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The Sunday Telegraph

The Sunday Telegraph (London)

December 7, 2008

The love story grows up; Mature, spiky Sondheim; and a sting in the tail from LaBute; OTHER THEATRE

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SECTION: SEVEN; Pg. 35

LENGTH: 630 words

A Little Night Music ?????

Menier Chocolate Factory, London SE1

(020 7907 7060) to 8 March

In a Dark Dark House ????? Almeida, London N1 (020 7359 4404) to 17 January

With wounds still fresh from the failure of *Gone with the Wind* earlier this year, Trevor Nunn is back with a new production of Stephen Sondheim's

A Little Night Music. It is, comparatively, a low-key comeback staged in an intimate setting. Nevertheless, the Menier has an impressive record of transferring shows to the West End - most recently *La Cage aux Folles* - and this production looks set to continue that tradition.

Nunn has assembled an impressive cast - Maureen Lipman and Alex Hanson being the best-known names - and there's not a weak link among them. It's not, admittedly, radical to revisit a Sondheim masterpiece, but Sir Trev does it very well.

On the surface there's something preposterous about *A Little Night Music*, which couches the story of the affairs of an actress on the wrong side of her prime in a frivolous country-house farce. But, through a combination of his sardonic lyrics and spiky tunes, Sondheim turns it into a meditation on sexual frustration, youthful and mature love, and, lest we forget amidst the final joyous coupling, death.

In the lead, Hannah Waddingham, as Desirée Armfeldt, plays the tart with a heart with a mixture of brassy pragmatism and touching lyricism.

I have mixed feelings about the musical's climactic song, *Send in the Clowns* - it can be painfully mawkish in the wrong hands. Here, however, delivered by Waddingham with wit, understatement and honest regret, it encapsulates the intelligence of Sondheim's achievement.

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In any other production, Maureen Lipman would have stolen the show as the wheelchair-bound matriarch; while Alistair Robins brings a hilarious pomposity to Count Carl-Magnus, and Kelly Price drips with sarcasm as his misused wife. The intimacy of the theatre intensifies the experience, and it's worth catching here before it transfers to a larger stage.

NEIL LABUTE likes to write plays with twists and turns, revelations and counter-revelations, and there's invariably a sting in the tail. He also likes controversial themes. His 1992 play, *In the Company of Men*, tells the story of two young men cruelly toying with the affections of a deaf woman, and his latest, *In a Dark Dark House*, confronts the sexual abuse of young boys.

It opens in the garden of an American rehab unit. Terry (David Morrissey) has come to visit his younger brother, Drew (Steven Mackintosh), who is there to dry out following a drink-drive accident. Drew is having flashbacks to his childhood, and needs Terry to confirm that both boys were the victims of abuse. But what is Drew really after - psychological release, or a get-out-of-jail-free card to brandish at the judge when his case comes to trial?

Over three acts LaBute unpicks the brothers' relationship, and Morrissey and Mackintosh, rather wooden in the opening exchanges (the perennial problem of English actors struggling to capture the pace of an American accent), gradually warm to their task. Mackintosh ducks and dives like an elusive featherweight past the more ponderous punches of Morrissey, and they complement each other well.

Director Michael Attenborough could have extracted rather more grim laughter from LaBute's script, and it is no coincidence that the outstanding performance is given by Kira **Sternbach**, an American actress, as a 'like, whatever' teenager.

It is somehow not as satisfying as it would have you believe it is. LaBute's plays can feel like crosswords, neat little exercises that stimulate the brain but can be thrown away at the end of the day. Ultimately, here, we learn that sexual abuse is harmful, and that parents can really f--- you up. Tell me something I don't know.

LOAD-DATE: December 7, 2008

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper