

"Rodgers, Rodgers & Guettel" | John Brancy, Hal Cazalet, Mary Testa, Lauren Worsham, Steven Blier

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THE TWENTY-NINTH SEASON of the New York Festival of Song opened with a program "Rodgers, Rodgers & Guettel" (seen Nov. 1), a tribute to composer Richard Rodgers, his daughter Mary Rodgers Guettel and his grandson Adam Guettel. Richard Rodgers is the most famous name on the program, thanks to his long-term collaborations with Oscar Hammerstein II and Lorenz Hart. Surprisingly, not one song from *The King and I*, *The Sound of Music* or *Babes in Arms* were part of NYFOS's program; *South Pacific* and *Oklahoma!* did make appearances, as did songs from *The Boys from Syracuse*, *Allegro*, *Do I Hear a Waltz?* and the lesser-known *Peggy-Ann*, a 1926 dance-heavy comedy that unfolds in the dream of the title character. There was also a Rodgers and Hart selection, "Ev'rybody Loves You," cut from *I'd Rather Be Right*.

The Mary Rodgers selections were a revelation. The composer—who transitioned away from music-making into children's book writing, most successfully with *Freaky Friday*, which was adapted into a number of films—scored a success with her first musical, *Once Upon a Mattress*, which starred a young Carol Burnett in her Broadway debut. Another commercial success was the revue *The Mad Show* (1966), from which the selection "The Boy From..."—written with Stephen Sondheim, under the alias of Esteban Rio Nido, as a riff on "The Girl from Ipanema"—has become a cabaret staple. After hearing this NYFOS program, it seems an absolute shame that many of Mary Rodgers's other works went unproduced. In particular, "Something Known," from *The Member of the Wedding*, a 1966 musical for which Mary was never ultimately granted the rights, should be a member of the standard soprano canon. (Sopranos: good luck finding the sheet music; it's unpublished.) Mary's keen sense of melody in this song is much like her father's, and yet her music is a bit more complicated (and dare I say more delightful?) harmonically. NYFOS also offered two beautiful selections from *The Griffin and the Minor Canon*, based on the short story of the same name by Frank Stockton, that were at once intricate and approachable, with gorgeous harmonies for two male voices in "Fear."

Adam Guettel's deeply moving success, *The Light in the Piazza*, won the composer two Tony Awards and two Drama Desk Awards. This NYFOS program presented two *Piazza* selections—the title song, sung in the show by Clara, a mentally challenged young woman, and "Dividing Day," a poignantly moving selection sung by Clara's mother, Margaret, as she reflects upon her failed marriage. Two selections from Guettel's song cycle *Myths and Hymns* illustrated Guettel's talent in composing for no specific genre: "Awaiting You" and "Migratory V" combine elements of ballads, jazz and even gospel swing. "There Go I," a 2013 song unattributed to a show, fell a little flat in comparison, but "Saint Who," from Guettel's forthcoming *Millions*, to be produced in 2017, was very smart. As explained by NYFOS artistic director Steven Blier, *Millions* follows a young boy who finds money and has a series of visions; in "Saint Who," he asks the saints to make his dead mother a saint. It was at once humorous and affecting—a skill that runs in the Rodgers/Guettel family.

Four fine singers made up the cast. John Brancy was a stand-out: his baritone has deep, rich color and his rendition of "Some Enchanted Evening" was first-class, vocally and emotionally. Hal Cazalet's agreeable tenor, light but not airy, was fortified immensely by his solid acting skills; "Bargaining," from *Do I Hear a Waltz?*, was quite funny. Broadway veteran Mary Testa still commands the stage as a character actress, if her voice is showing signs of wear. Her top boasts a full belt, while her bottom is full and commanding, and she sported a glorious diminuendo in "Ev'rybody Loves You." Lauren Worsham has a lovely, if safely-guarded, soprano; in this program, she offered some very strange diction, either because her vibrato was masking the sound or because she had a habit, especially in the Richard Rodgers's selections, of opening her mouth only slightly. But of all the performers, Worsham was the best at connecting with the audience.

As usual, Blier's commentary from the piano was expertly educational. Did *you* know the reference to "the night boat to Albania," in Rodgers & Hart's "Dear Old Syracuse" was a reference to the night boat to Albany, which was a floating brothel? So much for the "good old days." —*Maria Mazzaro*