



Fräulein Maria at ADF

by Kate Dobbs Ariail

July 13, 2009, Durham, NC: Whoops, I just started to write "dateline: 1959" — which points up the big question raised by Doug Elkins and Friends' *Fräulein Maria*, a good-natured take-off on *The Sound of Music*. What year are we living in? If we are in 2009, are we stuck in some swamp of nostalgia — sort of like Bunyan's Slough of Despond, but all saccharined-up? So far this summer in the Triangle we've had Steely Dan and *The Jersey Boys* — and now the Von Trapp family?

I guess anything can become classical, even "Do[e], a deer," but personally I'd hoped that one would fade away. For those of us who are vocally-challenged, every repetition recalls the whiplashes of scorn applied to us by those born to lift ev'ry voice and sing. Before the dancing started, I nearly fled the theater when the simulacrum of my junior high chorus teacher appeared to assign the audience their notes by section. Arrgh!

But *Fräulein Maria* is a sweet thing, in its mild way. It started life as a revivifying little project by choreographer and former B-Boy Doug Elkins, and was originally performed at Christmas-time in Joe's Pub of New York's Public Theater. It has won a Bessie and a pile of positive reviews. Undoubtedly it is more simpatico in a cabaret setting than in Duke University's Reynolds Theater, where the [American Dance Festival](#) is presenting it this week as a little sample of "downtown" dance from New York (although hardly the freshest example). I expect it would be a lot more fun in closer quarters, where the homemade-performance-in-the-living-room aspect would be more pronounced, the broad jokes could better extend their reach into your heart, and the less-than-pristine recording of Julie Andrews would sound more at home.

There are charming, low-cost, inventive stage effects, and there is a lot of wit in the concept, with plenty of gender-bending, sexual joking, and innuendo — none of it mean, or even, really, ironic, which is refreshing. There's some interesting movement of many types — highly referential, and probably best-appreciated by a dance in-crowd able to recognize the tropes. The ADF-heavy audience on opening night lapped it up, especially Elkins' solo — in hoodie, as the Abbess. I seemed to be the only person there who thought the dances dragged (and the scene changes more so). By the time the show got around to "The Lonely Goatherd," I found my eyes glazing and my head flopping forward like a forlorn marionette stranded along a pop culture byway.

This production continues through July 15. See our [calendar](#) for details.

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