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Review: Stage Kiss

Tyler Gillespie Oct 5, 2015 - 2:27 pm



Photo by John Barrols



Working with a former flame can be awkward. It's even worse for an actress who hasn't auditioned for a play in 10 years and is cast opposite the love of her life in *Stage Kiss*, presented by Southern Rep. The two start to reconnect, but she's married and nothing is as it seems.

In Sarah Ruhl's romantic comedy, the play-within-a-play scheme works hilariously as the framework sets up rewarding juxtapositions. The play-within-the-play is an over-the-top melodrama, and the actors cast in it already are dealing with their backstage emotional entanglement. The expansive set, designed by Jason Kirkpatrick, who also directed the show, allows for transition from a small audition space to a full stage production, which then rotates to show behind-the-scenes action.

The two former lovers – referred to as He (Trey Burvant) and She (Southern Rep Artistic Director Almee Hayes) – are at first reluctant about the closeness the play-within-the-play demands. They had a difficult relationship when they were young actors. Their passionate but odd director (Richard Hutton) uses this history to his advantage and encourages them to tap into the past, which leads to a messy rekindled romance. She has a husband (Johan Neisler) and daughter Angela (Madison Kerth).

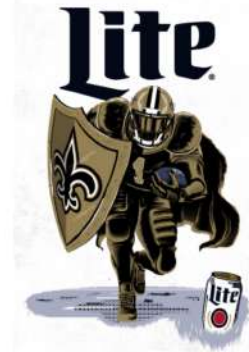
Hayes is dynamic. The play-within-the-play is a 1930s-set melodrama filled with pretentious dialogue and the affectations of the affluent. Hayes' comedic timing is perfect, but she reins in her character's exuberance to portray a real person. In a standout monologue, she says living without her first love makes her feel like a "ghost person." Burvant is charming, but He, in all his bravado, lives life like a man stuck in adolescence. Burvant gives him heart and makes him sympathetic. The leads have sizzling chemistry, and supporting actors Kevin/Butler (Matthew Thompson) often comment on their intense scene

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work. Thompson plays a minor character, but he shines in a hysterical performance.

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She can't help but fall back into old habits with He, who doesn't want to settle down. As the two lovers become entwined, her home life is thrown into disarray, and she must choose between them. As the husband, Neisler grounds the show's emotional narrative. As their daughter Angela, Kerth is a bratty teenager in the best and funniest kind of way.

Stage Kiss is one of the funniest shows in recent memory, but it steers away from frivolity and becomes more than a romantic comedy. It explores just how messy love can be.

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