Send in the Clowns

Piers Ford explores how certain songs stand up to reinterpretation by different singers

Few songs have survived the indignities heaped on them in third-rate piano bars and auditions drenched in misplaced earnestness like Sondheim's 'Send in the Clowns'. Its lyrics speak so eloquently of self-realisation, and the gently relentless rise of each cadence from the oboe's melancholy opening bars is so irresistible, that it throws temptation in the path of any would-be dramatic singer. Its simplicity is deceptive.

That it strikes such a chord beyond the proscenium arch is testament to Sondheim's abundant gifts as a songwriter, for 'Send in the Clowns' is in every sense a theatrical conceit. It is the 11 o'clock number in one of his best-loved shows, 1973's A Little Night Music, the moment when actress Desiree Armfeldt, reunited in fading middle age with the love of her life, Fredrik, and apparently about to lose him again, takes a long, bleak look at her lot. The language is all of the stage: she's making her entrance, she's sure of her lines, but there's no audience. She's lost her timing. The play of her life has reached its emotional nadir and the clowns must come in to save the day. But the clowns, with typical Sondheim irony, are already here: Desiree and Fredrik themselves.

A superficial accessibility comes from the fact that the song was written for a non-singing actress, silvery-voiced Glynis Johns who created the role on Broadway. Its range is limited, the notes not intended to be held for long. Sondheim was apparently worried that it sounded too like a piano-bar song and its genesis during the show's pre-Broadway try-out was painful indeed.

To add a further layer of irony, it was the soprano tones of the classically trained folk singer Judy Collins who gave Sondheim his biggest commercial hit, when the serene fluidity of her 1975 version hit the pop charts. In some respects, Collins is too good a singer for the number. She turns it into three minutes of beauty that, although lacking the underlying pathos that underpins the song, have a poignancy that serves the sophisticated elegance of the melody and lyric.

Unfortunately, Collins' success also heralded a long sojourn for 'Send in the Clowns' in the easy listening wilderness as it fell prey to a succession of cheesy, overwrought interpretations that simply ignored its dark centre and suggested that, after all, Sondheim could have been right about his own composition. But there were also glimmers of hope. Frank Sinatra, the only male singer to sound truly convincing with this brittle material, expertly imbued it with a world-weary quality when it became a staple of his later career. Cleo Laine's sensitive and restrained reading gleamed with melancholy intelligence. And in 1985, Barbra Streisand persuaded Sondheim to write a new lyric to replace the monologue that, on stage, links the first and second verses, for her classic Broadway Album, with fascinating results for the song's dynamic.

In the end, however, it's the ladies of the stage who rightly set the standards for a song that they have, over the years, consistently reclaimed with magnificent effect (although it might be wiser to leave Elizabeth Taylor, Desiree in the 1978 film of A Little Night Music, to one side). Glynis Johns' version on the original Broadway cast recording remains one of the very best, although a later, live recording of a 1996 Hollywood Sondheim gala is touching for the enhanced fragility of her distinctive vocal. Jean Simmons originated the role in London and her recording is interesting for a frustrated, waspish tone that injects real venom into the song. Two other versions, by Glenn Close - another live performance, this time from 1993's Sondheim: A Celebration at Carnegie Hall - and Julie Wilson (Sondheim Songbook) also repay repeated listening for the layers of meaning they peel away.

But it was Judi Dench who served the strongest reminder that 'Send in the Clowns' is at its most effective in the hands of a non-singing actress. Her rendition in the National Theatre's 1995 revival of A Little Night Music prompted Sondheim to tell her, simply, 'It's yours, now'. There could be no higher praise.

Three of the best:

Glynis Johns, A Little Night Music, RCA and Sondheim, A Celebration, Varèse Sarabande
Barbra Streisand, The Broadway Album, Columbia
Judi Dench, A Little Night Music, Tring

Sondheim is never too grand to adapt his own material if the results are likely to be worthwhile. He couldn't go wrong with Streisand and Judi Dench, but it was Judi Dench who served the strongest reminder that 'Send in the Clowns' is at its most effective in the hands of a non-singing actress. Her rendition in the National Theatre's 1995 revival of A Little Night Music prompted Sondheim to tell her, simply, 'It's yours, now'. There could be no higher praise.

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Fabulously cracked and lived-in but, according to Dress Circle, the rarest of Sondheim's cast recordings and almost impossible to find