



Party animals

'Rock 'n' Roll' at ACT

by Richard Dodds

Darn that thing called human nature. It has screwed up everything from the Russian Revolution to Pink Floyd. But like the sporadic little blips on a radar screen, human nature promises the only real twinkle in our personal firmament. It's not a complicated concept, though Tom Stoppard gives it a dense context in his play *Rock 'n' Roll* before letting a moment of visceral pleasure bring down the final curtain.

American Conservatory Theater is opening its season with *Rock 'n' Roll*, seen in London in 2006 and on Broadway the following year, and it further cements ACT and Artistic Director Carey Perloff's Bay Area dominance of all things Stoppard. To be sure, it's a high-quality production of an intriguing play that can spin from political debates to emotional meltdowns at the drop of a needle into a vinyl groove.

The needle drops quite a few times, mainly in the Prague apartment of a young socialist who confounds custom authorities with a suitcase packed only with his precious record collection. Educated in England, Jan has returned home to Czechoslovakia after the short-lived "Prague Spring" is crushed by Soviet troops. His embrace of rock music, especially the homegrown Plastic People of the Universe (an actual Czech group of the day), leads to protests, arrests, petitions, and the planting of one of the seeds that eventually brought down the communist government in late 1980s.

Jan had been a believer in socialist ideals, especially while living in Cambridge as the protege of Max, a thundering, opinionated professor and proud proponent of old-school communism. The play shuttles between Cambridge and Prague from 1968 to 1990, as different dramas play out for Max and his family and Jan and his friends, until a reunion leads to a triumph, of sorts, of messy human nature over tidy ideology.

That's a sufficiently complicated structure for discussions about life, love, and politics, but Stoppard can't help from being an intellectual showoff. Max's wife, for example, happens to be an expert in Sapphic poetry, and we hear a fair amount about its structure, meter, and meaning in what seems to be a casual interlude from the primary plot. Then again, we also learn about how Syd Barrett (a founding member of Pink Floyd) is treated by the tabloid press.

In addition to the complexities of dialogue and structure, there are many tones to the emotions that constantly flare up, and Perloff's direction provides a strong foundation to support the play's shifting layers. She's working with a large and able cast highlighted by a collection of memorable performances.

As Max, ACT regular Jack Willis creates a scarily volatile curmudgeon whose political certitude can't compete with love. Rene Augesen, another member of ACT's core company, manages to create two distinct but believably connected characters, as Max's wife in the first act and as their grown daughter in the second. New York actor Manoel Felciano is understated yet powerful as Jan, from his feverish life in the 1960s to a sadder-but-wiser survivor of the 1980s.

But there is still joy to be plucked from the ether, Stoppard seems to say, at least if your eyes are open to the right catalysts for you. "It's Only Rock 'n' Roll," sing the Rolling Stones at a key scene in the play, but for these characters, at this moment, it's plenty.

Rock 'n' Roll will run at ACT through Oct. 18. Tickets are \$20-\$82. Call 749-2228 or go to www.act-sf.org.

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