

THE VOICE

Watch Out, Julie!

Tackling a classic with love and impudence

by Deborah Jowitz

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Stand in the middle of a crowded room and remark, "the hills are alive. . . ." Watch what happens. After a brief pause, people will start to warble "with the sound of muuuuusic!" and grin in complicity at one another. Some of them, like choreographer Doug Elkins, grew up with the 1965 movie version of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. Some may even have visited the online Sound of Music Movie Mall or tooled around Salzburg on one of the ongoing tours to sites where *The Sound of Music* was shot. The film was—is—huge. So it's all the more entrancing to see Elkins's *Fraulein Maria* presented by danceMopolitan at Joe's Pub, where the musical's vision of romance, family fun, and looming danger (Hitler's takeover of Austria) has been reduced to fit the very small stage and intimate atmosphere, and its treacly but irresistible sweetness given a few raunchy pomo tweaks by Elkins and colleagues. Where the movie's director, Robert Wise, panned over the Alps for a very long time before zooming in on the tiny figure of Maria twirling on a grassy hill, Elkins has two people push through the crowded room bearing two sparkly little fir trees. Julie Andrews's inimitable spun-sugar voice singing the title song accompanies not one but two Marias (Arthur Aviles and Jennifer Nugent) in blue dresses and white aprons, who frolic like puppies in their joy and indulge in a little flying sex. Elkins, who's been scarce on the New York scene for too long, brings to *Fraulein Maria* not only his apparently encyclopedic knowledge of the film and its backstory but his choreographic skills and wit. Carolyn Cryer, Krista Jansen, Alexis Murphy, and Charemaine Seet wear lavender hoodies to play the nuns who chatter about the novice Maria's lack of docility. In their "Morning Hymn and Alleluia," they perform almost all their small gestures in canon: now me, now you, now her, now her. In "Maria," they form a line, hand to-elbow, and jointly evoke a hip-hop wave. "The Lonely Goatherd" puppet show put on by the von Trapp kids is reconfigured as a charming stamp-and clap number for the same four women (now costumed in fur-trimmed vests and hats with extremely long feathers). Remember Julie Andrews's long argument with herself as she skips down the road to take up her job as governess ("I Have Confidence")? Elkins has dual aspects of Maria (Nugent and Nicole Wolcott) battle it out—entering along the low wall that runs through the audience and coming out on stage suitcases swinging. The choreography takes slightly more devilish view of the duet "Sixteen Going On Seventeen." In the movie it's the soon-to-be nazified telegraph delivery boy who urges the eldest von Trapp daughter Liesel to control her yen for kisses. This show's Liesel is David Parker in a large white satin dress demurely reading in a chair, and her very randy boyfriend is that snake-hipped house dancer par excellence, Archie Burnett. There are many delights in Elkins's tongue-in-cheek homage to a classic. Johnnie Moore in a too-large tailcoat fussily both impedes and instructs singer Mark Gindick as Gindrick delivers "Do-Re-Mi" as a sing-along. Keely Garfield seems less the smitten Maria and more the sly Baroness (hiss!) in a duet with Elkins (although maybe it's about the initial tussling between Captain von Trapp and Maria). Elkins performs "Climb Every Mountain" alone as a fluid meld of hip-hop and contemporary dance; never moving from one spot onstage, he maintains a sinuous twisting and curling of arms, hips, head, and knees that's as arduous as it is understated. And *Sound of Music* fans chuckle and guffaw over the choreography's references to the von Trapp children's propensity for bouncing up and down and popping in and out of line. My personal favorite of the evening is Elkins take on "Do-Re-Mi." Embellishing the structure of the learn-to-sing number, he creates a little movement motif for each of the notes of the the scale (Aviles is especially rapt as the note "re", the "drop of golden sun"), then mixes and combines these in wildly jubilant dancing that reflects Maria's lesson: that the notes of a scale can be turned into glorious music. What finer message for a happy crowd to take out onto the Christmas ready streets than one of diversity and freedom cohabiting with group harmony?