

## Old Wicked Songs review: intimate and moving

Steven  
McKnight

Has it really been over 17 years since the regional premiere of *Old Wicked Songs* by Jon Marans at Studio Theatre? The 1996 Pulitzer Prize nominee for Best Drama (which lost to *Rent*) is given a welcome and first-rate return to the area by 1<sup>st</sup> Stage.

*Old Wicked Songs* is a two-hander about the relationship between brilliant young American pianist Stephen Hoffman (Aaron Bliden) and Professor Mashkan (Philip Hosford), a music teacher in Vienna. Hoffman is a 25 year-old former prodigy with great technical skills but who is already feeling burnout. He has traveled to Vienna to study with a famous maestro to rejuvenate his musical skills.

When Stephen arrives, he learns that the maestro is requiring him to first spend three months studying accompaniment and taking singing lessons under the kindly but eccentric Professor Mashkan. The experience is meant to help him better understand the great soloists with whom he will work and the emotional content of the music.

Stephen is stubborn and resentful of this requirement and only reluctantly agrees to Mashkan's requirement that he learn to sing a deeply passionate and bittersweet Schumann song cycle, *Dichterliebe* ("the Poet's Love"). Schumann's music brings to life poems by Heinrich Heine about a love affair that has run its course and left the poet jilted.

Do you suspect that Hoffman will learn lessons both in music and life from the experienced, old school professor? Of course, yet the literate discussions and clashes between the two strong personalities are still fascinating. The scenes in which Hoffman receives a master's class from Mashkan are among the best teacher-mentor moments in modern drama.



Aaron Bliden as Stephen in *Old Wicked Songs* at 1st Stage  
(Photo: Teresa Castracane)



Philip Hosford as Professor Mashkan in *Old Wicked Songs* at 1st Stage (Photo: Teresa Castracane)

Yet *Old Wicked Songs* is even richer than the basic personality conflict between the two. Marans sets the work in 1986 Vienna, a time in which former U.N. Secretary-General is seeking election as President of Austria. During the campaign, news came out indicating that Waldheim had underreported details of his service as a Nazi officer during World War II. This becomes important as Hoffman begins to suspect that Mashkan is anti-Semitic, and rises in importance once Hoffman makes a visit to the former concentration camp at Dachau.

*Old Wicked Songs* is a deeply moving work and it receives a top-notch production from 1<sup>st</sup> Stage. Philip Hosford is ideally cast as the wonderfully odd professor, from his scruffy beard to the frequent twinkle in his eye for the surprising humor in the work. Hosford gives a memorable performance, one to cherish.

Aaron Bliden takes a little time to settle into his role as Stephen, coming off a little more peeved and insolent at the start than the tense and arrogant character of the script. Yet like a talented accompanist, he adjusts to Professor Mashkan and gradually assumes new layers of anger. His powerful second act monologue on Vienna and its citizens should become a permanent piece in his audition repertoire.



(l-r) Aaron Bliden and Philip Hosford in *Old Wicked Songs* at 1st Stage. The show runs through May 3, 2015 in Tysons Corner. (Photo: Teresa Castracane)

Fortunately the two also have the musical chops to make the piece work, both in live piano and vocal skills that are an essential part of *Old Wicked Songs*. Attempts to stage the piece with recorded music are reported to fail miserably. Perhaps those musical demands are why the play is not a more frequent regional offering despite being an inexpensive to stage yet superior drama.

## **OLD WICKED SONGS** **Highly Recommended**

*April 10 – May 3*

1st Stage Theatre

1524 Spring Hill Road

McLean, VA

2 hours, 20 minutes with 1 intermission

Tickets: \$28

Fridays thru Sundays

[Details](#)

[Tickets](#) or call (703) 854-1856



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Audiences can especially enjoy the performances and the music thanks to the intimate setting of the work at 1<sup>st</sup> Stage. The small performing area is surrounded on three sides by the audience, with seats that only go a few rows back. The set has a clean and but still weathered feeling suitable for the elderly Professor's studio.

Once again, director Michael Chamberlin proves to have a delicate touch and a perfect sense of tone in this



production of *Old Wicked Songs*. Those characteristics of this talented artist are becoming almost a hallmark of his work, perhaps best illustrated by his direction of 1<sup>st</sup> Stage's nearly magical production of *Almost, Maine* a few years back. He is supported by some fine sound and lighting design.

If you missed the premiere performance of *Old Wicked Songs* at Studio Theatre back in the 1998 which received several Helen Hayes nominations, you should take advantage of the opportunity to see 1<sup>st</sup> Stage's terrific production of this intimate and touching work. Even if you did see it, the opportunity to experience once again the emotional power of *Old Wicked Songs* is not to be missed.

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***Old Wicked Songs*** by Jon Marans . Directed by Michael Chamberlin . Produced by 1<sup>st</sup> Stage . Reviewed by Steven McKnight.