'Elegance must be real at five feet'

Bad staging ruins 'Night Music'

'A Little Night Music,' produced by Hoof 'n' Horn. Written by Hugh Wheeler. Kevin Patterson, director; Patty Forbis, choreographer; David Meoli, musical director.

by Rick Sebak
DTH Critic

The production of *A Little Night Music* at Duke which closed Sunday night was not a totally meritless mounting of the Stephen Sondheim-Hugh Wheeler musical, but it certainly destroyed any respect which I might have felt for the Hoof 'n' Horn organization. Beautiful music, respectable acting talents and some fine vocal abilities were crushed beneath the weight of a totally fatuous and inappropriate staging of the play in Duke's Fred Theatre.

Director Kevin Patterson obviously plunked himself down in the center of the center section of the audience and totally ignored the fact that his playing area was thrust and required non-proscenium-arch staging. Sitting in a seat on the right side of the stage, I was unable to see large parts of Act I because a high-backed hunk of furniture blocked my view.

At other times, members of the 5-person chorus positioned themselves directly in front of me so that I could not follow the actions happening at center stage. (This is to say nothing of the annoying spotlight which shined directly into my eyes when there was no set piece of cast member obstructing my view.)

Patterson rationalized in the program: "We are not professionals, we are not drama majors—we love getting together for some laughs and a lot of hard work." The first two statements are obvious, the third is irrelevant because any audience member is still required to pay $2.50 for a seat, irregardless of the fact that that seat might not even permit an easy view of the stage. Such foolishness would be inexcusable in the smallest of community theatres and definitely destroys the reputation of any university group which hopes to please any kind of discriminating audience.

I would not be suprised if these complaints were answered with cries of "But the theatre was so small! There was no other way!!" Rubbish. Inadequate and faulty staging merely indicates lack of imagination on the director's behalf.

A Little Night Music is an intimate musical which should work splendidly in such tight quarters. Unfortunately, however, the illusion of elegance is hard to create when the audience is close enough to read easily the labels on the bottles of wine (and Andre champagne will never pass for Mumm). Disbelief of mock elegance is much more readily suspended when one observes from a distance.

Runs in stockings, overly heavy make-up, dirty costumes and tablecloths which hang only two inches on the upstage side of a table only work against one's willingness to accept theatrical conventions in a small theatre. Elegance must be real at five feet.

The musical is a skillful adaptation of Ingmar Bergman's comedy film, *Smiles of a Summer Night*. Set in turn-of-the-century Sweden, it's the enchanting story of Frederick Egerman and his second wife Anne (still a virgin after several months of married life), who gets upset when she hears her husband say the name "Desiree" while napping one afternoon. In town with a touring theatrical company, Desiree Armfeldt is a skilled and experienced actress who had an affair 14 years ago with Frederick and is ready to resume the relationship now on a permanent basis.

Unfortunately, she has a lover, the Count Carl-Magnus Malcolm, who is insanely jealous and ready to duel at a moment's notice. At his request, his wife, Charlotte, informs Anne that her suspicions about Frederik and Desiree are true. As Act I comes to an end, the Egermans (including Frederick's son Henrik, who is studying for the ministry) are invited to Desiree's mother's mansion for a weekend in the country. Act II is spent untangling and rearranging relationships.

The score is composed entirely of waltzes which lend an appropriate dignity to the whole scene. It has been recognized as an unusually adult and mature musical, and, I think, the finest in many years. I had seen two professional productions before the Hoof 'n' Horn presentation and must lament the poor staging because there was some truly fine work done by several of the performers.

Norman Ussery was very well cast as Frederik. He managed to overcome the age difference with apparently no real effort and was surprisingly convincing as the Swedish lawyer who might be attractive enough to deserve the attention of a famous actress.

Carole Bowers was absolutely perfect, an unqualified success, as the Countess Charlotte Malcolm. Looking like a tall Liv Ullman, she delivered lines with comic timing and assurance which distinguished an outstanding performance. I would consider sitting through the show again (even at such a great disadvantage) just to hear her say again, "I frequently laugh myself to sleep contemplating my own future."

David Reid played her handsome husband with a suitable military demeanor, but his hair style was so incorrect that I never once was able to forget that he was probably just a Duke student.

As Petra, the maid, Laurie Hankins added a large amoung of essential energy to the show. I found her song, "The Miller's Son," to be much more acceptable in this production than even in the Broadway version where it seemed to be somewhat out of place.

The most famous song from the show, "Send in the Clowns," was handled beautifully by Jennifer Nielson whose performance had annoyed me in earlier parts of the show. She initially lacked the dignity which Desiree requires in order to be believed and had to fight a set of costumes which were much too large in almost every instance. I accepted her portrayal much more readily in the second act when she seemed a bit more resolved and subdued.

I sincerely regret that these performances were not showcased in a more exciting and conscientious production of the musical. The Hoof 'n' Horn players offer an intriguing set of musical plays every year, but if they insist on perpetrating such foolishly inadequate staging and such half-hearted theatrical convictions, it will not be worth the trip to Durham, let alone the price of admission. Even amateurs must strive for professionalism.

Rock's Fleetwood Mac comes to Memorial Hall

The British band, Fleetwood Mac, will perform at 8 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 18, in Memorial Hall. Tickets are $4 at the Union desk.

The group first gained renown in late 1968 with a melancholy, melodic instrumental called "Albatross," which became a No. 1 British single. Three more hits followed in the next two years: "Man of the World," "Oh Well" and "Green Mannalishi."

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There will be no warm-up group.

WANTED

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