

PLAYWRITES

The Real Thing

The Hippodrome

The Real Thing begins with a play. Or rather, a scene from a play entitled *A House Of Cards*. In it, a husband accuses his wife of infidelity. The scene is dramatic, edgy, and, above all, funny.

The actor and actress performing are Max (Rusty Salling) and Charlotte (Jennifer Pritchett). They are also married in real life. And, coincidentally, Charlotte is also having an affair in real life.

Charlotte is in love with Henry, the playwright who wrote the comedy they are starring in. Henry (Mark Capri) is married to Annie (Kate Alexander), but he loves Charlotte, and it is only a matter of time before they leave their spouses.

The Real Thing, Tom Stoppard's play, is the story of Henry, and his relationship with Annie and then Charlotte. Henry is an incurable romantic in a world of cynics. He believes in commitment, but Charlotte tells him that "there are no commitments, only bargains."

Henry doesn't accept that. He loves pop music — pure emotions simply expressed with nothing held back. Henry spends the play searching for the real thing — that is, love. He wants to feel the idealistic passion that is so easily expressed in songs like "I'm a Believer," by The Monkees. More often than not, all he finds is the despair of "You've Lost That Loving Feeling," by the Righteous Brothers. Soon, Henry

leaves Annie, Charlotte leaves Max, and they marry.

But, several obstacles lie in the way of their search for the real thing. One of them is Billy (Andrew Watts), an actor that Charlotte is performing with in a play about incest.

Formerly, Henry could not get upset about men that made passes at Charlotte. She off-handedly mentions a man who stuck his tongue in her ear, and then fumes when he doesn't question her about it. "I can't help it," Henry says. "I feel superior. All he gets is a scrap of ear wax from the rich man's table. I know that you're coming home to me."

But, when he suspects Charlotte of having an affair with Billy, Henry can't control himself. Charlotte believes the fact that she came back to him should be enough. He shouldn't have to ask her if she slept with Billy. If she didn't love Henry, Charlotte reasons, she wouldn't come back.

"You have to find a part of yourself where I'm not important, or you're not worth loving," she tells him. But it is useless. Henry can't find a part of himself where she isn't important. That's what he thinks love is all about.

Another stumbling block is Private Brodie (Michael Johnson). Charlotte met Brodie on a train, and they teamed up to march in a protest against missile deployment. Brodie was imprisoned when he set fire to the wreath of the Unknown Soldier on the War Memorial.

Henry thinks Brodie is a hooligan, while Charlotte sees

him as a political dissident. She even offers to act in a play that Brodie wrote about his experiences. Henry objects, if only because, "... he can't write."

The basic conflict of the play can be illustrated by the scene in which Henry is talking to Debbie (Caryn Rosenthal), his daughter from his marriage with Annie. They are talking about his last play, which Henry, the romantic, sees as about "self-awareness through pain." Debbie thought it was only about whether the wife was cheating on her husband.

The Real Thing won the Tony Award for Best Play, and deservedly so. It is wonderfully witty and very touching. Like the best of Neil Simon, Stoppard's play is funny and acutely penetrating. Not only does he eloquently explore the meaning of love, but Stoppard throws in a few keen observations about writing for good measure.

The cast is uniformly excellent, with an especially humorous turn by Rosenthal as Debbie, who is a gleeful non-virgin. The scenic design and costumes are well-done, and Robert Robins does a superb job employing dramatic lighting.

The Real Thing is a triumph for Stoppard and the Hippodrome. They let his carefully structured work become fluid and natural. They let us see that love will prevail. I'm a believer, and you'll be one too.

By Michael Giltz

The Real Thing is running until Nov. 17. For more ticket info., call 375-HIPP.



(l. to r.) Mark Capri, Kate Alexander and Michael Johnson