

A NOTE FROM THE DRAMATURG

Where are the clowns? There ought to be clowns. Send in the clowns. – Desirée Armfeldt, *A Little Night Music*

In 1973, the late prolific theatre director and producer Harold Prince was on the search for a new project with composer Stephen Sondheim. The pair had previously collaborated on both *Company* (1970) and *Follies* (1971), both non-linear musicals with no direct plot. After the financial disaster of *Follies*, Prince and Sondheim needed a guaranteed success. Sondheim suggested one of his favorite films, Ingmar Bergman's 1955 film, *Smiles of a Summer Night*. Bergman granted them permission to adapt the plot and its characters, although insisted that they use a different title. Always one step ahead, Sondheim had already thought of one: *A Little Night Music*.

Set at the turn of the twentieth century during the Swedish holiday of Midsommar, the plot of *Smiles of a Summer Night* follows a series of couples switching partners over the course of a romantic “weekend in the country.” Sondheim's initial concept for the show was of a “dark, somewhat Chekhovian, yet romantic and erotic musical taking the form of a theme and variation.” Hugh Wheeler's book greatly contrasted this idea; after some intervening from Prince, the pair settled on a “light, fluffy, and comedic romp”. Sondheim's response to this new take was to show off writing a “through-composed score”, all of the pieces of music complementing each other. Instead of imitating a nineteenth century score, it is as if Sondheim set out to write a nineteenth century score of his own, utilizing lush, romantic theme and variation.

Put simply, this version of *A Little Night Music* was a hit. To quote Sondheim, “it was the least poorly received show of [Prince and mine] at the time”. The original Broadway production ran for over 600 performances; Sondheim's score not only charmed the Broadway community (and the Tony voters), but the entire country as well. If not already established as the one, Desirée Armfeldt's Act 2 ballad “Send in the Clowns” is in the running for Sondheim's most successful song. Judy Collin's recording of “Send in the Clowns” won the 1975 Grammy Award for Song of the Year; before that, Frank Sinatra recorded a cover in 1973, establishing the piece as a jazz standard.

Sondheim explains the imagery depicted in “Send in the Clowns” as an allusion to a “theater reference meaning ‘if the show isn't going well, let's send in the clowns’; in other words, ‘let's do the jokes.’” The song itself can be viewed as a metaphor for Prince and Sondheim's career as well: Prince and Sondheim could not afford another flop and truly took a gamble with *A Little Night Music*. Relying on the humor and wit to win over audiences, Prince and Sondheim sent in the clowns and wound up with their biggest success.

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Sources:

Stephen Sondheim, *Finishing the Hat*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group 2010.