

music

Musical Chairs

See is dense and unlistenable; *Unmade Bed* is hysterical and sophisticated

by Floyd Sklaver

Musical theater composer Michael John LaChiusa is that rarified bird most cherished by the intelligentsia—the noble failure. Time and again, he's written music theater pieces of arcane sophistication (*The Wild Party*, *Marie Christine*), earning the admiration of foundations giving grants, nonprofit theater directors who otherwise disdain musicals and critics who like that kind of thing. In other words, everyone but audiences.

His musical *See What I Wanna See* (*Ghostlight*) is no exception. Listening to the world premiere recording of this production from the Public Theater in New York, one wonders just who would want to listen to it. Occasionally tuneful without being hummable, the score is a postmodern take on 1950s film noir soundtracks. There's not a song

here you want to sing along to in your car. Fans of Idina Menzel, who is featured here, will just have to keep lip-synching to their recordings of *Wicked*.

Even worse, *See What I Wanna See* possesses a densely complicated story told from multiple perspectives that requires a careful reading of the synopsis and following the libretto. Even deliberately obtuse American operas like John Adams' *Nixon in China* (recently performed in a definitive production by Portland Opera) require less of the listener. What's this show about? I have no idea, and I don't care enough to find out. Who wants to work that hard?

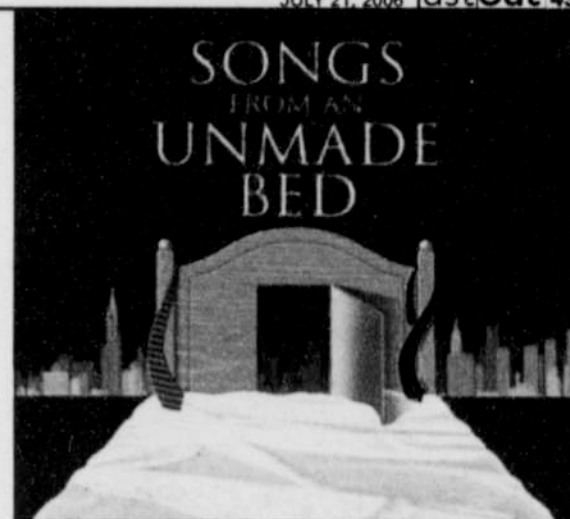
Far more satisfying is the world premiere recording of *Songs from an Unmade Bed* (*Ghostlight*), by music theater singer Mark Winter, which connects 18 cabaret songs by as many composers, yet all with lyrics by the witty Mark Campbell. The concept works astonishingly well. Campbell's distinctly gay worldview provides continuity, while the range of composers provide variety. Unlike LaChiusa, the music here manages to be sophisticated without being off-putting. Why any of these 18 composers aren't getting LaChiusa's commissions is a mystery to me.

Most of the songs concern the ins and outs (pun intended) of dating, yet somehow they never manage to be redundant, dealing with such previously untapped material as being the "other other woman" (one of two fuck buddies a married guy is

sleeping with), having sex with an actor who readjusts his hair mid-coitus or, in "He Never Did That Before," realizing your lover is cheating because he tries something in bed he only could have learned elsewhere. The ballads are enormously touching, as well. Brutally honest without being self-pitying, the loneliness expressed in them is tempered with self-deprecating humor, as demonstrated in this lyric, a reference to the unmade bed that sat on the stage of the original production:

*I could die here tonight.
Die unknown, here in my bed.
And yet it is abundantly clear
That even the act
Of being dead
Would only feel redundant here....*

Campbell has a gift for expressing ideas that are both surprising yet inevitable. There's not a sentiment here that most gay men won't identify with. As a result, the entire album is the kind that gay men won't be able to resist singing along with, not only because of the "Oh my God this is my life" lyrics, but also because of the manageably conversational range in which singer Michael Winther performs. Winther has a lovely, easygoing bari-tenor voice of the Michael Feinstein variety: a sheer pleasure to listen to, but accessible—the kind of voice your average gay guy who sang in choir thinks he has, but doesn't. He's backed by a trio of piano, percussion and cello, the latter highlighted in "He Plays the Cello," a hysterical



cal love song about a boyfriend who can't play in tune, ingeniously composed by Jeffrey Stock:

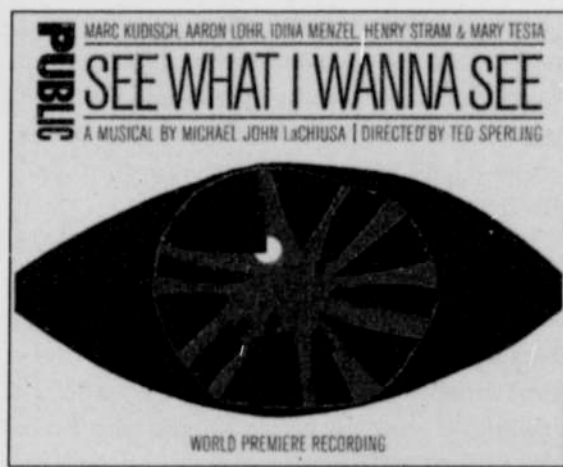
*He plays for pleasure
And not for art.
He plays in private.
And that is smart.*

The arrangements of the rest of the songs are equally inspired; the inclusion of the cello especially provides a touching counterpoint and sophistication. Most moving is "Our Separate Ways," composed by Stephen Hoffman, which mixes the pathos of a memorial service with bitchy observations:

*Maurice read a verse he wrote
(Completely devoid of charisma).
Debra swallowed a note
Midway through her melisma.*

This is the kind of album that makes you wish you'd seen the original production or hope that Winther will bring the show to Portland. Funny, romantic, wise and moving, *Songs from an Unmade Bed* is a must-have for any gay guy who is single, was single or will be single. **10**

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