

Theater Review: 'Real Thing' much more than a comedy



Photo by Charlie Glazer Debbie (Grayson Brannen, right) gets advice from her parents, Charlotte and Henry (Elise Girardin and Richard Hollis), in Northern Stage's "The Real Thing."

By **Jim Lowe**
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WHITE RIVER JUNCTION — What begins as a somewhat cynical but most entertaining romantic comedy turns into a deep look at the meaning of love in "The Real Thing."

Northern Stage opened a delightfully stylish, entertaining and deeply touching production of British playwright Tom Stoppard's humorous masterpiece Friday at the Briggs Opera House.

The play opens with a somewhat inebriated Max accusing his wife, Charlotte, of infidelity upon her return from Switzerland. He found her passport in the recipe drawer, and a rancorous but witty argument follows. In the second scene, it becomes clear that the first was from a play.

In reality, the tough Charlotte is married to Henry, an acerbic playwright. And Max is married to Annie, also an actress. Max and Annie drop in on the other couple one Sunday morning. Annie is on her way to visit the imprisoned political activist Brodie.

But when Charlotte and Max are out of the room, it seems that the do-gooder visit is an excuse for Annie to get a moment away from her husband. For Annie and Henry are in the midst of a passionate affair. Eventually, Henry and Annie are married, and the tables seem turned.

Henry becomes concerned about Annie's fidelity or lack thereof with a young actor, Billy, when the two are off to Glasgow in a play. And Brodie gets out of prison.

No one is ever quite sure of who is doing what with whom, which forces Henry and Annie to come to grips with their relationship uniquely, humorously and touchingly.

What makes "The Real Thing" fascinating and emotionally powerful as well as downright entertaining is that it can easily be enjoyed on either or both levels. So can Northern Stage's slick, fast-paced

production, directed by Brooke Ciardelli, the company's founder and artistic director.

Ciardelli has brought together an excellent cast that drives home Stoppard's wit and depth. British actor Richard Hollis, save for a bit of over-enthusiasm at the beginning, did a virtuoso job of exploring and delivering the many facets of Henry. Amanda Barron, as Annie, matched him all the way, convincing with an amazing amount of subtlety and nuance. The two managed to be touching and extremely funny simultaneously.

Elise Girardin delivered the worldly Charlotte with wit and as much pathos as the role allowed. Grayson Brannen was charming as Debbie, Charlotte and Henry's trying-to-be-worldly daughter. Kyle Knauf was perfectly genuine as the cuckolded Max, which is exactly what the role asks for.

The boy toys were pretty straight roles. Nicholas Urda was terribly earnest as the oh-so-in-love Billy, while Tim Eliot was appropriately pompous as Brodie.

It is a tribute to Ciardelli and her cast that, save for some awkwardness in Brodie's meeting with Henry and Annie, it was fast-paced first-rate theater.

Northern Stage's "The Real Thing" proved simply excellent theater, substantial yet entertaining.

Northern Stage

Northern Stage presents an Equity professional production of Tom Stoppard's "The Real Thing" through March 6 at the Briggs Opera House on Main Street in White River Junction. Performances are at 7:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday, 5 p.m. Sunday, plus a 2 p.m. matinee Feb. 24.

For tickets or information, call 296-7000 or go online to www.northernstage.org.