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Stoppard's 'Rock 'n' Roll' is splendid

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Hearts and minds take center stage in Tom Stoppard's epic drama "Rock 'n' Roll." The playwright so well known for dense literary and historically based material ("The Coast of Utopia," "The Invention of Love" and "Arcadia"), and also occasionally criticized for lacking feeling, subtly shifts a tender humanity into his latest work.

Stoppard lovers need not worry, however, as the splendid new production at San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater has all of the playwright's signature trappings, not the least of which is a consuming, heady and at times comedic political argument.

Opening in 1968 with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the play alternates locations between Cambridge, England, and Prague while centering on the relationship between Marxist professor Max Morrow (Jack Willis) and Jan (Manoel Feliciano), Max's Czech grad student who eventually becomes a university lecturer himself.

The lengthy arc closes in August 1990 as the Soviets leave Czechoslovakia. The short scenes take us through the interconnected lives of Max and Jan as they negotiate the failings of their political beliefs and the corresponding intricacies of their personal relationships.

Director Carey Perloff gets strong performances from throughout her ensemble, especially ACT veteran Rene Augesen playing a dying Greek classics teacher and later her grown-up hippie daughter.

As the play's title suggests, music in the form of guitarbased rock 'n' roll plays a central role, though this being Stoppard, there are several motifs spiraling through the play, eventually wrapping around each other. While Willis' angry, frustrated Max is a die-hard communist, Feliciano's easygoing Jan is a pragmatic nationalist and lover of rock music most fiercely dedicated to his extensive record (that's vinyl) collection of bands like the Velvet Underground, Pink Floyd and the Rolling Stones.

When Max's 16-year-old daughter, Esme (Summer Serafin), wants to give the 29-year-old Jan something on his leaving (it's her virginity), he takes a record instead. In the play's more satisfying second half, Augesen becomes the grown-up Esme, who though with a child of her own maintains an affection for Jan.

It's Jan's appreciation of an actual Czech rock band, the Plastic People of the Universe, that causes his demise in the closeted Czech society under Russian rule. The Plastics, as they became known, were unintentional dissidents by simply being an uncompromising rock 'n' roll band. Jan's circulation of a petition to get the band out of jail following an illegal performance eventually lands him in jail as well.

Though Max defends his belief in communism with a King Lear-like obliviousness, it's his overwhelming love for his cancer-stricken wife, Eleanor (the superb Augesen), that moves us. The hulking Willis nearly makes Max a one-dimensional character with a bitterness that overpowers everything in his path. Only his wife can really contain him.

Nearing death in the early stages of the play, Eleanor passionately grasps at life through her teaching of classical Greek poetry, and her determination and insistence on a life of both mind and body ultimately informs the play.

While Jan shuffles his way through the occupation of working at a bakery after losing his university job, he gets occasional visits from Max bearing gifts from Esme like Syd Barrett's solo record "The Madcap Laughs." Barrett, the Pink Floyd founder who left the group in 1968 to later become a recluse in Cambridge, plays a pivotal poetic part in the play.

Barrett may or may not be the figure playing panpipes while Esme gets high at the play's opening, but she maintains an idealized image of him throughout the play, just as her father and his friend maintain their idealized images of what they love as well.

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