

Theater & Dance

# Piano lessons with a side of philosophical sparring

By Jane Horwitz April 16

“Old Wicked Songs” at 1st Stage gathers power in subtle increments. Jon Marans’s play has a few built-in flaws, yet this small theater company’s production overcomes them and captures the imagination.

The action unfolds in Vienna in 1986. Just before the play begins, in a total blackout, sound designer Kenny Neal fills the space with a city’s clamor. It crescendos into sirens and the clang of freight trains.

The lights come up on Professor Josef Mashkan (Philip Hosford) playing the piano and singing a German art song to himself. (Brian S. Allard’s lighting design deftly realizes the nuanced time shifts.) White-haired and rumped, Mashkan sits in his studio, furnished with a piano and music stand, a chaise lounge and a vintage phonograph.

In the long seconds before his new student arrives, an audience can take in the striking diorama of Viennese buildings that curves around the theater space on all sides, behind the audience and the stage.

Set designer Kathryn Kawecki has created the diorama as a collage made of corrugated cardboard. Painted onto it, in grays, blues and browns, are the outlines of ornate Viennese facades, skewed at an unsettling angle. Kawecki also did the costumes, which look authentic to period and place.

With the brash arrival of Mashkan’s new pupil, American pianist Stephen Hoffman (Aaron Bliden), the moral fencing match commences. A prodigy in his 20s, Stephen suffers from burnout. He has come to Vienna to reignite his talent, but the piano teacher with whom he wants to study has insisted he spend a couple of months learning how to be an accompanist with Mashkan, who teaches voice.

To Stephen, this is stupid. He is a concert pianist or nothing. But Mashkan, played by Hosford as a wily intellect eager for a sparring partner, seems delighted to take on the arrogant young man. Bliden aces Stephen’s tetchiness and arrogance, adding a dash of youthful bluster for good measure.

Mashkan wants Stephen to learn Robert Schumann’s 1844 song cycle, “Dichterliebe,” which sets to music poems of love and loss by Heinrich Heine. He wants Stephen to both play and sing the songs. The emotions in them prove a challenge for the brittle young American.

Austria had a national election in 1986. Kurt Waldheim, a former United Nations secretary general, was poised to become Austria's president, despite newly exposed details of his Nazi past. References to the Holocaust creep into the student-teacher repartee in the studio. Stephen bristles, quietly at first, when the professor makes anti-Semitic jokes. As Waldheim's victory looms, the younger man studies the history of Nazism in Austria and, newly armed, he forces the professor into a truth-telling climax.

The moment isn't as powerful as it should be, in part because Marans's script has telegraphed it for ages. But director Michael Chamberlin stages the Big Moment with admirable restraint. Even better, he allows the audience to savor the rest of the play fully — the evolving relationship between professor and student, the erudite discussion of music and the music itself.

It helps that both actors — Hosford in particular — are proficient pianists, and we can actually see them playing. Bliden, while he has a light voice more suited to pop or musical theater, does a creditable job assaying the Schumann songs.

The script's ill-kept secrets aside, "Old Wicked Songs" strikes a satisfying chord.

*Horwitz is a freelance writer.*

## **'Old Wicked Songs'**

*By Jon Marans. Directed by Michael Chamberlin. About 2 hours, 15 minutes, including an intermission. Through May 3 at 1st Stage in Tysons, 1524 Spring Hill Rd., Tysons Corner, Va. \$28, with discounts for seniors, students and military. Visit [www.1ststagetysons.org](http://www.1ststagetysons.org) or call 703-854-1856.*

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