

Theater: Sting and Ewan McGregor Hit Broadway; Does Broadway Hit Back?

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THE REAL THING ** 1/2 out of ****

THE LAST SHIP *** out of ****

Two major talents made their Broadway debut recently, though neither is a stranger to the stage. Actor Ewan McGregor came to Broadway after numerous stints in the West End. (His turn in the musical *Guys and Dolls* had charm to spare.) And Sting came to Broadway with a musical about a town facing hard times as the ship building industry slowly sinks away. Neither show is a full-on creative success. But in a role more suited to him, McGregor will shine. And Sting has a gift for melody Broadway desperately needs; he's one of the pop stars who genuinely belongs on the Great White Way. Maybe a show less personal will free him up to build on the strong start he makes here.

THE REAL THING ** 1/2 out of ****

ROUNABOUT AT AMERICAN AIRLINES THEATRE

The volume is turned way down low on this muted, low-key revival of Tom Stoppard's blistering masterpiece *The Real Thing*. I mean that literally. The show -- about a playwright with a floundering marriage and a deep-seated love for pop music -- is filled to the brim with references to and actual snippets of gems like "You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling" by the Righteous Brothers and the pure disposable joy of "Sugar Sugar" by the Archies.

Yet Sam Gold's production is tone deaf when it comes to these 45s. First, the show is peppered with moments where the cast grabs an acoustic guitar and does a sing-along; it's an interesting gesture that might perhaps have illuminated some ironic element of Stoppard's play. Genial, but it goes nowhere. More crucially, the actual songs are played with the volume down low. When the epic drums of Phil Spector's *Wall Of Sound* kick off "Be My Baby" by the Ronettes, the last thing you want to do is play them at a polite level. They should shake the floor, raise the roof -- not serve as background music.

A similar politesse is present throughout. Ewan McGregor is Henry, a very successful playwright who is invariably the smartest man in the room and incapable of not letting that fact be known. He is maddeningly right about most everything, the sort of person who corrects you and makes you want to slap him when he does so. "Yes, you're right, you bastard!" is the reaction Henry typically evokes in performance or on the written page. McGregor has an innate puppyish charm that undermines Henry, robbing the show of its vitality. He's married to actress Charlotte (Cynthia Nixon) but has fallen hard for Annie (Maggie Gyllenhaal), another actress but one -- he imagines or believes or accurately sees as -- more alive and exciting than Charlotte.

Soon enough Henry and Annie are together while Charlotte continues to raise their daughter Debbie. She's played by Madeline Weinstein, the guitar-toting star of those sing-alongs; tellingly her scenes with McGregor are where he shines best because they're the moments where Henry is at his kindest. Public duties claim the time of these people: Henry is preparing for the famed radio show "Desert Island Discs" but is too much of a snob to admit his heart belongs to rock and roll singles rather than the classical music expected of an intellectual. Meanwhile, Annie is campaigning for the release of a soldier named Brodie (Alex Breaux), whom she considers

a political prisoner, while acting in a drama with a younger actor (Ronan Raftery) who relentlessly flirts with her, much to Annie's pleasure and (very) mild disapproval.

Almost none of this generates any heat. The characters come across as negligible figures in a Noel Coward comedy rather than deeply etched humans with roiling emotions.

Ironically, this emotional distance lets you appreciate anew the brilliant structure of Stoppard's play, which begins with actors performing a scene from a play, followed by the playwright and star chatting after the show is over, followed by a real life scene that mimics the scene from that play-within-a-play, followed by the story of Annie's meeting with the soldier, followed by a performance of that same meeting in a rehearsal for a TV movie and on and on. Real life and drama refract and double back on each other again and again, with Stoppard pulling the rug out from under the audience repeatedly and with glee. Keeping us off balance throughout and always wondering, is this real? That's a smart way of undermining any expectations for a play that might easily seem autobiographical -- though surely no one could be as annoyingly right as Henry, day in and day out.

What exactly is wrong here? The problems are myriad. Most of the cast struggles with their British accent. The excellent actor Josh Hamilton is American to his bones, Cynthia Nixon has almost as much trouble with hers (though somehow in the midst of this run she delivered a fine one in a reading of another play) and Gyllenhaal is mostly unscathed, in both elocution and execution; her game presence with her many suitors is the show's strongest element. McGregor naturally is fine with his accent but your constant worries over such a basic element keep things off kilter.

The very narrow set by David Zinn leaves little room for the cast to navigate and unimaginatively presents the various settings of the show. The costumes by Kaye Voyce are unfortunate, especially for the women and especially for poor Madeline Weinstein, who is asked to don some godawful period looks that are distracting and unhelpful. It feels so indeterminate, I forgot for long stretches of the play that Nixon was supposed to be playing an actress. Nonetheless, the play is simply too good and filled with too much crackling dialogue not to be somewhat entertaining.

With actors struggling with their diction; a tiny, anonymous space; and dowdy outfits; well, a general air of malaise sets in. It's encumbered further by a stingless approach to the dialogue, which should be barbed even at its nicest but floats by here without any venom. Stoppard's play hasn't dated a bit except perhaps in one way: it's almost confusing to hear someone fear people will think less of him for embracing pop singles like Neil Sedaka's "Oh Carol" and classic numbers by all-time greats. Frankly, if you want to be a snob, the more obscure soul 45 you can quote as your absolute favorite the better. Was Henry really worried people would think less of him, even back in 1982 when the show was first performed? It's almost hard to imagine a time when there was a divide between high and low culture.

Even here the show misses a beat. It's supposed to end -- and usually did -- with a song "like" the great single "I'm A Believer" as performed by the Monkees. But this production ends with "God Only Knows" by the Beach Boys. That song is nothing whatsoever like "I'm A Believer." The Monkees record is a wide-eyed embrace of youthful romance and first love, the blush of unadulterated joy that only a teenage crush can bring. "God Only Knows" is a far more rueful, adult and introspective tune.

The irony of seeing Henry crushed and crying while the adolescent delight of "I'm A Believer" rings out is entirely lost here. There's no similar contrast when a middle-aged man cries to the gently sad and wise music of "God Only Knows." McGregor's performance lacks snap and here when he breaks down at the end, for a brief moment it even lacks believability. We aren't ready to believe any of them are feeling this deeply. When it comes to this production, it's hard to be a believer.

THE LAST SHIP *** out of ****
NEIL SIMON THEATRE

While *The Real Thing* is underwhelming, Sting's Broadway debut is quite promising. He delivers 16 tuneful new numbers filled with the effortless melody that has rightly made him a pop star for nearly 40 years. The melancholy nature of this very personal story might keep the show from taking off and the score overall from being a classic. But he shows a real gift for the very different challenge of a Broadway show: revealing character and moving the story along.

The fact that he does it in confident, rousing style is no surprise from this protean talent. Sting himself can nail Weil's "Mack The Knife" along with standards like "Someone To Watch Over Me." (Few have sung that better and it's a shame he's never recorded similar gems with a small jazz combo.) So the theater is very much in his blood. Perhaps a different show with a broader emotional palette will inspire his talents to the fullest. If Broadway is lucky, *The Last Ship* will be his debut and not merely a one-off.

Sting tackled the same territory in his darkest, most personal album *The Soul Cages*. Inspired by the death of his father (or more accurately, the result of Sting breaking through writer's block by dealing with the death of his father head-on), *The Soul Cages* touched on his father's love of the sea and the dying ship-building trade of Newcastle. That album opener always felt like a scene-setter and here it is opening the show.

In classic Broadway style, "Island Of Souls" sets the stage, introducing us to our hero and the world he lives in. Gideon is a young man determined not to stay trapped in the grim, grey world of his father and his father's father and on and on to the beginning of time. He angrily breaks with his dad by refusing to take an apprenticeship at the dockyards where ships are built, even though his father has become disabled and can't work anymore. Gideon has a girl but Meg is too tied to their town and won't run away with him.

Here it all is: the dying town he wants to escape, the bitter ties to a family he's rejected and the girl he left behind. In quick, confident strokes led by another song from *Soul Cages* -- "All This Time" -- and a new number "August Wind," we learn everything we need to know, Gideon has left and returned 15 years later and without wasting a moment of time, the audience is immediately clued in that while he's been gone and as good as dead, Meg has been raising his son and is linked to another man. The shipyards? They're on suicide watch, with a scrapyards company moving in, tearing the old yard down and making do by living off the remains of ships that have died. No more new ships, it seems, will be built here.

Yet another strong new number arrives in the form of "Shipyard." Any doubts that Sting has completely embraced the musical form are dispensed with here. It's a multi-character song, as various men from the shipyard introduce themselves and debate whether to accept the demeaning work being offered to them or fight on against time and tide in vain hope of shipbuilding coming back to life.

Led by the great rocker and actor Jimmy Nail in a solid Broadway debut that fits him like a glove, we meet a parade of fellows, including Meg's steady love, a decent sort who has sided with the scrapyards owners because he realistically sees no choice and will do what he must to support her and her son Tom. The amusingly caustic Father O'Brien (an appealing, low-key Fred Applegate in a role that could be hammy), Nail as the natural leader of the workers, another worker who is the token socialist -- they all come to life here and move the story along with dash.

The scenes are helped tremendously by the choreography of Steven Hoggett and the brisk book of John Logan and Brian Yorkey, all of it overseen by the intelligent direction of Joe Mantello. The dying Father O'Brien (this is not a show afraid of drama) comes up with a daft idea: let's build one more ship, whether anyone needs it or not. The idea gains momentum and soon the returning Gideon is on their side. Suddenly he and Meg's son are on one side while her de facto husband Arthur (Aaron Lazar) are on another.

The workers versus the owners; the wandering sailor versus the dependable sober man of business. Here it is, laid out quickly, neatly and directly, capped by another strong song -- "If You Ever See Me Talking To A Sailor" - - where the women have their say, putting the men in their place, cleaning up the local pub and sending the lads

packing with a firm kick in the arse. It's all rousing fun. By god, The Last Ship will be ready to sail before you know it. But does it have anywhere to go?

The momentum of those scene setters and strong group numbers aren't squandered precisely. But the show does lose a fair amount of speed and sense as the story goes along. Our hero Gideon (Michael Esper) had a convincing showdown with his father right at the start, angrily storming off into the night and for good since his dad died in the intervening years. Indeed, Gideon only returns to finalize his dad's modest effects, having missed the funeral by a few days.

In the show's first mis-step, Gideon reenacts that painful rupture in "Dead Man's Boots," only six songs into the show and before we've even reached the intermission. Since it doesn't really shed new light that I could see on that rupture, the point of redoing this moment so soon (or at all) is lost on me. Similarly, the group numbers and the desire of the community to build one last ship is a strong element in the story. But one too many songs repeat that desire, with everyone coming together yet again to reaffirm that yes, indeed, they want to build one last ship.

It would have been relatively easy to give some purpose to their task beyond shaking your fist at fate. Apparently, they plan to launch the ship and everyone is going to get on board and sail away. But to where? And why? And who is going to pay for the docking fees and the food and the countless other needs of a ship at sea not built for passengers and yet filled with them? And who's going to actually sail the damn thing?

It's an easy fix: surely the stand-off with management might have inspired media attention or drawn the interest of a buyer who would -- I don't know -- acquire the ship for its historic value as one of the last ships of its kind built in England? They can't chart a course to a happy ending -- shipbuilding is going to die whatever happens to this final product of their craftsmanship. But the purpose of their venture and the actual launch of the ship needn't have seemed quite so daft and pointless. As it is, you keep worrying they'll be a ship of fools with no port that'll take them.

A further, major detriment to the show is the scenic design and costumes of David Zinn and the lighting of Christopher Akerlind. This is a very dark, very gloomy looking show. Yes, it's a dying port town, not Brigadoon or Camelot. But does it have to be so relentlessly bleak? There's no sense of the sea, that beautiful, powerful, awe-inspiring backdrop to any town on the coast. It's there before the show begins, with a curtain that ripples with grey, stormy waters, a modest effect that's beautiful and striking. But when the story begins, we might as well be in Detroit as Wallsend on the coast of England. When the ocean finally makes a climactic appearance, it's via some mundane video footage out of character with the rest of the show.

Luckily, we have the songs of Sting, buttressed by the musical direction, orchestration and arrangements of Rob Mathes, whose only mistake is a too-literal rock drum beat on a few numbers. The lovely "When We Dance" -- the third and final pre-existing song used in the show -- doesn't really belong and calls unnecessary attention to itself; Sting should have written another new tune. "We've Got Now't Else" and "The Last Ship" are excellent numbers, albeit repeated too often.

But to my mind, Sting hits new heights with the act two charmer "The Night The Pugilist Learned How To Dance." Gideon and his son Tom are in jail for taking part in the occupation of the shipyard. (Even a mild reference to Occupy Wall Street feels dated and unearned, by the way; these men aren't denouncing the system, just making one last defiant gesture.) As the boy and the man begin to bond, Tom wants to learn how to fight but Gideon uses the moment to teach the kid about what really matters: women.

Sting's lyrics and music give both actors wonderful moments, bringing them closer in a natural and convincing manner that's true to who they are and who they want to be. And it's all done with a tune that is simply gorgeous and like the best show tunes will work brilliantly on its own. It's a real gem and as sure a sign as any that Sting can and should tackle another musical soon.

He's aided by a solid cast. Esper is good as Gideon though it must be said that Rachel Tucker has that compelling something extra that lets her shine in their every scene and on her own. The rest up and down the line are good, with a real find in Collin Kelly-Sordelet as both Young Gideon and his son Tom.

Kelly-Sordelet has the romantic, desperate aura of a boy/man desperate to break out as Young Gideon. He's even better as the gawky, but growing Tom, a kid eager to learn, eager to pitch in but not so eager you get tired of him. He's more man than boy, but with still a lot to learn. This sort of role is easy to play too dumb or too eager, but Kelly-Sordelet hits just the right balance throughout, especially on his dangerous and amusing introduction to the world of the shipyard on "We've Got Now't Else." There's nothing remarkable here -- a fresh face in a new and dangerous world, given good-natured hazing by the more experienced men and soon fitting in as seen by his ever more confident dancing. But it's a very well-calibrated piece and Kelly-Sordelet makes the most of it.

One admires the no-nonsense nature of a show that refreshingly avoids cliché in the romantic department. It's a pity it wasn't similarly hard-headed about the launching of the ship that dominates the second act. The closer it looms, the more you wonder what exactly they have in mind. Either *The Last Ship* should have emphasized the loony aspect of the venture or given it some root in reality so it wouldn't feel so pointless. This show may have a few leaks, but the songs aren't the problem here. Sting has the skill to craft a truly sea-worthy musical, if only he'll take a chance on another voyage into the uncharted waters of a Broadway show.

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