
OLD WICKED SONGS

Robert Alexander Schumann is renowned as one of the most important composers of the German Romantic movement. The *Dichterliebe* (A Poet's Love) is one of the most famous of his song cycles, encompassing 16 songs symbolising the themes of loss and renewal. *Old Wicked Songs* interweaves Schumann's *Dichterliebe* with the story of an arrogant young American piano player who reluctantly agrees to study with an idiosyncratic Viennese music Professor.

Bob Hoskins makes a welcome return to the stage in the role of the Professor. His last stage performance was in 1983, after a 13 year absence. James Callis, the student Stephen Hoffman, is making his professional stage debut and one which he should be very proud of. He speaks eloquently and has great presence.

Hoffman is a child prodigy who mastered the piano at a very tender age. Professor Mashkan has been assigned to help him but unexpectedly reverses the

roles. He insists that for Hoffman to truly understand and appreciate Schumann's songs he should learn to sing them, whilst Mashkan accompanies him on the piano. Of course, Hoffman retaliates at the mere suggestion of this and, as he rants and raves, Mashkan cleverly ignores the whole tirade and goes about his business, making tea and discussing inane subjects such as the weather. When the storm had lulled, Mashkan reasons with him and they put the idea to the test.

Bob Hoskins does well with a difficult part. The scene showing Mashkan's suicide attempt didn't work: it was almost superficial. The only problem with Hoskins is that, even when totally submerged in character, you still think of him as Hoskins. The scenes which included referrals to the Holocaust were very uncomfortable, with lots of highly-strung over-acting. However, Hoskins does bring a touch of humour and irony to the part, making a perfect foil for the inflexible Hoffman. □

JULIE EAGLETON AT THE GIELGUD THEATRE

MUSIC BY RICHARD BROWN

DIRECTOR
DESIGNER
LIGHTING DESIGNER

ELIJAH MOSHINSKY
CHRISTOPHER ORAM
HOWARD HARRISON

PROFESSOR JOSEF
MASHKAN
STEPHEN HOFFMAN

BOB HOSKINS
JAMES CALLIS

THE SLOW DRAG

*Julie Eagleton at the
Whitehall Theatre*

Liza Sadovy has a difficult role. Not only does she have to play the saxophone well, croon blues numbers such as *Sweet Melinda* well, but she has to do this playing a woman playing a man. No easy task but she manages to bring credibility to the role of Johnny Christmas.

The Slow Drag is set in New Orleans in the Forties and is based on the amazing, true story of Billy Tipton who fooled the world throughout his life to get ahead in the jazz world. Johnny Christmas is a saxophonist who states his case: "I wasn't born a man, I was born a musician". A victim of sexist rules that were prevalent throughout this period, Christmas is reduced to taking on the guise of a man, with slicked back hair, pinstriped double breasted trouser suit, a deep voice and a barrel of lies in order to become a full time musician.

Kim Criswell plays June Wedding, his wife who doesn't find out Johnny's dark secret until she reaches the altar. Criswell, a well-respected international solo artist in her own right, recreates the role which she first played at the Freedom Theatre. The role of a jazz singer in this era is a perfect vehicle for her talents, as her powerful yet melodic tones do justice to the showcase of jazz songs featured. Her curvaceous appearance in extra-tight, bodyhugging and, it has to be said, badly-fitted dresses, gives her sassy character the air of a tough, course yet vulnerable performer who has been through hard times but managed to come out on top.

Christopher Colquhoun plays a sharply dressed Chester Kent, a fellow singer on the circuit who is the only other person to know the truth behind the marital facade. As a paler faced black man, he refers to his skin as 'just white enough',

indicating the racial tensions for black performers wanting to perform in a white jazz band.

With a five piece band, including a piano and double bass, the interesting tale of these three characters is told through a series of flashbacks and songs. The story is somewhat patchy in parts as it never delves into the true nature of the marriage or June Wedding's close friendship with Chester Kent. Who was the father of her children, for example? We are only given the vaguest of clues. Many questions are left

unanswered. The music, however, helps to compensate for the lack of coherent storyline with strong vocal performances by all.

The Slow Drag is lightweight but enjoyable, running at just the right time of 90 minutes, as any longer and the audience's attention might not have been sustained. □

BY CARSON KREITZER

Director Lisa Forrell
Musical Staging Bill Deamer
Designer Lisa Robinson
Lighting Designer Douglas Kuhrt
Sound Designer Simon Whitehorn

Musical Director James Pearson, Paul Englishby
Musical Arrangements James Pearson, Bill Deamer

Cast Kim Criswell, Liza Sadovy,
Christopher Colquhoun, Arnie Hewitt, Raya
North, Corinna Powlesland

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