

Rock Out at The Western Stage

Salinas, CA — July 15, 2010

When The Western Stage's Artistic Director Jon Patrick Selover saw the London premiere of Tom Stoppard's "Rock 'n' Roll" three years ago, he found something intriguing about this play that he had not seen in this playwright's work since "Arcadia" over a decade ago. "I have a fondness for Stoppard, but I have had a hard time getting into his work lately," Selover says. "This story was more human than many of his more recent plays."

What made it so human? Probably the fact that Stoppard, for the first time, was exploring his own past, imagining what might have happened to him had his family returned to Czechoslovakia after World War II instead of settling in Britain. What would he have turned out like if he had lived through the totalitarian Communist regime that ruled the country through most of the late 20th century?

Selover was so intrigued by "Rock 'n' Roll" that he spent the rest of his vacation discussing it with family members. So, there was probably little doubt that he would eventually mount this show at The Western Stage. Opening July 30 in the Studio Theater in the Hartnell College Performing Arts building, "Rock 'n' Roll" promises to capture the hearts and minds of Central Coast audiences as well. It certainly has done so for Selover and his cast.

"We spent three weeks doing table work," says Selover, referring to the process in which actors sit around the table and analyze the script and their roles. This is often necessary when working on a Stoppard play. Not only does he write rich characters who speak in a verbally acrobatic language that have led some to refer to Stoppard as our contemporary Shakespeare, but he also draws from history, art, politics, and philosophy to create a mesmerizing world of ideas on stage.

"Rock 'n' Roll" is no exception. Alternating between Prague and Cambridge over a 22-year period between the Prague Spring of 1968, when Czechoslovakia enjoyed a brief respite from its oppressive Communist government, through the Velvet Revolution in 1989, when the Communist government was finally overthrown and democracy established, the play is filled with debates about the merits of capitalism versus socialism, contemplations on Sapphic poetry, and arguments about the best method to challenge totalitarianism — through mere letter writing or by wearing long hair and playing rock 'n' roll?

Yet, for Selover, the ideas are secondary to the human story the play depicts. "Despite what he says, Stoppard is a sentimentalist at heart," says Selover. "He writes characters that are well rounded and in human relationships."

At the center of the drama is Jan, a philosophy student with a deep passion for Western rock 'n' roll music. When the Prague Spring comes to an abrupt end under the might of Soviet tanks, he abandons his studies at Cambridge under the tutelage of Max, an idealist who still believes in the

possibility of a utopian socialist society, and returns to Czechoslovakia to support the reform movement. When his favorite band, the Plastic People of the Universe, are persecuted because the government fears the subversive nature of their music, Jan begins to head down the path of dissension.

Reinforcing this theme about the power of music to incite profound social change is the music itself. True to its title, “Rock ‘n’ Roll” features musicians like Pink Floyd, the Beatles, Bob Dylan, the Velvet Underground, and the Plastic People of the Universe. But it is the Rolling Stones who serve as the symbolic bookends for this story. During the early stages of the play, they are forbidden to perform in Czechoslovakia only to be invited back to perform a concert after the fall of Communism in 1990. In this sense, “Rock ‘n Roll” is a story about change — human, historical, political and musical.

Perhaps it is fitting that Selover is tackling a play about seismic world changes since his own theatre has undergone a major transition itself. Two years ago, The Western Stage Auxiliary Corporation was dissolved and Hartnell College reabsorbed the theatre program back into the college.

“I’m glad we made it through the transition,” says Selover, who will be celebrating his tenth anniversary as artistic director next year. “In a lot of ways, we are much closer to the college now.” He believes the theatre now has a lot more stakeholders on campus who see what an important resource this department is to the community. “I’m actually excited about the future and am more optimistic than ever that this program will last another 35 years.”

“Rock ‘n’ Roll” plays Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. through August 22. Season tickets are always the best option. Reserve your seats through The Western Stage ticket office at (831) 755-6816 or online at westernstage.com. For group sales, contact Ron Cacas at (831) 759-6012.

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