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The Real Thing

Tom Stoppard's *The Real Thing* is a fascinating and unique play that traces the lives of two lovers in a way that not many people get to see. Typically the role of an unfaithful spouse is cast in a negative light and the audience does not usually see the aftermath, but in this play, it is seen as normal and it even follows the progression of the unfaithful couple, Henry and Annie. Stoppard uses the subtlety of music to parallel the storyline as the play develops as well as having Henry write a play, which traces his own life, within the larger play. The topic of infidelity remains huge; Henry thinks that his relationship with Annie is perfect, yet Annie still struggles to remain faithful, having an implied affair with a co-star. In the film *Love Actually*, the topic of infidelity and acceptance of it is also a big theme and I was able to make connections to the film throughout much of *The Real Thing*.

The music in *The Real Thing* was one of my favorite aspects of the show. Each song selection had a significant yet subtle impact that paralleled the content at that particular moment of the play. Having the actors sing along to all of the songs was a nice touch, as well. It seemed so natural to have people singing as they do mundane tasks such as changing the set. Henry's fascination with pop music was a constant source of contention between not only he and his ex-wife Charlotte, but also he and Annie. The development of his character to appreciate the classical music that Annie preferred was

an interesting transition to watch. However, the song that stuck out most to me was “God Only Knows” by The Beach Boys. It was in that exact moment that Henry realized how in love he was with Annie and that what they had was, indeed, the real thing. While they didn’t have a traditional relationship what with Annie’s inability to love just one man, it was their love and it was enough. It was also symbolic that, for once, Annie turned on the radio to Henry’s preferred genre of music. This followed her final line when she hugs Henry lovingly, in essence telling him that she belongs with him now. They’ve both realized how vital they are to each other and that their love is real.

I couldn’t help but draw parallels to the film *Love Actually*, which also takes place in the United Kingdom. One of the biggest topics in the film is infidelity, as in *The Real Thing*. The song “God Only Knows” is also played during a pivotal moment during the film, right at the end when everything begins to relax and all the characters have found happiness, even the man who couldn’t remain faithful to his wife. This song seems to symbolize an epiphany in both the play and film, a happy ending in which characters realize that they’re able to live with how things are. Henry accepts that Annie has some sort of relationship with Billy; the characters in *Love Actually* find acceptance and contentment in their abnormal, messed up lives and realize that they wouldn’t be who they are without the trials and tribulations they have faced.

But, unlike *The Real Thing*, the film portrays the unfaithful spouse as a villain who gives in to temptation and is unable to stop himself. In *The Real Thing*, Annie isn’t portrayed as bad; she’s just a flawed human being. And I think that in *Love Actually*, the audience comes around to realize that the unfaithful husband is not a horrible person, too; he’s just flawed, human. I think this is an important revelation for the audience to

experience because it teaches us not to settle, but to accept that life isn't a fairy tale. There really is no Prince Charming or Cinderella waiting to sweep us off our feet and live happily ever after. This is a relevant lesson for me to experience as a twenty-year-old college student experimenting with relationships and growing into adulthood. I'm learning that relationships are hard and they take work to be successful. I'm facing reality and finally understanding that what I grew up thinking was true love is just a fantasy. And it's not just fairy tales that teach us these unbelievable lies; adult society teaches us, too, that beautiful girls end up with gorgeous men and there are never any problems. Just look at any of the romance films out today! They all have a "happily ever after" ending, which is just impossible because nobody lives forever. I appreciated that in both *Love Actually* and *The Real Thing*, the characters felt like real people experiencing real problems; I didn't leave feeling like life is going to be perfect. But I did leave feeling like everything would be okay, that I'd survive and be accepting of life's imperfections.

The biggest complaint I had about *The Real Thing*, however, was the casting selections. I felt as though Ewan McGregor was the only one that felt completely comfortable and looked completely natural on the stage. But he and Maggie Gyllenhaal lacked chemistry, in my opinion. Perhaps my expectations were too high going into the performance because I am such a fan of Ewan McGregor, but the other actors just were not on the same level as him. The daughter's character, while minor, seemed too wise for her age and seemed like a complete outcast based on the costume and makeup she wore; she left me thinking she was a character from a different play, simply performing on the

incorrect stage. Her dialogue came across as forced and left me not believing her sage words of wisdom that Henry so easily ate right up.

I also found myself confused when the actors sat on the stage in a circle and sang a song for a short period of time at the beginning of certain scenes. It had no relation to the play itself, they weren't portraying their characters; they were just sort of there. I know this was a director's decision and I cannot understand why this decision was made. It confused me because it took me a while to realize that it wasn't supposed to necessarily be the characters singing together for any purpose. I just kept expecting it to have some larger meaning and it didn't deliver.

Although, these flaws aside, I did enjoy the show. I enjoyed the content of the play. I was familiar with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and thoroughly appreciated that play, so I was eager to experience a more realistic work of Stoppard's. It was much more light-hearted but maintained its serious undertones, which I like to see in plays. Talking about real life problems but not making them seem boring or overwhelming. I also enjoyed watching and meeting Ewan McGregor. It was a huge treat to see him perform live since I am so used to seeing him on the big screen. I thought he did just as well as he does in film. And he is just as nice as I thought he would be in person, taking the time to sign Playbills and let people photograph him. I would be interested to watch this play again but with a different cast to see if there are other actors better suited for some of the roles. It was a wonderful experience and I always learn new things from seeing shows, even if they aren't my favorite.