

Ophelia - Book and Lyrics by Antonia Tancredi; Music by Jeffrey Weissman

Wings Theatre Company (The Armory, 154 Christopher Street; 212-627-2961)

Reviewed 3/9/01 at 8 pm

Here's an interesting idea for a new musical - take Ophelia, a lesser though important character in Hamlet, and tell the story through her eyes. Actually, Antonia Tancredi who wrote both book and lyrics even takes us back to a time before The Bard's play originally begins. As a whole, Ophelia works fairly well. Particularly when writing lines for Ophelia, Hamlet and Laertes; Tancredi does a credible job at sounding Shakespearian without actually using archaic language. Now while I'll grant you that this IS the story as seen through Ophelia's eyes, I did find it a little excessive that so very much of the conflict and drama in the plot revolved around Ophelia and everyone wanting to sleep with her. All power plays were sexual in nature and it seemed a bit like the Harlequin Romance version of the tale. If there had been more of an inkling of this in the source work it wouldn't have seemed so incongruous to me. Still, Ophelia is an engaging musical with a plot that will certainly keep your pulse racing and your heart breaking.

From a musical standpoint, the show is quite fine. Right from the overture, all of the melodies - by Jeffrey Weissman - keep a suggestion of chants and modes, harking back to the music of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. While some of the solo numbers suffer from Frank Wildhorn Syndrome (stopping the action while the character tells an inner truth), at least Tancredi Weissman put songs where songs are called for. However, they and the show, truly shine in duets and group numbers. Canopy of Stars is an exquisite duet celebrating the consummation of Ophelia and Hamlet's relationship. We've Been Here Before is a delightfully smarmy duet between two of our resident baddies, Hamlet's mother Gertrude and uncle Claudius. Later, Ophelia and Hamlet crackle with dramatic intensity in Are You Honest? Good and evil meet in the excellent Gertrude/Ophelia duet There Are Ways. Two of Ophelia's solos are worth special attention, A Letter in which Ophelia tries on every different gown she has while getting ready to rendezvous with Hamlet; and Perhaps The Sky Will Weep For Me in which Ophelia somehow manages to be transcendent while walking into the sea and ending her life. Evil Is Near which ingeniously echoes and evokes Hamlet's original soliloquy is outstanding.

The only song that screams FORMULA! is Skoal! Let Us Drink To It All which is a drinking song for Hamlet's father and the chorus. It seems that ever since Les Miserables every period musical has to have a tavern song (harking back to Operetta and Light Opera no doubt). It's a tired convention, and having just come out of the good, but man-

bashing Men Are Swine the composers are hitting us over the head with a sledge hammer with the concept that males as a whole only think through their gonads. Sorry, but that's just as annoying and unrealistic as portraying all female characters as whores or unintelligent drudges.

Lynette Knapp plays a spunky, radiant Ophelia. Her voice is lovely, and physically she has a beautiful ethereal quality. Though her descent into madness could have been less abrupt, she still carried the show with conviction. Knapp is a delight to the eye and ear. One might think that Chan Harris as Hamlet was hired just for his exceptional good looks, until he opened his mouth to sing. Harris has a fine, warm instrument and his charm immediately wins over the audience. While his second act was a bit more foppish than melancholy, his Dane moves through a range of emotions with confidence and style. Cherilyn Bacon as Gertrude and Christopher Lynn as Laertes, are also fine musical actors who have excellent moments. I found the character of Polonius somewhat anachronistic, a bit more like an American Southern abusive father circa 1990 rather than a Danish abusive father from the Middle Ages. Steve Steiner plays the role with a lot of bluster but not a lot of depth, and I'm not sure whether this was an acting choice or a directing choice. Though a minor complaint, it was the only characterization that seemed out of synch. John Dewer, J.T. Cromwell, Alyson Reim and Jennifer Ahia round out the cast admirably.

Director Nancy Hancock uses her minimalist stage and moody lighting well, creating a stark, riveting evening. She obviously understands the lives of her characters and moves them around on the stage with all the finesse of a chess master. I'll be interested in seeing where Ophelia will go from here, and congratulate Wings Theatre Company on it's commitment to new musicals. Keep the fire burning!

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