

## Theatre Review: 'Old Wicked Songs' at 1st Stage

By Andrew White

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L-R Aaron Bliden and Philip Hosford. Photo by Teresa Castracane.

It is rare, exceedingly rare, to be in the presence of a masterfully-written play, performed by actors who are not only emotionally engaging but also fine, classically-trained pianists. Even rarer to find that the play is framed by a song-cycle, in this case the *Dichterliebe* ("A Poet's Love") by Robert Schumann, one of the 19<sup>th</sup> century's most famous composers.

The joy of Jon Marans' internationally-renowned drama *Old Wicked Songs* is that he doesn't use classical music as a pretext for cattiness and cute one-liners; the characters have a deep, emotional connection to the music. Even if you come to the show with no knowledge of this grand tradition, you will come away knowing why it has endured down through the centuries – and why it will endure long after today's fads have, well, faded.

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And I guarantee after the show you'll rush to YouTube, and then to your preferred music store to buy up the first recording of *Dichterliebe* you lay your eyes on. It's that inspiring.

1<sup>st</sup> Stage's production of *Old Wicked Songs*, under the careful direction of Michael Chamberlin, is one of the most deeply moving and well done chamber-pieces for theatre I have ever seen. Set in a small, finely-appointed studio (thanks to Set & Costume Designer Kathryn Kaweck), we spend an intimate evening with two musicians as they

engage in a battle of egos and communicate their dreams and regrets through Schumann, whose work is more than up to this heavy emotional task.

Our story is set in the mid-1980's—a period notorious in Austria for ex-UN General Secretary (and ex-Nazi) Kurt Waldheim's campaign for the Presidency. Stephen Hoffman, a young, frustrated American concert pianist has come to Austria in a desperate attempt to revive his flagging career. A shadowy off-stage mentor (cleverly named Schiller) has diagnosed Hoffman's problem and has sentenced him to several months of voice lessons—to teach him humility, and to turn Hoffman into a musician who not only listens to his partners but who also *feels* what he is playing. His teacher Josef Mashken is one of those wily, mischievous (and dirt-cheap) mentors who puts Stephen in his place. Phillip Hosford's Mashken is a master-class; his frazzled, proud but fragile persona is riveting from start to finish.

Sparks fly from the moment Hoffman and Mashken meet; the unwilling student often assumes the worst about his teacher's methods and politics. Proud of his Jewish heritage, Hoffman is shocked by the anti-Semitism he is confronted with on the streets of Vienna, which complicates his relationship with his teacher in many ways. But given his age and the times he has lived through, Mashken harbors more than his share of secrets, which he guards almost as jealously as his musical gifts.

As Hoffman, Aaron Bliden gives us all the arrogance and presumption that come with being a child prodigy; but he also has the vulnerability that comes with being a grown-up prodigy, who realizes that his glory days may be behind him, even though he's only in his 20's. One of the highlights of the production is when Bliden's Hoffman has to learn how to sing Schumann's music honestly and in harmony with Mashken's idiosyncratic piano accompaniment. Bliden's ability to shift from frustration to sarcasm and, at last, to genuine feeling in the course of a single song is unforgettable.

Now, at this point I must confess: I have a special emotional connection to Marans' show, because I come from a classical music family. My mother taught classical voice from her own baby grand—our living room was her studio, and I vividly recall the advice she gave her long parade of students. That music is a big part of my life, and to see lessons so honestly staged, and with such talent, was deeply moving for me. Kudos to Jane Margulies Kalbfeld for her work here, her guidance on the vocal arrangements is spot-on.

The entire audience space at 1<sup>st</sup> Stage is decked out with a collage of classic architecture—another nice touch from Ms. Kawecki—and Kenny Neal adds some nice environmental touches, with a few nice recordings from the classical repertoire to boot (although given the talent onstage, they are almost superfluous). Brian S. Allard's lighting cues are sensitive to the smallest detail, and he finds a way to echo a key point in the script, when Hoffman visits the Dachau prison camp.

*Old Wicked Songs* is one of those rarest of things – a flawless production with tremendous humanity, and an emotional wallop you're not likely to experience again. I don't care what you think you're doing over the next few weeks, you have to drop your plans and see this show.

Running Time: 2 hours and 10 minutes, with one intermission.

*Old Wicked Songs* runs through May 3 2015 at 1<sup>st</sup> Stage which is located at 1524 Spring Hill Road, Tysons, Virginia. Tickets can be ordered by clicking [here](#).