

He Said/She Said Critiques

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REVIEWS

Paragon's "The Real Thing" is Theatre at Its Best

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The Real Thing presented by Paragon Theatre Ensemble presents one of Tom Stoppard's best plays. This play is typical Stoppard complete with witty wordplay that flies past you before you can comprehend half of it. This play, however, offers a brainy and heartfelt view of the cynical and sweet parts of love, lust, fidelity and marriage. The play centers on a central couple, requiring a few of their exes, offspring and lovers to fully tell their story.

HE SAID: It has been a long time since I have had such an experience at the theatre, and it was very welcome. It was almost awe-inspiring how perfect this production is in every element of its creation. Design, direction, and acting were all executed with a creativity and brilliant simplicity that teamed together for a common goal – to tell the Stoppard's story completely and honestly.

SHE SAID: I went into this production with very high expectations, which were more than met. The actors handled Stoppard's cleverly twisted language just perfectly, all while maintaining pleasing and consistent British dialects. The direction, by Wendy Franz, simultaneously brought out all the right aspects of their performances and got out of the way to give the writing and the acting the small knock they needed to travel to the audience.

HE SAID: Sam Gregory, as Henry, was tasked with the largest amount and arguably the most complex dialogue in the show, and he carried it off with no problem at all, communicating the intricate thoughts and emotional shifts without any outward signs of work. As polished as his performance was, I was actually even more impressed with the work of Barbara Andrews as Annie. She may have had some simpler dialogue, but she seemed tasked with a greater level of emotional variation, which she nailed with remarkable finesse.

SHE SAID: I completely agree that Andrews' performance was the best of the night. She was absolutely riveting and truthful, and although I enjoyed her throughout, during the few scenes that were placed far downstage, I felt especially privileged to watch her from such a close distance. Although all the performances were very strong, I also particularly enjoyed Emily Paton Davies' honest portrayal of Charlotte.

HE SAID: I also need to applaud the director, Wendy Franz, for trusting the actors and material enough to not add any unnecessary staging or technical elements. There were several long scenes with almost no blocking and I found myself riveted the whole time. The actors told the story, and anything extra would have been a distraction, and it takes a great director to show such restraint – knowing when to apply meaningful staging and when to leave well enough alone.

SHE SAID: The design elements also contributed greatly to the production's success. The set, designed by David Lafont, represented two flats, which were designed and dressed well to show the different personalities of the people living there. In addition, there was a "dressing room" area in the center of the stage, which was used in combination with the partially onstage tech board, as a device to help tell the play-within-a-play moments. This worked quite well, and positioned the board to handle several complex sound cues well.

THEY SAID: *The Real Thing* at Paragon is the best piece of theatre we have seen in a long time. Watching the actors perform their roles with complete control over the difficult language and effortless portrayal of their complex emotions was like being in a master class. But their work would not have been successful without a creative design team to craft the world around them and a trusting mature director who knows when to add and when to let it be. This production is a testimony to how powerful theatre can be when talent, onstage and off, comes together with the focus of telling a great story. Paragon Theatre Ensemble succeeds in making the audience feel intensely connected to an authentic and richly represented humanity. If that's what you love about live theatre, we strongly urge you to go see this production.

The Real Thing runs Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays until August 14th. Click the banner below to get tickets and info!

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