



DIVINE DIVAS OF 'NIGHT MUSIC': (left to right) Grande dames Elaine Stritch & Bernadette Peters make up new cast of 'A Little Night Music'. Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

Legendary Peters & Stritch make

A Little Night Music

A Little Night Music

Book by Hugh Wheeler

Music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim

Directed by Trevor Nunn

Walter Kerr Theatre

219 West 48th Street

(212-239-6200), www.NightMusicOnBroadway.com

Open run

By Scott Harrah

When news broke that Bernadette Peters and Elaine Stritch were taking over the lead roles in the blockbuster Broadway revival of Stephen Sondheim's *A Little Night Music*, some were skeptical about whether these two grande dames of the American theater could pull it off. After all, Welsh superstar Catherine Zeta-Jones won the Tony for her portrayal of Desiree Armfeldt, and the iconic Angela Lansbury did a brilliant job playing Madame Armfeldt. Skeptics needn't worry, however, because the marvelously gifted Ms. Peters and Ms. Stritch have once again reinvented this classic musical and infused it with a fresh interpretation that makes it a must-see.

Sondheim musicals are always complex and appeal more to theater aficionados and cultists than the masses, and this is certainly the case with *A Little Night Music*, based on Ingmar Bergman's *Smiles of a Summer Night*. Some were critical of this revival, which was first mounted last winter on Broadway after a brief run at London's Menier Chocolate Factory. Yes, it's still toned and scaled down from the original 1973 production, and the lighting is muted and the costumes a bit drab, but Ms. Peters and Ms. Stritch put a quintessentially American spin on this story of the Swedish upper class.

Bernadette Peters' superb take on Desiree is unlike anything one might imagine. Although she is much older than the gorgeous Ms. Zeta-Jones, Ms. Peters brings a level of maturity and razor-sharp acting chops that breathe new life into the role. Here is Bernadette Peters as we've never seen her before: delivering dialogue in an elegant, velvety accent that's natural and compliments the other cast members. When she sings the show's most famous song, "Send in the Clowns," there are actual tears in her eyes and an emotional quiver in her voice that brings down the proverbial house. Ms. Peters is touching and completely convincing as Desiree, who is aging and unable to grasp the love of Fredrik Egerman (Alexander Hanson).

Elaine Stritch is simply dynamite as Madame Armfeldt. Whenever she's on stage, we're riveted to her salty, piquant interpretation of the matriarch of a Swedish estate, especially when she sings the show's other well-known song, "Liaisons." It's amusing indeed to hear Ms. Stritch doing Sondheim with such wit in her performance that it's actually funny. Angela Lansbury's Madame Armfeldt was imperious and had the haughty refinement of a well-to-do Northern European, while Ms. Stritch gives the role a uniquely American perspective that gels beautifully with Ms. Peters.

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