



KISS OF THE SPIDERWOMAN

SEDOS talk about their recent production of Kander & Ebb's *Kiss Of The Spiderwoman*. It's a musical that presents challenges as they found out!!

INTRODUCTION

Relatively few have heard the tale of Argentinean prison cellmates; Valetin, a revolutionary, and Molina, a gay window dresser. This is the foundation for the story of "Kiss of the Spider Woman" – a story which was beautifully told in Manuel Puig's 1976 novel, 'El Beso de la Mujer Arana' and went on to inspire play, a film and a musical.

In its various incarnations, "Kiss of the Spider Woman" has won many awards and accolades. The film won Best Actor for William Hurt at the Oscars and the BAFTAs; whilst the musical won 6 Tony's, including Best Musical and Best Original Score for the writers Kander and Ebb (most famous for 'Cabaret'). The original London production also won the London Evening Standard Drama Award for Best Musical.

So, when Sedos decided to put the musical on in November last year, we were well aware of the weight of responsibility that came with doing justice to a story with such legacy. "Kiss of the Spider Woman", is rarely performed and tricky to license; so Sedos saw this as a great opportunity to prove why we are consistently referred to as London's premier amateur theatre society.

THE MUSICAL

"Kiss of the Spider Woman" is a powerful multi-dimensional story, exploring the complex relationship between two very different men.

Luis Alberto Molina, in prison for corrupting a minor, escapes the horrors of prison life by recalling his favourite movie sequences, all featuring his screen goddess, Aurora. But there is one role she plays that terrifies him – the Spider Woman, whose Kiss brings death. She continually stalks the prison in Molina's psyche, weaving her web ever closer.

The show opens as a new man is brought into Molina's cell - Valentin Arregui Paz, a Marxist revolutionary. Valentin has been tortured for information, so Molina cares for him and tells him of Aurora. Initially, Valentin is reluctant to listen to Molina's tales, but as the show goes on he is drawn into their refuge.

We learn that Valentin has a girlfriend name Marta who appears in various songs, as the audience get an insight into Valentin's thoughts and dreams. We also discover that Molina found love before prison in a waiter named Gabriel, and has a mother on the

outside who is ill and requires help.

The head of the prison, known only as "The Warden" makes life hell for both prisoners and, through the course of the show, poisons both of them.

Will the Warden break Valentin and discover the secrets he's hiding? Will Molina find freedom and help is mother? It's a heartbreaking ending that has audiences at the edge of their seat.

CASTING

Casting the show was always going to be a challenge with such a male-heavy show. The creative team were adamant that they wanted good actors who could sing; and so extended the initial rehearsal schedule to ensure they found the right caliber of performers. The relationship between Molina and Valentin had to be perfect, requiring numerous recalls.

Casting Aurora was also a feat. Regardless that there are only three female leads in the show, they are all complex; and Aurora requires an excellent character actress (having to play 4 different 'roles'), strong dance and a potent singing voice as well as that elusive 'something' - so whoever got the part truly had to be a triple threat for the show to be a success.

REHEARSALS

As the entire cast and crew were also working full time jobs, it was important to be as effective as possible with the rehearsal time available. Early rehearsals were generally twice a week, one for singing and one for actors or dancers and this started to include weekends as we got closer to opening night.

One trick that has helped Sedos in recent years has been videoing rehearsals and putting these videos on websites like YouTube. This was particularly useful for the dancers in the production, who could refer to the video in their free time to recap the dance steps and movements.

There was also a great dynamic in that the show had two co-directors, and each focused on a different part of the show. One on vision and staging, the other on

characterization; the latter of which was always going to be a tricky in ensuring that the cast portrayed how prisoners in this time and place would have been feeling.

You may know the history - on March 24 1976, in a well-planned coup, the Argentine armed forces overthrew the existing government and a three-man military junta took charge and began a ruthless campaign against the liberal counterculture. People suspected of favouring the rebellion were kidnapped on the streets and never seen again.

Conditions in the prisons were unthinkable. Prisoners were not allowed to lie on their beds during the day, and the strain of this sometimes caused paralysis or atrophy of the legs. The prisons would play sad songs by Julio Iglesias to deepen prisoners' depression.

In one rehearsal, actors literally stood in a confined cell space for 40 minutes improvising. It doesn't seem very long, but got very claustrophobic very quickly and elements of the improvisation were then incorporated into the actual performance.

On working with the two directors, David Walker-Smith, who played Molina said: "At first working with two Directors was pretty daunting; I was worried it would be confusing. But together they worked as a total unit. Dawn inspired and worked very deeply on the characterization whilst Roger was the visionary and had great eye for the detail. As Molina said..."I loved it!"

Musically, the score for "Kiss of the Spider Woman" presents its own challenges with some particularly close and challenging harmonies to conquer in songs like "Morphine Tango". The musical director, David Griffiths, had strong aspirations for both the vocals and the role the band would play in the show too, and planned for an ambitious 15 strong orchestra.

Andrew Overin, who played Valentin, said of David: "This was the third time I'd worked with David Griffiths. One of the things I admire about him as a Musical Director is that he not only has the skill to lead an orchestra which is relatively large for an amateur production but he really understands how to work with singers and actors, providing coaching, support and the preparation needed to bring out their best performance."

COSTUMES / MAKE-UP

Kiss of the Spider Woman was a dichotomy of costume requirements. On the one hand the prisoners were a bedraggled, grubby bunch who had been holed up and mistreated for years, on the other there was Aurora and her multitude of glamorous characters. Having clear direction and input from the Production Team was invaluable throughout the process, and ensured a unified vision of the overall look and feel of the show.

Many of the prisoner's costumes were able to be sourced from Sedos' already existing costume store, with the cast being very helpful in suitably "dirtying" their own outfits. On the night of the dress rehearsal the stage got cleaned by the cast rolling around on it, which aided an authentic "prison" look. We adhered to the period for the remaining cast characters, finding outfits that had a seventies feel.

However the challenge came about on how to create Aurora's many and varied outfits on a limited budget. Existing costumes from our store were adapted as well as entire outfits created from scratch. The most problematical of these was how to create a "bird of paradise" outfit from a corset and feather boas. After a weekend of brain-storming, pinning, hand-sewing and sequinning, the two costumiers produced incredible results.

To ensure that Aurora really was a "star", and looked suitable, the 'Kiss' team were able to get sponsorship from Illamasqua make-up artists who in return for some space in the programme sent a professional to provide and apply Aurora's make-up each night.

SET

Sedos perform many of their shows at the Bridewell and as such know the space inside and out and recently, Sedos announced that we are to be the Resident Theatre Company. The great and challenging thing about the Bridewell Theatre is the stages depth. It was important we could create both the feeling of closeness and a movie style dance space.

One of the distinguishing features of the set was that it featured 4 sets of moveable prison bars. These not only served to create cells when needed, but were used to dramatic effect in transitions, choreography and to create different spaces. The bars gave depth and dynamic to the space and in addition a looming upstage walkway gave the Spiderwoman and Warden somewhere to 'prowl'. It enabled the team to create all the various locations and movie worlds that Molina fantasies about without it being over complicated. Simple, but effective.

The set was built offsite and moved into the Bridewell on a Sunday, giving the cast an opportunity to have a run through in the space on the Sunday and a tech on the Monday before the show opening for its Tuesday – Sunday run.

SOUND

Sound at the Bridewell can be a headache for some sound people. However, we had the wonderful sound team of StuSound who could balance a beautiful sounding orchestral band, which had soft string and reed sounds, to the marimba and percussion section of songs like the Act One close, 'Give Me Love'. They also contended with 17 mic'ed actors. It was a tough job, but Sedos always knew Stuart and his team would rise to the



ONSTAGE

occasion. Opening night was amazing considering the short amount of time to move into the Bridewell. It made a black box sound like the West End.

MARKETING

Sedos set up a marketing subcommittee at the start of 2010 and someone from the committee is allocated to each show which really helps ensure the show gets a great campaign, but that it links in with all other Sedos activity (Sedos put on 10 shows in 2010!) – so it was promoted at all Sedos shows that were around the same time.

Artist and cast member Anthony Newell produced the original artwork for the flyer. Flyers were then available at the theatre, given to the cast for friends and dropped off at pubs and shops near the theatre — and the front was also emailed to the cast to forward and sent out with the press release.

Professional theatre photographer Nick Chronnell took photos at an early rehearsal and also the dress, and these were used to promote the show through our website (sedos.co.uk) and facebook page (facebook.com/sedostheatre). Indeed, much of Sedos' marketing now takes place online, with daily facebook updates and we used the phrase "What was your favourite kiss?" to start debate and "You've never had a kiss like this" to create intrigue. We also used email marketing, as well as asking other amateur theatre companies to promote the show.

Finally, we featured Kiss three times in the Grapevine, the quarterly Sedos members' e-magazine. In June, we announced the cast, in September we had a Q&A with the creative team and in November there was a "did you know" style feature.

We met our original sales aim for Kiss, which was to sell 600 tickets out of 780 available. Three nights sold out, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday night's gala night, for which tickets cost an extra £5 including a glass of fizz and programme, plus a late bar.

CONCLUSION

Sedos never shy away from putting on controversial or underperformed material, and 'Kiss of the Spider Woman' certainly fit the bill. It was a tough ride, but Sedos were delighted that with so many mountains to climb they were able to pull off a production that the creative team and cast were proud of.

Sedos' next two shows are much more known than "Kiss of the Spider Woman". From 8-12 March they are performing Romeo and Juliet and from 6-16 April, West Side Story. You may think it an odd choice to put these two shows on so close together, but Sedos always committed to challenging expectations and are hoping to show how you can tell a similar story in two very different ways – an exploration of love!

Society: Sedos
Dates of production: 23-27 November 2010
Venue: The Bridewell Theatre, Bride Lane, Fleet Street, London, EC4Y 8EQ.
Website: www.sedos.co.uk

Kiss Of the Spiderwoman is licensed in the UK by Samuel French Ltd

FORTHCOMING SEDOS PRODUCTIONS

- Romeo and Juliet - 8-12 March
- West Side Story - 6-16 April
- Push Up - 19-23 July
- Assassins - 9-13 August
- PLAY TBA - 27 September-1 October
- Wilde in the City - September / October TBA
- Fewer Emergencies - 27 November
- A Little Night Music - 23 November-3 December

