

CD Reviews Gypsy and La Leggendia della Pianista

Gypsy (1962) ***

JULE STYNE AND STEPHEN SONDHEIM

Warner Bros./Turner Classic Movies Music

22 tracks - 69:56

I've had to listen to boys in Greenwich Village piano bars bitch about this one for years. Now I'm going to exact a bit of artistic revenge and tell the world how I really feel: I don't think there's much wrong with Warner Brothers' splashy 1962 film adaptation of the 1959 Broadway musical milestone *Gypsy*. Before I'm stoned in the streets by legions of fanatical Ethel Merman admirers, I will readily acknowledge that The Merm's indelible interpretation of the unstoppable Momma Rose is justifiably worshipped. Ethel's overbearing stridency perfectly conveyed the ferocious ambition and roaring angst of the ultimate stage mother. To hear Merman belt "I had a dream..." as she launches into "Everything's Coming Up Roses" is undeniable proof that there is a God and she was born in Astoria, Queens in 1908.

Although Merman was inexplicably passed over for the movie of *Gypsy*, her volcanic spirit hovers over the film like a furious specter. The controversially cast Rosalind Russell, a consummate talent in her own right, gamely tries her best as Jack Warner's Momma Rose, wisely relying on her sublime comedic abilities to carry her through. The vocal demands of the role were far beyond Russell's range, however and the star wasn't completely forthcoming in her 1977 memoir *Life Is A Banquet* when she wrote, "That's Roz, and nobody else, as Rose on the soundtrack of *Gypsy*." What cinema audiences and soundtrack devotees actually heard was an amalgamation of voice double Lisa Kirk (mostly) and Russell (very sparingly).

Unlike Marni Nixon, who loaned her lilting soprano to Deborah Kerr for *The King and I* and Audrey Hepburn for *My Fair Lady*, Lisa Kirk (1925-1990) hasn't received nearly the same attention for her own ghost belting achievements. Hand-picked by Cole Porter to originate the role of Lois Lane in the original Broadway production of *Kiss Me Kate*, Kirk enjoyed a successful career as a nightclub chanteuse and Great White Way favorite. It's unclear who's idea it was to utilize Kirk for the *Gypsy* dubbing but she produced a respectable though never truly electrifying Rose Hovick.

The invigorating "Some People" is one of the most eagerly anticipated numbers in the score and the presentation here is something of a letdown -- not only are the seams showing on the Kirk-Russell patchwork but Kirk's subbing seems too sluggishly paced to project the requisite fire necessary for the quintessential "get outta my way" anthem. On the poignant and winsome side of things, Kirk is far more effective with two endearing Styne-Sondheim ballads, "Small World" and "You'll Never Get Away From Me." When Merman was subtracted from *Gypsy*, her sonic boom chutzpah was forfeited but a certain warmth and humanity was regained. As Rose savors the words "small and funny and fine" at the conclusion of "Small World," Kirk is arriving at a genuine emotional discovery whereas Merman (on the original Broadway cast album) is still steamrolling.

"We can say she wore black-and-white pumps and that's about it," is how Arthur Laurents, the author of

Gypsy, has glibly dismissed Russell's performance in the film. A handful of unadulterated Roz vocals are collected at the conclusion of this Warner Bros/Turner Classic Movies Music edition of the soundtrack and the painful quality of most of these tracks would seem to validate Laurents. However, that gorgeous nervous breakdown known as "Rose's Turn," inspires Russell to previously unscaled heights and she earns her rightful place in the National Diva Registry by fully committing to a spirited and impassioned delivery. Light the lights, indeed.

For my money, there is no more exhilarating overture in the history of the American musical theater than the instrumental introduction to *Gypsy*. The circus-like aspects of show business, Rose's dazzle-or-die determination and the desperation of the mother-daughter disunion at the center of the story are all orchestrally in evidence. As arranged and conducted by Frank Perkins, the movie's overture is in some ways more vibrant and commanding than its theatrical equivalent. Equally sublime is the Warner Brothers Studio Orchestra's sizzling accompaniment of Natalie Wood's reprise of "Let Me Entertain You." As burlesque goddess Gypsy Rose Lee, Wood's hopeless attempts at vocalizing are ironically on target in underscoring her character's discomfort as she's cruelly exploited by the unrelenting Rose.

This remastered release also retrieves (at last) the memorable "Together Wherever We Go," which was deleted from the release print in an effort to shave a few minutes from the picture's running time. It's puzzling why this ditty was deemed expendable as Russell, Wood and even the woefully miscast Karl Malden are all in peak comedic form.

The cover of the liner notes booklet is graced with the original poster art and not the garish collage featured on the jacket of the original LP issue. All things said and done, this adaptation of *Gypsy* wasn't the four-star classic it could have been but it's certainly not the devastating catastrophe that some boys on their third vodka stinger would have you believe... How do you like them egg rolls, Mr. Goldstone? -- Mark Griffin

La Leggenda della Pianista and other Music for Film ****

ENNIO MORRICONE

DigitMovies CDDM006

24 tracks - 73:18 (22 tracks; 2 commentary Tracks: 10:02)

When the phrase "recorded live" appears on an Italian production, it generally sends shudders down one's spine. *La Leggenda* is a live piano concert recording from 1998 featuring Gilda Butta (who played on *The Legend of 1900* soundtrack) performing music from a variety of Morricone films from *Gott Mitt Uns* (1969) all the way to *The Legend of 1900* (1998). The "Four Studies" for piano will catch some casual Morricone fans off guard. They're harsh, dissonant musical expressions of contemporary, atonal piano writing. The same goes for the "Rag frantumi" (1988). These lay in harsh contrast to the thematic selections from *Love Affair* (which sounds like the published version available in recent sheet music collections) and *Cinema Paradiso*.

In addition to selections from *Cane Bianco*, *Stark System* and other films less familiar in the U.S., there are five tracks devoted to the aforementioned *The Legend of 1900*. The exquisite "Playing Love" gets a show stopping performance, followed by the remarkable "Moto Perpetuo," which brings the disc to a satisfying conclusion. All the selections are well performed and extremely close-miked, with precious little hall ambience.

For those who do not speak Italian, Digitmovies has graciously included a translation of Morricone's

comments in the booklet. Unfortunately, these don't offer any additional information on the music. Still this is a fine disc that illustrates the many faces of this master composer. It's a limited edition disc available at www.digitmovies.com. -- S.A.K.

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