

British Theatre Guide

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The Sound of Music

Music by Richard Rodgers, lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, book by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse

Andrew Lloyd Webber, David Ian and the Really Useful Group

New Wimbledon Theatre

(2011)

The Sound of Music is one of the country's best loved stories of all time. A staple of Christmas television programming, the current stage production premiered back in 2006 at the London Palladium with Connie Fisher as Maria, having won Andrew Lloyd Webber's first TV search for a musical star. Since then vocal problems have plagued her career and although she started in the lead role of the tour back in 2009, she has since had to withdraw to be replaced by the wonderful Verity Rushworth.

Rushworth's Maria is a bundle of energy, ready and willing to burst out in song at any given opportunity. Her voice is fresh, crisp, clear and pure and she brings a number of modern mannerisms to the role, some of which jar slightly with the 1938 setting. Her opening number 'The Sound of Music' fills the auditorium with joy and evokes nostalgia amongst the diverse audience present. However, no matter how hard any designer tries, the sprawling Austrian Alps cannot be faithfully reproduced onstage, leaving her 'Sound of Music' somewhat static and void of the constant iconic whirling of Julie Andrews in the film.

The Sound of Music tells the tale of problem postulant Maria, who, when sent to a regimental house as Governess, transforms the life of Captain Georg von Trapp and his children through music and love. The problem with the stage version is that, although full of song, it offers very little in the way of romance; Maria and Captain von Trapp are never really given the opportunity to interact closely, apart from a short dance sequence towards the end of Act One. We hear about their reactions to one another second hand and are thus deprived of witnessing love's true course. This distancing effect leaves the audience emotionally detached, making it difficult to feel anything between the two lovers, which is also not helped by a rather understated portrayal of Captain von Trapp from Michael Praed and a rather comedic first kiss.

The seven talented young performers as Captain von Trapp's children go down a treat. The 'ahh-factor' is in full swing during their rendition of 'Goodnight' complete with mechanical choreography courtesy of Arlene Philips, who also re-envisions 'Do-Re-Mi' as a quaint quasi-1930s Austrian rave with clubbing hand gesture 'stacking the shelves' to accompany each perfectly sung syllable.

In the role of Mother Abbess, Lesley Garrett delivers an entrancing rendition of 'Climb Every Mountain', reprising the role she also played at the Palladium. Garrett's Mother Abbess is unlike that of Peggy Wood in the film: she's down to Earth, witty and full of the warmth of Yorkshire. Garrett's acting is nowhere near as strong as her singing, but the audience don't seem to mind and gaze on in awe at who the programme notes describe as "Britain's most popular soprano". In terms of celebrity, Garrett is the star of the show and this is strongly enforced during the walk down when her fellow cast members clap her bow, but no-one else's. So many other cast members work

equally as hard, if not harder than Garrett and the isolated applause onstage only disrupts the notion of 'the company' whilst acting as an explicit signifier to enforce the production's casting hierarchy.

Two actors who really shine are Martin Callaghan as Max Detweiler and Chris Barton as Rolf Gruber. Both successfully portray the inner turmoil experienced by those in Austria regarding the Anschluss and impending Nazi rule.

Callaghan's Detweiler is lovably eccentric and whilst many of his antics summon laughs from the audience, his multi-layered portrayal of the Minister for Education and Culture leaves us sharing his despair when trying to communicate his reasons for submission with a stubborn Captain von Trapp. We also share his emotional journey as he tries to play the clown in a circus of terror and brutality and feel his pain when he realises his time is up, having used the Salzberg Festival as an opportunity to save his friends.

Likewise, this double-morality of helping those you officially should not becomes very real when the charming telegram boy Rolf Gruber transforms into a Nazi in Act Two. Gruber's final stand off with the von Trapps is full of tension and testament to Barton's understanding of what the role demands.

Being in the audience for *The Sound of Music* is a joy. As soon as the orchestra strikes up one of its memorable tunes the audience begin to sway, mouth the words, and tap their feet uncontrollably. It's almost as if the show is in our DNA. *Sing-a-long-a-Sound-of-Music* has long been popular in the cinema, and should patrons ever be permitted to sing along to the stage show, a rousing chorus of every number would give those on stage a run for their money.

The New Wimbledon Theatre is the last venue on *The Sound of Music*'s current tour. With a short run of only sixteen performances, don't miss this chance to see one of your favourite things before it says so long, farewell and Auf Wiedersehen for good.

"The Sound of Music" plays at the New Wimbledon Theatre until 22nd October 2011.

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Reviewer: [Simon Sladen](#)