

on-stage studies off-stage studies

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Taking Care of Leon. Neil Simon.

Slovak National Theatre

Bratislava, Slovak Republic

Directed by Emil Horvath, June 17, 1995

Who'd have thought Neil Simon's crassly commercial *They're Playing Our Song* could become a moving and enchanting evening of intimate theatre? Not I as I settled into the 168-seat Mala Stage of Bratislava's National Theatre wondering how in the world this quintessentially New York fare could travel to Mitteleuropa. Little did I anticipate that a sensitive director could turn this biographical tale of the neurotic relationship between Marvin Hamlisch and Carole Bayer Sager into something that not only had "Slovakian legs," but that was the kind of rewarding theatre it had never been in America- . loving study of two people I cared about.

I knew *They're Playing Our Song* as a thin piece of American musical theatre that needed all the star power that Robert Klein and Lucy Arnaz could give it. I also knew it demanded all the production flim-flam that director Robert Moore could wring out of Ann Roth's sequined costumes, Doug Schmidt's moving scenery, Tharon Musser's elaborate light plot, Pat Birch's choreography, and a **back-up** group of six singer-dancers, not to mention a back stage crew large enough to warm the cockles of IATSE's heart. And I knew the show couldn't succeed without a brassy combo in the pit providing all the raucous sound a Broadway audience could desire. I was wrong, wrong, wrong. Director Emil Horvath showed me the quintessence of this little play, and after I came out of the theatre into the warm moon glow that reflected off the gentle ripples of the Danube River just across the road, I was reminded of Albee's celebrated line from *Zoo Story*: "Sometimes you have to go a long distance out of your way in order to come back a short distance correctly." Sometimes you have to go to Bratislava to learn what Neil Simon is really all about.

The Mala Stage is a friendly and intimate little theatre that reminds me of the Lucille Lortel—without the balcony. The well-dressed, middle-aged Bratislavian audience was there for a rewarding Saturday night of good theatre. They laughed sympathetically, listened attentively, applauded the songs gently, and talked about the show during intermission—not about their nephew’s imminent Bar Mitzvah. This was not an “in-crowd” gossiping about Hamlish and Sager, but an audience intrigued to learn how the story would end.

Director Horváth told the story in very simple theatrical terms, focusing primarily on his two fine actors. The set consisted of a piano downright and a small round table and two chairs downleft. These were Leon’s studio and a nightclub setting (I never did learn why the character’s name was changed from Vernon in this production). They remained on stage throughout the evening, with the actors moving from one side to another as the action dictated. Downcenter was a neutral space that could be used as a beach house, a dance floor, or a recording studio. A phone was enough to transform it into a phone booth. Mid-way upstage was a dull green half-curtain on a track, which the actor could (and did) pull open to reveal a bedroom. Minimal changes in furniture and hanging lamps transformed this area from Leon’s apartment to Sonia’s. There was no attempt at Realism and no effort given to dazzling spectacle or revolving scenery. The setting was in the tradition of what neighboring Czech scenographers call “action design.” All the locations were visible simultaneously, suggested by fragments or single props, presented rather in the manner of the conventions we associate with Elizabethan theatre. The setting was utilitarian, not decorative. It helped tell the story and suggest the world of the play, but it did not provide spectacle for its own sake.

The lighting and costumes were similarly utilitarian. The lighting illuminated the relevant areas, but there was nary a follow-spot or glitter ball to be seen all evening. The costumes were charmingly mitteleuropean to my American eyes. The

man wore black jeans and a black shirt and looked like a renegade from the musical *Nine*. He never changed costume, since he never left the stage. The woman wore the sloppy and eccentric clothing that I associate more with trendy Eurotrash than with Simon's stage direction that she "dresses like a cross between Annie Hall and a gypsy tea reader." And yet the audience understood them to be "American artistes." National dress is evidently in the eye of the beholder.

The lights came up on an elderly bald man, pianist Tomas Seidman, playing the piano. The title character Leon (Michal Docolomansky) was standing next to him with score sheets in hand and pencil in mouth, writing the melody for "Fallin." I suspect Docolomansky could not play the piano, but in any event Seidmann accompanied the performance throughout, discreetly changing from a suitcoat to a maroon tux jacket when the action moved to Le Club. Sonia (Kamila Magálová) entered through a slit in the green curtain. This was the character's story, not the actor's, and there was no need for an ornate doorway or for a star's entrance. She left the same way, and when the action moved to Leon's flat, Docolomansky merely grabbed the green curtain and marched it to one side of the stage, revealing the bed, table, and chair that were his apartment. He then pulled it closed when the action moved on.

The effect of this simple staging was to guide our attention to the characters and their story. Director Horváth was blessed in his two actors. In the role of Leon, Docolomansky had the quiet strength and virile masculinity of a Michael Nouri or Sam Elliott. He was not a handsome man, nor a neurotic one, and he suggested nothing of the true persona of Marvin Hamlisch or his theatrical surrogates Robert Klein and Tony Roberts. Docolomansky's Leon was a cautious man, fearful of emotional entanglements, probably burnt by failed relationships in his past, and he reminded me of Karl Malden's Mitch in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. He was someone I could root for. I wanted him to find happiness.

Kamila Magálová's Sonia was not a neurotic and skittish Diane Keaton, nor a leggy show-biz star like Lucy Arnaz. She looked to be in her early 40s and while her Sonia seemed a little dowdy and dressed in a manner we used to call "kooky," she was someone who commanded our attention and merited our concern. I sensed that these two are established leading actors of the Slovak National Theatre and well-known to their audience. Together, they took us through the story of two people who need one another and finally get together.

Yes, they picked up mikes and sang the songs to Seidmann's accompaniment. But they sang them directly to the audience, not to an imagined crowd at a nightclub nor with the added pizzazz of singer-dancers and complex orchestrations. The conventions of this production were very modest. It was a chamber musical, a small event for a small theatre.

And that is what was so marvelous about it. Dramaturg K. Foldrari seems to have recognized *They're Playing Our Song* for what it truly is—a two-hander about people we care for, two people who are involved in "Taking Care of Leon." Director Horváth achieved that vision on the stage and created the kind of production that belongs in the second spaces of LORT theatres across America, as well as in the intimate off-Broadway house where Simon's newest play was produced. Simon may have needed to go a long distance to Bratislava in order to come back a short distance to off-Broadway correctly.

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