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THEATER REVIEW

Songs of Love and Loss, Limning the Family Plot

'Myths and Hymns,' Directed by Elizabeth Lucas

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD Published: February 7, 2012

The sound of the ocean lapping at the shore recurs throughout Elizabeth Lucas's gently luminous staging of Adam Guettel's "Myths and Hymns," being presented at the West End Theater at the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew. The haunting murmur of waves tugging at the sand reflects the unquiet mind of the central character in Ms. Lucas's dramatization of Mr. Guettel's song cycle, an elderly woman who has lost the power of speech but is caught in the grip of past sorrows.

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Mr. Guettel's elegiac work, first performed under the title "Saturn Returns" and seen only briefly in concert in New York in 1998, was not originally fashioned as a book musical. As the original title indicates, it's a musically eclectic collection of songs that alternates between adaptations of 19th-century hymns and classic myths with contemporary lyrics supplied (mostly) by Mr. Guettel (best known for his Broadway musical "The Light in the Piazza"). Ms. Lucas has shown judicious taste in supplying only minimal dialogue for the new version: the songs remain the focus of the show, expertly performed by a five-member band in spare orchestrations by Bruce Coughlin and Robert Meffe and sung with bright fervor by a six talented singers. What Ms. Lucas has supplied is a slender but effective thread of story that illustrates on the painful intertwining of love and loss in human experience.

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Lucas Steele in a scene from "Myths and Hymns."

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literal attic and a suggestion of some celestial otherworld.)

What cannot easily be transcended, Ms. Lucas's story line suggests, is the tangle of human commitment as embodied by the ties of family. Linda Balgord, playing the mother in the grip of painful memories, spends much of the show's 80-minute running time as a silent spectator, her eyes alight with fond recollection or clouded by dark visions of unhappiness.

She has retreated to the attic of the family home (New England has been suggested in reports on the production, although the program doesn't specify any location), obviously distraught and in flight from the gentle attentions of her daughter, who tries repeatedly to coax her mother to come downstairs. The contents of the house, we learn in one of the few lines of dialogue, are soon to be auctioned.

Sorting through piles of boxes stuffed with forgotten mementos, Ms. Balgord's character is assailed by ghosts from the past, rising before her like shadows cast by the moonlight glancing off the jumbled piles of long-unused furniture. Her happy meeting with her future husband (Bob Stillman) is recalled in the song "Hero and Leander," in which he sings of her as "my lighthouse on the shoreline, my passion on this lonely sea," images that chime nicely with the seaside house.

Their marriage is celebrated in the exuberant number "In the Sounding," with its text drawn from an 1886 hymn that speaks of a joyful reunion in heaven "by the crystal sea." The birth of a daughter and son is friskily signified by the sudden appearance under Ms. Balgord's arms of two blankets — one pink, one white — curled into shapes suggesting infants wrapped within.

The myths Mr. Guettel chose to evoke — of Hero and Leander, of Sisyphus's endless travails, of the winged horse Pegasus and his rider, Bellerophon, who tumbled to the ground when the horse was bitten by a gadfly — are often tales of mortals finding punishment under the mercurial whims of the gods. Accordingly, the family in this version is torn apart by conflict and unhappiness, seemingly doomed to enact the stories of folly that are woven so deeply into the fabric of mythology. Yet Ms. Lucas's poetic staging, washed in Herrick Goldman's shimmering lighting design, provides a satisfying frame for them without twisting itself in any narrative knots.

As the son, Lucas Steele sings the song "Saturn Returns" to his lover (Donell James Foreman), expressing both the rapture and the evanescence of love. "Now it's gone, and I am incomplete," he sings, although the ambivalent lyrics are somewhat belied by the somewhat overripe balletic pas de deux the men perform at the climax of the song.

His father's discovery of his son's attraction to men turns him into an unforgiving patriarch wielding his Bible as a weapon, as he leads the family in the hymn "Children of the Heavenly King." Later remorse will eat into his heart when the family gathers to mourn the son's death (one guesses from AIDS, although no time frame is specified). Meanwhile the daughter, played with rich feeling by Anika Larsen, embarks on a confused search for love complicated by her sorrow over her brother's death and her ambivalence toward her father. One of the rare lighter songs is the wryly funny "How Can I Lose You?" Over a simple, lilting music-box melody Ms. Larsen laments the disappearance of yet another lover. (They are all played by the fine tenor Matthew Farcher.) The song contains some of Mr. Guettel's most appealingly down-to-earth lyrics:

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No one should always lose.

Can't I find some kind of peace?

Nobody owns the blues,

But I have a long-term lease.

Of course that's a sentiment felt by most at some point in life. The simple dramas enacted in "Myths and Hymns" are sometimes only tangentially connected to the lyrics, but the universal expressions of hope, fear, yearning and desire in the songs will strike deeply sounding chords.

Myths & Hymns

Music and lyrics by Adam Guettel, with new narrative by Elizabeth Lucas; directed by Ms. Lucas; choreography by Wendy Seyb; music supervisor, Robert Meffe; sets by Ann Bartek; costumes by Emily Morgan DeAngelis; lighting by Herrick Goldman; sound by Janie Bullard; musical director, Katya Stanislavskaya; stage manager, Kristine Ayers. Presented by Prospect Theater Company, Cara Reichel, producing artistic director; Melissa Huber, managing director. At the West End Theater, Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew, 263 West 86th Street, Manhattan; (212) 352-3101; prospecttheater.org. Through Feb. 26. Running time: 1 hour 20 minutes.

WITH: Linda Balgord (Woman), Ally Bonino (Trickster), Matthew Farcher (Lover), Donell James Foreman (Shapeshifter), Anika Larsen (Daughter), Lucas Steele (Son) and Bob Stillman (Husband).

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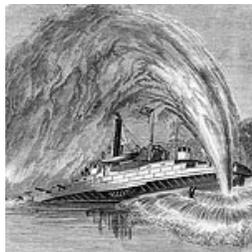
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