

## Theater review: Tom Stoppard's 'Rock 'n' Roll'

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**Rock 'n' Roll:** Drama. By Tom Stoppard. Directed by Carey Perloff. With Manoel Felciano, René Augesen, Jack Willis, Jud Williford, Summer Serafin, Delia MacDougall et al. (*Through Oct. 18. American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco. Two hours, 45 minutes. Tickets: \$20-\$82. Call (415) 749-2228 or go to [www.act-sf.org](http://www.act-sf.org).)*)

The bright sunshine of an English garden bursts upon the audience to banish the gloom of a cramped apartment in Prague. The lively mind of a Cambridge University student, enthusiastic over the emotional subtleties in an ancient poetic fragment by Sappho, lights up the American Conservatory Theater. It's not so much the wit and intellectual vigor of the argument between Delia MacDougall's Czech student, Lenka, and Jack Willis' Marxist professor, Max, as the sexual electricity between them, attentively observed by René Augesen as Max's cancer-ridden but fiercely alive wife.

It's also a long time coming in ACT Artistic Director Carey Perloff's staging of Tom Stoppard's "Rock 'n' Roll" that opened Wednesday. We've spent too much of the first act with earnest but unexciting young men in the aftermath of the 1968 suppression of the Prague Spring. One of Stoppard's most personal and teasingly passionate plays, "Rock" loses its connection with the audience until it returns to the Cambridge garden of its promising beginning - a promise largely fulfilled in the second act.

Anticipation filled the house before the show began. A co-production with Boston's Huntington Theatre, this is the first post-Broadway outing for Stoppard's most recent major work - a reconnection with his Czech roots interwoven with a celebration of the England that's been his home since childhood - and had been extended a full week well before it opened. The content is eclectic, combining two decades of Czech politics and rock history, English Marxism, theories of consciousness,

the rise and fall of hippiedom, cancer, journalism, sex and Sappho. The action unfolds in Cambridge and Prague from the end of the Prague Spring to the Velvet Revolution of 1990, and from the year rock god Syd Barrett was thrown out of Pink Floyd until his death as a lonely recluse.

Snatches of Barrett, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, Grateful Dead, Velvet Underground, U2 and post-Barrett Pink Floyd enliven the many scene changes and comment on the action as Alex Jaeger's apt costumes signal the changing times. The English and Czech settings slip into place in the midst of what looks like the courtyard of a three-story building laid on its side, with the sky directly in front of us, in Douglas W. Schmidt's richly emblematic design.

Willis is a commanding Max, though somewhat too angrily dogmatic in his political arguments. The scenes between him and Augesen, as his Sappho-scholar wife, are rich in emotional complexity, as are those between Augesen and Summer Serafin as their flower child daughter, Esme, and, later, Augesen as the older Esme and Serafin as her formidable Gen-X child.

The Prague scenes suffer by comparison. The growing repression is starkly stated enough. The political arguments between Jud Williford's committed dissident and Manoel Felciano's rock-fanatic Jan are presented without the usual Stoppardian verbal flair, which makes their clarity seem increasingly tendentious.

This is particularly problematic because Jan and Esme are central figures in the story. Soundtrack aside, it's hard to make a rock fan as exciting as the music he loves, and Jan is a character more acted upon than acting. Felciano plays him with an observant diffidence that makes him believably attractive, but he lacks the charisma necessary to carry his Prague scenes.

Fortunately, there's a great deal more in "Rock" to stimulate the mind and engage the heart. In its most Stoppardian scene, when Lenka's interpretation of Sappho's poem comes to life amid raging arguments at a large dinner party, the emotions playing over Augesen's face send shivers down your spine.

### **The Plastic People of the Universe**

Sometimes called "the greatest obscure rock band of all time," and an important catalyst in the revolutionary events chronicled in Tom Stoppard's "Rock 'n' Roll," the Czech band Plastic People of

the Universe will make two rare appearances in San Francisco in conjunction with the run of the play at American Conservatory Theater.

Plastic People plays Slim's on a bill with Hungary's Gypsy rock band Little Cow and the Bay Area's Forrest Day, 9 p.m. Oct. 9, 333 11th St., San Francisco. Tickets: \$15 in advance, \$20 at the door, (415) 255-0333, [www.slims-sf.com](http://www.slims-sf.com). The same day, Plastic People will appear at a preshow reception for ACT's performance of "Rock 'n' Roll."

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/09/19/DDVQ12T4KE.DTL>

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