

ON STAGE

Beckley with Christopher in *Night Music*.



Themes from a Summer Place

By Dick Lochte

Tennessee Williams and Sondheim in one tranquil garden

There are approximately 200 theater companies in the Los Angeles area. A handful huddle comfortably within large commercial houses. Another handful pursue their muses in medium-sized theaters. The majority of the companies, however, operate under an Equity waiver that allows union actors to take part in productions at less than minimum wages, if said productions take place in theaters with 99 seats or less. Ever since the Equity waiver opened that particular thespian floodgate a while ago, nearly a hundred small theaters have popped up like toadstools at various odd points in the city and on its cusp. And just about all of them seem to

have begun new productions this month.

The most ambitious of them is to be found at the Colony, housed at the Studio Theater Playhouse (1944 Riverside Dr.) in the shadow of Dodger Stadium. The Colony has been justly praised for its technical skills, especially in creating dimensional sets to match the imagination of Ray Bradbury. (*Fahrenheit 451*, *The Martian Chronicles* and *Dandelion Wine* have all materialized there.) But other aspects of its productions have not always been as successful.

Presently, however, the company is offering two plays in repertory—Stephen Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* and the

American premiere of Tennessee Williams' "freely adapted" (as it says in the program) version of Chekhov's *The Sea Gull*, retitled *The Notebook of Trigorin*. Neither is what you would call flawless, but they are reasons enough to travel out along the Golden State Freeway in search of the theater.

Utilizing the same tranquil garden set by Gene Mazzanti, *Notebook* and *Night Music* are curiously similar. Both take place at the turn of the century. Both are concerned with events that transpire during crowded visits to summer houses presided over by actresses.

As in the original Chekhov, Williams'

play is about a selfish, domineering woman of the theater (Nan Martin); her voluptuary lover, Trigorin (Ronald Morhous), an author; her disturbed, artistic son Constantine (Robert O'Reilly); her aged and ill brother (Stuart Lancaster); Nina, a neighbor whom Constantine loves (Suzanne Celeste); and the steward's daughter, Masha, who loves Constantine (Kathryn Kates)... all gathering for a few quiet drinks. Williams', ah, deviations from Chekhov include the *Suddenly Last Summer*-ing of the actress-mother character, a bisexual Trigorin and an all-over shortening and tightening of the play, which now closes with a more theatrical flourish.

Under Terrence Shank's direction, Martin is a riveting presence as one of Williams' more fascinating mommy monsters. O'Reilly is properly anxious, confused and a bit addled. Morhous, in the pivotal title role, has a habit of reacting to surprise with the frowning cocked head of someone listening for a bluebird, but this is only mildly disconcerting. Both Kates and Celeste register well. And I was particularly fond of Don Furneaux's cynical doctor, Dorn, and Lancaster's remarkably naturalistic old dodderer.

Night Music, which Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler adapted from Ingmar Bergman's movie *Smiles of a Summer Night*, is a lovely light comedy of coupling and uncoupling sung and danced in waltz time. It is not an easy vehicle to stage, but director and choreographer Todd Nielsen, aided by Jeffrey Rockwell's musical direction, does a splendid job of it, making sure that the large cast gives Sondheim's lyrics their due. It's the first time I've ever heard every word of a musical's score.

The plot is far from simple. Actress and courtesan Desiree Armfeldt (Barbara Beckley) is in love with Fredrik Egerman (Thom Christopher), who after a year has not yet consummated his marriage to the girlish Anne (Robin Lynn Funk), for whom his son by an earlier marriage, Henrik (John Thomas Clark), secretly yearns. Complicating matters even more, Desiree is presently the mistress of the bellicose Count Carl-Magnus Malcolm (Paul Eggington), much to the dismay of the countess (RoZsa Horvath) and Desiree's mother (Georgie Paul) and daughter (Theresa Bailey). When all of these folks, including the Egermans' randy maid (Linda Stone), arrive at the mother's summer home, various confusions and conflicts arise. And, as usually happens, they get sorted out.

Glynis Johns, the original singing Desiree, and Elizabeth Taylor, the film Desiree, notwithstanding, *Night Music* is an ensemble piece here, with everyone taking special care of his or her section of the stage admirably, and with a cheery chorus

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(Richard Johnson, Barbara Beaman, Toni Tomci, Mark Christian Miller and Linda S. Piccone) filling in the blank space.

Christopher and Eggington possess rich voices. Stone's version of "The Miller's Son" is praiseworthy. And while the others' vocals range from good to adequate, the arrangements are such that not one detracts from the overall professionalism of the production.

I should mention the staging of a dining scene, which has all of the diners, save one, with backs facing the audience, while cryptic conversations and whispers are exchanged. I've no idea if this effective idea was carried over from Harold Prince's Broadway production or if it originated here. In either case, it works. So does most of the musical. (Eggington's aggressively false mustache seems a bit too heavy, a comic touch in the midst of all the gossamer goings-on, but let's not split hairs.)

