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A big kiss for Lab Theater's 'Stage Kiss'

ARTS COMMENTARY

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"You must remember this/ A kiss is just a kiss"

— **"As Time Goes By," Herman Hupfeld**

"What a strange job it is to kiss strangers in front of people and make it look like you know each other. Or kiss someone you know in front of people and make it look like a stranger," exclaims a character in ["Stage Kiss."](#)

It's said in nervousness — he's about to kiss a woman onstage and doesn't feel comfortable with it at all. But it's also a smart commentary on the art of acting and what a strange profession it is.

After all, what other job requires you to kiss other people in front of an audience on a regular basis?

True to its name, there's a lot of kissing going on in "Stage Kiss": tender kisses, awkward kisses, passionate kisses, angry kisses, tentative kisses, perfunctory kisses.

This funny, absurd play by [Sarah Ruhl](#) (“[Dead Man’s Cell Phone](#),” “[The Clean House](#)”) runs at the [Laboratory Theater of Florida](#) through [Nov. 21](#). It centers on two actors who are simply called She (Annette Trossbach) and He (Paul Graffy). They used to be lovers, in real life, but it ended badly. They haven’t seen each other for 20 years — until they happen to be cast to play opposite each other in the ill-advised revival of a [1930s](#) flop.

This cleverly written play-within-a-play seems to echo their own history, as it’s about two lovers who broke up 20 years ago, only to be reunited when the woman learns she has a terminal illness.

Not at all keen on being cast together in the first place, He and She are further frustrated with the material, which not only forces them to act out scenes eerily similar to their own lives, but to kiss, multiple times, throughout.



[Annette Trossbach](#) and [Paul Graffy](#) star in “[Stage Kiss](#).” MILA BRIDGER / [COURTESY PHOTOS](#)



Everyone wonderfully overacts, gesturing broadly and wildly as they speak the ridiculous dialogue of the period piece. The director (Jack Weld) is no help at all, as he doesn’t seem to possess any opinions of his own. He’s vague and indecisive, and when the actors ask him for guidance, he simply turns it back on them, asking, almost like a therapist, “Well, what do you think?” because he doesn’t have a clue.

“Stage Kiss” demonstrates just how odd acting can be, as people wearing T-shirts, shorts and flip-flops spout the melodrama’s overly flowery dialogue during rehearsal while others mill about in the background, texting on cell phones or knitting.

Matt DeNoncour, who plays Kevin, the understudy, is especially humorous in his role. Kevin's simply there because he and the director are an item, not because he has any acting ability. He's terrified when he has to step in for He and kiss She. Terrified that he won't be taken seriously portraying a straight male, he overcompensates.

"Stage Kiss" is full of great backstage scenes and shows audiences how plays are stitched together, sometimes despite the director's incompetence or lack of experience.

Ms. Ruhl's play is extremely clever, in part because it contains two plays-within-a-play, both of which echo the two leads' relationship. It's almost a funhouse mirror, with reflections of reflections of reflections.

The line between acting and reality grows thin, as even the actors become confused with the difference, if any, between their true feelings and those of their characters.



[Ms. Trossbach](#) and Mr. Graffy are superb in this play, a sheer delight to watch. Both masters at their craft, they raise the level of this production far above that of community theater.



It's particularly entertaining to note the little moments in the play. Ms. Trossbach's character, jittery and insecure as she auditions after a 10-year hiatus, has a wonderful little bit where She can't quite decide if she wants to stand or sit while delivering her lines.

And also early on, Mr. Graffy has a compelling moment when He realizes his former lover has been cast as a lead with him. Not wanting to even look at her, He doesn't say anything as He slowly realizes who She is.

The play is full of little moments like this; neither actor lets an opportunity slip by. And while they provided many laughs throughout the evening, they also evoked tears with a particularly tender yet heartbreaking

scene.

[Gil Perez](#), as She's husband, is stronger in his role in the 1930s melodrama, playing it over-the-top, gesturing wildly.

[Holly Hagen](#) smolders with teen angst as the petulant daughter, and Stacy Stauffer plays He's current girlfriend, a nice, passive-aggressive girl from the Midwest.

Director [Lois Kuehne](#) does a deft job with this difficult play. Neither farce nor slapstick, the playwright's humor borders more on the absurd. But some scenes, particularly in [Act II](#), seem to be searching for the right tone. And Mr. DeNoncour's depiction of a pimp in the second act seems more cartoony and not in tune with the tenor of the play. (The over-the-top costume doesn't help, and just seems to be going for an easy laugh.)



But Ms. Kuehne makes the best use of the small stage for multiple scenes: an audition space, a stage, He's studio apartment. And she cleverly has the real-life stage manager and crew come out to change the set onstage while the action is still going on.

There are so many layers to "Stage Kiss," it's almost like watching a juggler add more items to her act; not only is she juggling plates, but she adds feathers and then chainsaws to the mix – and manages to keep it all up in the air.

LAB Theater's production of "Stage Kiss" is the [Florida](#) premiere of the play. It would be a shame if you missed it. |

'Stage Kiss'

>> When: Through Nov. 21

>> Where: Laboratory Theater of Florida, [Fort Myers](#)

>> Cost: \$25 (\$12 for students)

>> Info: 218-0481 or [laboratorytheaterflorida.com](#)

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