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## The Real Thing

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Friday Oct 31, 2014

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Ewan McGregor, Cynthia Nixon, Josh Hamilton and Maggie Gyllenhaal (Source:Joan Marcus)

"You love her but she loves him, and he loves somebody else/ you just can't win. And so it goes till the day you die/ This thing they call love, it's gonna make you cry," go the lyrics to the popular '80s J. Geils Band song, "Love Stinks." But it could just as easily serve as a quick recap of Tom Stoppard's "The Real Thing," now playing at the American Airlines Theatre.

Stoppard shows himself as a shrewd player this fall; when the Roundabout Theatre Company wanted to stage this play, he insisted that they also produce his "Indian Ink," now playing at the Laura Pels Theater. But where "Indian Ink" follows a free-spirited poet on her travels in India in the 1930s as she finds love, "The Real Thing" looks at two couples in the '80s as they fall in and out of love.

Two-time Golden Globe nominee Ewan McGregor makes his Broadway debut as Henry, a playwright who is unhappily married to Charlotte (Tony winner Cynthia Nixon), the lead actress in his play about a marriage on the rocks. Nixon, who also starred in the original Broadway production in 1985 in the role of teenage daughter Debbie (in tandem with "Hurlyburly," in an interesting twist), plays Charlotte as haughty and cerebral.

Her English accent could use some work, and her wardrobe looks like she raided the closet of Golden Girl Dorothy Zbornak. Why anyone would feel inclined to swath this pretty little redhead in brightly patterned caftans and front-placard skirt-suits is truly beyond comprehension.

As it happens, life imitates art, and Charlotte soon discovers that while she has been off having nine separate, meaningless affairs of her own, her beloved Henry has been having it off with their young friend Annie, played by Academy Award nominee Maggie Gyllenhaal, also making her Broadway debut.

The two are really and truly in love, they say, and Annie is almost gleeful when their affair is discovered. And truly, the chemistry between McGregor and Gyllenhaal is palpable, and a wonderful thing to behold, despite the patina of smarminess surrounding it.

While Maggie's husband Max, played by a mostly affable Josh Hamilton, goes to pieces over the news, he is presumably the only one who does. And Annie, the bitch, finds his desperate pleas to win back her love as not only pitiful, but in bad taste. In short, they are harshing her love buzz.

Turnaround is fair play, though, and after only two years of wedded bliss, Annie and Henry hit their own rough patch, in the form of bright-eyed young actor Billy, (Ronan Raftery), Annie's co-star in a Glasgow production of "'Tis Pity She's a Whore." Annie loves to be loved, and becomes addicted to the feeling of being the more experienced, older woman.

She swears to Henry that nothing physical happens, although the audience as much as witnesses the two making love (is it them, though, or their onstage characters?) Yet in another part of the show, Henry remarks that the physical aspect of love is meaningless; it's the vulnerability two people show each other as lovers that really 'makes' love.

Annie tells Henry not to press too hard, that love is a mutable thing. And he seems to go along with it, although in the back of his (and presumably everyone's) mind is the looming question, "Is this the real thing?"

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And running under everything is a subplot about domestic terrorist Brodie (Alex Breaux) whom Annie has met on a train and works tirelessly to free from jail. When she does finally free him, it is just in time to profit off the film made about his crime -- and just in time to cream him in the face with a bowl of dip.

There's a lot of crudités and dips in this production, and unfortunately, some of them are in the cast. Although McGregor gives a stellar turn as Henry, the character is a real dip. Whether he's looking for the perfect old song to take on a desert island or just the perfect relationship, he always misses his mark. Charlotte is easily unlikeable, and Max is a desperate boor. Annie is so wishy-washy it renders her pathetic, with her ideals at opposite with her actions.

And then there's Stoppard. It's hard to stomach that a longtime married couple would be so easy to forgive each other's infidelities, and that their teenage daughter Debbie (Madeline Weinstein) would emerge from such a split unscathed, happy to play old songs on her guitar with whichever combination of adults happen to be around.

Real life is much messier -- a lot closer to Max's pathetic self-flagellation over his split with Annie, and a lot less neatly wrapped up in the end. Like Henry, the audience is left trying to make themselves believe that this is something real.

Although the subject matter is profoundly depressing to anyone who's ever been in (and out of) love, the acting is stellar, with McGregor and Gyllenhaal shining. If you can handle the fact that ultimately, love stinks, you'll have a fine time at "The Real Thing."

*"The Real Thing" runs through Jan. 4, 2015 at the American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd Street in New York City. For tickets or information, call 800-BROADWAY or visit <http://www.broadway.com>*

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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