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Southern Rep's 'Stage Kiss' a clever backstage comedy about heated passions, long-term love

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Gallery: Stage Kiss at Southern Rep

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By Theodore P. Mahne, NOLA.com
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"You must remember this. A kiss is just a kiss."

Or is it?

In her cleverly devised romantic comedy, "Stage Kiss," now receiving its local premiere by Southern Rep, playwright Sarah Ruhl uses a backstage story to examine the intersection of true love and the artifice of life upon the stage.

In her play-within-a-play setting (two plays, actually), Ruhl introduces She and He, a pair of actors who were once involved with each other years earlier. Following an apparently bad breakup, She is married to a banker and they have a teen daughter; He is in a relationship (just how committed is questionable) with a schoolteacher.

Having long left the theater, She is trying out for a role in a terribly bad 1930s melodrama, in which a glamorous woman, dying of a mysterious illness, longs to see a former lover one last time. His arrival revives her health, leading to romantic complications with her nobly, self-sacrificing husband. Following a comically awkward audition, She gets the role, only later to discover that her leading man is He.

STAGE KISS

- **What:** Southern Rep opens its 2015-16 season with playwright Sarah Ruhl's comedy. Long after a disastrous love affair, two actors are thrown together in a 1930s melodrama and find themselves carried away by the story. Directed by Jason Kirkpatrick and starring Aimee Hayes, Trey Burvant, Richard Hutton, John Neisler, Matthew Thompson, Madison Kerth and Kristin Witterschein.
- **Where:** Ashe Power House, 1731 Baronne St.
- **When:** Performances at 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, and at 3 p.m. Sundays, through Oct. 10.
- **Admission:** \$20-\$40. For information, call 504.522.6545 or visit [the theater's website](#).

Life begins to imitate art imitating life, as He and She engage in passionate smooches through the rehearsals, while - for a time - complaining about the awkwardness and remaining anger and spite they each feel for each other. But can those "stage kisses" remain ineffective?

In the tradition of any romantic comedy, the audience can readily project where this is headed. The fact that the two lovers are willing to toss aside their other partners also adds layers asking just how real or phony emotions can become in a long-term relationship.

Which would you choose?

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While not as deeply developed as Ruhl's equally smart "In the Next Room," which Southern Rep audiences will recall from several seasons ago, "Stage Kiss" takes the tight structure of a farce, with enough unexpected turns to keep the audience guessing and laughing throughout the evening.

Director Jason Kirkpatrick has a keen sense of how to blend the comedy, the swift timing of farce, as well as the sardonic wit of a classic screwball comedy. Ruhl's script is both a comedy of manners, in the tradition of such writers as Philip Barry, and "travesty" a la Charles Ludlam.

Kirkpatrick paces the show well, relishing not only the farce, but also the pleasure of Ruhl's breezy writing. Her dialogue has that crisp snap of a Preston Sturges comedy, which Kirkpatrick takes full advantage of. He and his actors also smoothly make the transitions in mood and tone from the spoofs of the bad plays they are rehearsing to the real-life stories being played out.

The center of the play's success is the nuanced performance by Aimee Hayes as She. Hayes reminds audiences of what an excellent comedienne she is, displaying a split-second comic timing. Her character is the most richly developed of the show, as she moves from a despondent uncertainty about her own talent, to a fresh vitality that overcomes her neuroses as she begins to fall in love again.



Trey Burvant brings an intentionally rough edge to his portrayal of He, giving the actor a Peter Pan quality. In the "opposites attract" approach, Burvant makes it clear that what he brings to their relationship is pretty much purely physical. Burvant remains appealing, however, because He is who he is. It's an honest, direct and funny portrayal.

The supporting actors throughout play their often multiple roles with panache, drawing out enough character development with attentiveness to detail.

Richard Hutton gives a wonderful performance as the pretentious but nervously rattled director of both plays within the play, each successively worse than the other. His highbrow approach to the lowest forms of drama is hilarious. And many actors will recognize the frustration of his marvelously imprecise direction.

John Neisler best plays up the parallel of the Husband in the melodrama of Act I, and She's husband, Harrison, in the second. Both are noble figures, the first a caricature, the second more realistically dealing with his situation. "She always falls in love with whomever she's in a play with," Harrison notes. Through his seeming acceptance of his wife's infidelities, Neisler displays a weary optimism, confident that she'll always find her way back home.



Matthew Thompson delivers laughs in a variety of roles, most notably as the gay understudy, who shows extreme discomfort as he tries to fake the passionate kisses with Hayes' character. Madison Kerth and Kristin Witterschein have sparkling moments as, respectively, She's daughter, and He's teacher girlfriend.

The physical production is as pleasing as the performances. Kirkpatrick's set designs establish the look well, especially the filthy New York apartment of He, filled with items that reveal his level of immaturity. Costumes by Laura Sirkin-Brown add definition to the characters.

Ruhl does get a bit contrived in her writing. While funny, some of her storytelling twists strain credibility. And the silly trend seen in several plays of using the "Everyman" titling of characters as merely "He" or "She," or "Girl" and "Guy," usually only reminds me of Lyndon Johnson's beagles, Him and Her. At least no one in "Stage Kiss" is being held up by his or her ears. Nevertheless, Kirkpatrick and his cast strike the right balance, keeping it wickedly clever rather than

preciously cute.

Southern Rep opens its season with work that takes a familiar concept and presents it through a fresh lens, which will please audiences.



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