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Not-so-real staging reveals the reality of "The Real Thing" ***1/2

By John Moore

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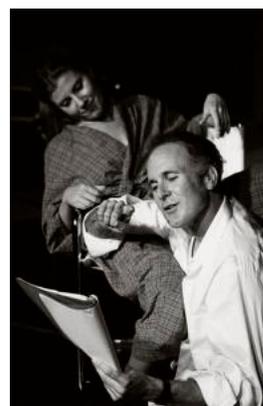
Images from Paragon Theatre's 'The Real Thing.' Photos by Erin Tyler Photography.

In the midst of an unusually busy summer of area theater, it might be easy to overlook the strong ensemble performance in Paragon Theatre's "The Real Thing." And that would be a real shame.

Anchored by Denver Center Theatre Company ace Sam Gregory, Paragon has crafted an inventive variation on Tom Stoppard's 1984 play, which ruminates on the ever-shifting tectonics of relationships you're never quite sure are "the real thing" — or just exaggerated variations of the truth as invented by the main character, who happens to be a British serial TV scribe.

"The Real Thing," perhaps an inspiration for Patrick Marber's far more brutal "Closer," also centers on two friendly, fluid couples whose loose marital foundations are houses of cards. That's a major theme of this smart play that exposes we self-sabotaging humans' innate inability to contentedly stand in relationship-place. We're too often done in, not by the banality of infidelity, but by the insidiousness of insecurity.

But there's something intentionally amiss about director Wendy Franz's staging. David Lafont's set is made up of two distinct but only partially constructed living rooms on either side of the stage. The visible planks holding up the walls suggest both a heightened artificiality and an instability. And intriguingly, a member of the creative team sits quietly at a corner table following along with the script, suggesting perhaps we're all on a sound stage, and they're merely playing out a story that's entirely a fiction.



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Barbra Andrews and Sam Gregory in Paragon's "The Real Thing." (Erin Tyler)

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Kind of like every play ever performed.

In the opening scene, an embittered, drunk husband shreds the shabby alibi of his oh-so-busted wife, who admits to having an affair. She leaves with the kind of perfect theatrical exit line we're never composed enough to come up with in real life: *"You've done everything wrong."*

But when the scene ends, there's no blackout. The woman exits one house and heads for the other, stopping first to change into a robe in our view. She musses her hair and walks into the second room, suggesting morning. She's now newly liberated and far better paired with a writer named Henry, presumably the man she left her husband for.

But when our nasty cuckold enters next, only now amiable and accompanied by a new wife, it's intentionally discombobulating: Is this a leap far into a remarkably civil future? No, it's something else entirely, and we'll be playing this delightful guessing game over what's real and what's not from here on. And it's an irrelevance.

This play just happens to have sublevels of reality — kind of like the new DiCaprio film "Inception" — without all those crazy dreams.

"The Real Thing" ultimately focuses on the writer, Henry (Gregory), and second wife Annie (Barbra Andrews). And while both have cavalierly left their previous mates, it's the disintegration of this relationship that gives the play its emotional center. Henry slips into a state of foolish arrogance about the marriage, while the more feral Annie follows her wandering passion. These two actors are wonderful with words, with one another and, most movingly, at demonstrating the inevitable erosion of their bond.

Gregory gets several chances to show off Henry's passion and playfulness. When he explains pop music's ability to distill the raw essence of love into a catchy refrain like, "Do Doo Ron Ron," it plainly points out how clueless this intellectual wordsmith is at grasping a concept as nonliteral as love.

They're backed by compact yet rich supporting turns by Emily Paton Davies, Warren Sherrill, Chloe Armao and Jack Wefso. But it's a crucial late appearance by Brandon Kruhm that brings it all together.

Paragon's staging is an increasingly rare example of how a "concept" production can enhance the themes of a piece, rather than convolute them.

By the end, our journey from confusion to certainty over what is real is complete. Which only serves to reinforce how utterly unimportant that distinction is in the cathedral of theater. Because when Davies delivers a great line like, *"You've done everything wrong,"* it matters not what sub-level of reality its been delivered from.

Well-delivered, that's as real as it gets.

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"The Real Thing" ***1/2 (out of four stars)

Drama. Paragon Theatre, 1387 S. Santa Fe Drive. Written by Tom Stoppard. Directed by Wendy Franz. Starring Sam Gregory and Barbra Andrews. Through Aug. 14. 2 hours, 25 minutes. 7:30 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Aug. 1. \$17-21. 303-300-2210 or paragontheatre.org (<http://paragontheatre.org>)

This weekend's theater openings

"Cymbeline" Shakespeare weaves a wicked stepmother and a deadly potion. A banished groom and a disguised bride. A loyal friend and a jealous enemy. Through Aug 15. *Longmont Theatre Company, 513 Main St., 303-772-5200 or longmonttheatre.org (<http://longmonttheatre.org>)*

"Guys and Dolls" Classic musical about gamblers desperate to find a place to hold their floating craps game. Through July 31. *Presented by Inspire Creative at the Byron Theatre in the University of Denver's Newman Center, 2344 E. Iliff Ave., 303-790-0875 or inspirecreative.org (<http://inspirecreative.org>)*

"I'm Getting Murdered in the Morning" A wacky wedding is the setting for this interactive murder mystery comedy. Through Sunday. *Parker Arts Council at Victorian Peaks Collection, 11020 S. Pikes Peak Drive, Parker, 303-840-5406 parkerartscouncil.org (<http://parkerartscouncil.org>)*

"Summer Madness" Two one-acts: The manic farce "Madly in Love," by Paul Ableman, and the classic comedy "The Bald Soprano," by Eugene Ionesco. Through Aug. 29. *Germinal Stage-Denver, 2450 W. 44th Ave., 303-455-7108 or germinalstage.com (http://germinalstage.com)*

"Summertree" A young, nameless man drifts among moments of innocent childhood, conflicted adolescence and present-day reality in a wartime play that encourages audiences to question their origins, destinations and present values. Through Aug. 1. *Presented by Applebox at the University of Colorado Denver Arts Building Blackbox Theatre, Room 278, 900 Curtis St., 303-523-7067 or appleboxtheatre.com (http://appleboxtheatre.com)*

"South Pacific" Coming off its recent first Broadway revival, "South Pacific" is best-known for its extraordinary 1949 score, including "Some Enchanted Evening," "Younger Than Springtime," "Bali Ha'i" and "There Is Nothin' Like A Dame." But this national touring production also tells a deeply-felt story of Americans stationed in an alien culture in wartime. *At the Buell Theatre, Denver Performing Arts Complex. 303-893-4100 (800-641-1222 outside Denver), at all King Soopers or denvercenter.org (http://denvercenter.org)*

"This Day and Age" In this sophisticated comedy by Nagle Jackson, a widow decides she is going to live life on her own terms, despite the expectations of her adult children. Through Sept. 24. *Creede Repertory Theatre, 124 N. Main St., 719-658-2540, 866-658-2540, or creederep.org (http://creederep.org)*

"Tomfoolery" Cameron Mackintosh has taken 28 of Tom Lehrer's greatest songs and added narrative for an evening that attacks American sacred cows from the 1950s and '60s — but only after having milked them first. Through Aug. 28. *Victorian Playhouse, 4201 Hooker St., 303-433-4343 or denvervic.com (http://denvervic.com)*

"Zoot Suit" Luis Valdez's classic play combines swing and style with a potent message about the corrosive power of racism. This production reunites some of the North High students who performed the play at the Buell Theatre six years ago. The band is directed by DeVotchKa's Shawn King. 7:30 Thursday and Friday, July 22 and 23. *Outdoors next to the Elitch Theatre, 38th Avenue and Tennyson St. 303-623-0216*

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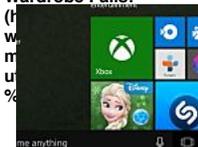
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