

Theater: An Affectionate Stage Kiss

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STAGE KISS *** out of ****
PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS

The old adage says "Dying is easy; comedy is hard." Here's a twist: "Acting is hard; bad acting is even harder." Stage Kiss, the new comic romance by Sarah Ruhl, has a lot of bad acting in it, not to mention bad dialogue, bad directing and some very bad kissing. But the bad acting is done very well, turning what could be an obvious look at sub-par actors in sub-standard plays into a sweet delight. Believe me, if it were easy to dash off some campy dialogue and let actors go to town making fun of their craft, amusing works about life in the theater would be a dime a dozen. Walking the tightrope that Stage Kiss does is very hard indeed and it begins with actors who know the work will be funnier the more seriously they take it.

Certainly our heroine takes her work very seriously. Jessica Hecht plays She, a woman who has been away from the theater for many years and is tackling her first audition in ages. It's for a revival of some awful 1930s melodrama (with not one, not two, but three authors credited!) and it will be staged somewhere in Connecticut, also known as hell. With the off-kilter charm of Julie Hagerty, Hecht is priceless from the start, dithering about whether to stand or sit, taking charge of the audition in the way only truly bad actors can, nestling into the lap of the clearly gay reader (Michael Cyril Creighton) she's doing the scene with, belting out a tune, insisting she's terrible and leaving without her purse, only to return and grab it. Will the purse spill on the floor? Of course it will.

She's a whirlwind of indecision, filled with umms and uhhhs and smile-inducing physical tics. She finally escapes and the director (Patrick Kerr) turns to his assistant and coos that she was good, wasn't she! And thus it begins. She is inexplicably cast as the lead, though it's not so inexplicable when you realize how obscure and awful the melodrama she's acting in truly turns out to be. Her co-star is an ex-lover (Dominic Fumusa), much to their mutual chagrin. They catch up -- she's married with a daughter, he's dating a schoolteacher -- and take out their aggression in rehearsal.

Perhaps the play started with the oft-repeated insight that it's pretty weird to walk into a room and start kissing a stranger. There is a lot of kissing in Stage Kiss. Hecht kisses her husband, her daughter, her ex-boyfriend, the reader, another actress (just to show how it's done) and perhaps the director though I missed it if she did. The kisses are funny, silly, sexy, angry, scary, sweet and about a million other things. (The mint bowl backstage must be industrial-sized.) If you feel a little left out that she doesn't kiss you -- well, you're not the only one.

Needless to say, old desires are rekindled but they're not left on the stage. The romance of the melodrama brings these two lovers back together. In the second act, we see them together in his rundown apartment, breaking up with his ex (Clea Alsip), while her husband (Daniel Jenkins) insists this always happens and her daughter (Emma Galvin) wishes adults would behave like adults once in a while and offers pointed critiques of their acting ability. (Frank Rich has nothing on her and she's more succinct.)

But theater seeping into real life doesn't stop there: they act in another play, this one a heavy drama involving an IRA member and a Brooklyn whore. The dissolution of that pair brings Hecht slowly back to her senses.

This is all nonsense and few things are more tiresome than actors mugging for laughs while "pretending" to be bad. So don't take for granted how difficult this simple-seeming show was to pull off. Ruhl of course had to write a good play and then the director Rebecca Taichman had to keep everyone on the same page. Any ham-fisted

turns and it would all fall apart. (Alaine Alldaffer handled the excellent casting.) Everyone is right on target, with Kerr especially good as a dithering director who literally never offers any notes ("Go with your instincts!") except for one hilarious moment where Hecht's instincts prove disastrous and he bumbles out some indecipherable sounds of distress. Creighton has the broadest turn and almost goes too far, but his schtick is just the sauce that may be a little heavy but doesn't spoil the meal. Alsip and Galvin are more restrained with Jenkins his usual solid self.

But front and center are Hecht and Fumusa, both hilariously good here. Stage Kiss let's them play scenes one way in rehearsal, another during performance and still another when Hecht must act with a stand-in. It never reaches those heights but Noises Off is the worthy comparison. Hecht is sexy and ditsy, never missing a beat as the story glides subtly into more serious territory. Fumusa is just plain sexy, delivering his lines with the serious intent that makes them funny, whether they're the lines on stage of one of his absurd characters (his Irish accent is especially wide-ranging) or the lines he can't help delivering offstage in the same devil-may-care style of whatever show he's in. In lesser hands, this tricky piece could easily fall flat, but not with these two pros in top form.

The finale is a little too neat and tidy for me, though Jenkins as the dutiful husband delivers his heartfelt speech with flair. I would have preferred the theater just work its magic on its own. But the modest revelations near the end don't spoil what is a charmer of a piece that's just bad enough to be quite good indeed.

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[Stage Kiss](#) ***

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