

## Stoppard's 'Real Thing' Makes Real Impact

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Article Launched: 07/19/2010. Section: TimeOut. Page 3D

At first glance, the pairing of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" and Tom Stoppard's "The Real Thing" -- in repertory at the Livermore Shakespeare Festival -- seems a bit random. Yet as the Stoppard play unfolded onstage, it made perfect sense.

Both are tales of star-crossed love, but in very different times and places. Stoppard's characters are older, perhaps a tiny bit wiser, and certainly a lot freer to pursue their destinies. But they are all looking for the real thing -- in life, in their careers and in love.

"The Real Thing" begins with a domestic scene of a wife (Hope Mirlis) coming home from a business trip, her husband (Ryan Tasker) accusing her of monkey business and the whole thing turning into something of a Noel Coward homage.

We learn this is actually a play-within-a-play, a scene from "House of Cards," the latest show from Henry (Patrick Jones), who also happens to be married to actress Charlotte (Mirlis), while Max (Tasker) is married to another actress, Annie (Jennifer Le Blanc).

The identities are revealed later at a brunch, where we also learn that Henry is about to leave his wife and take up with Annie. Henry, we discover, is an author with a sharp wit, a precise passion for words and a fear he is losing his touch as a writer.

As the story grows, Annie becomes increasingly involved with the cause of a Scottish prisoner, Brodie (Joshua Large).

Henry becomes jealous of the time Annie spends helping Brodie with a play he's written -- a play that Henry believes is awful -- and of the younger leading man, Billy (Ben Kahre), chosen to play Brodie in the latter's play.

You sense a bit of autobiography here, but that's best left for after-show talk. The play's sharp humor, excellent dialogue and engaging story (not to mention some wonderful comments on the craft of writing) make it captivating viewing. As I watched, I got the feeling I was seeing one of Stephen Sondheim's brilliant marriage songs ("You Must Meet My Wife," "Could I Leave You?" "The Little Things You Do Together") become a play.

And what a wonderful play it is. Director Lisa Tromovitch has assembled an excellent cast to bring the show to the outdoor stage at Livermore's Concannon Vineyards. Jones and Le Blanc are stunning in the leading roles, creating memorable characterizations and inhabiting them fully. Tasker and Mirlis are excellent as well, and the performers in the smaller parts succeed in giving them impact even in brief stage appearances.

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Record Number: 1423003