

Pittsburgh Irish and Classical Theatre has started its new season with a dynamic, superbly acted and insightfully directed production of Tom Stoppard's "Rock' n' Roll." It's from 2006 but focuses on events between the years of 1968 and 1990, specifically tied to the political climate in Stoppard's birthplace Czechoslovakia.

Not that this seems deliberately autobiographical nor need you look for that. You'll have enough to look for anyway. Rock and Roll music backgrounds and permeates a story which does indeed move around a lot, with themes, rhythms and words which jump all over many places at once. Consequently the complex developments and the intellectually provocative dialogue may not always seem easy to follow, especially at first. But soon it becomes clear that Stoppard primarily writes about emotional relationships and how people behave and think, caught up in changing history.

All of the 9 actors in significant roles excellently and clearly define the characters with polish, conviction and clarity, despite many decidedly English accents. Credit director Andrew S. Paul for bringing that out, for making sure the text takes precedence over authenticity of pronunciation, and for staging everything in ways making all the essentials clear, rather than cluttered by clever invention.

The play deals with the significance of rock and roll in the democratic movement in Czechoslovakia. Taking place in Cambridge, England and in Prague, it especially contrasts the attitudes of Jan, a young Czech Ph.D student and rock music fan, appalled by the repressive regime in his country and those of Max, a friend and British professor who continues to believe in Soviet communism. Many ideas get tossed around intellectually, especially politics, Marxism, capitalism, the ravages of age, "making love not war," journalism, social responsibility, personal integrity, Greek literature, family dynamics and more. In that sense, Stoppard doesn't seem to be trying to wrap up everything into one specific point, but rather to tell an interesting, potentially moving story laced with ideas to ponder.

Sam Redford as Jan especially stands out with sensitivity, conviction and personal appeal. So too does Helena Ruoti as Max's wife Eleanor and later as their daughter Esme. She brings great depth, perception and naturalness to both roles not just in speaking but in reacting.

I definitely recommend that you read in advance the background in the program book. Second I suggest that, if you find the first act seeming not to go anywhere special, hang in there for the second act. In fact you might want to attend more than once to better grasp and enjoy Stoppard's best moments and to witness such fine acting.

"Rock 'n' Roll" continues through May 30th at the Henry Heymann Theater in the Stephen Foster Memorial, Oakland. 412 394 3353 www.pictheatre.org

Gordon Spencer on WRCT (88.3) Sunday May 10th 2-3pm on "The Best of Broadway"