

THE REAL THING

A CONVERSATION WITH ASSISTANT DIRECTOR LEE SUNDAY EVANS AND COSTUME DESIGNER KAYE VOYCE

On October 4, 2014, Lee Sunday Evans and Kaye Voyce spoke about The Real Thing with education dramaturg Ted Sod as part of Roundabout Theatre Company's lecture series.

An edited transcript follows (please note that there are plot spoilers):



Ted Sod: Lee, will you tell us about the rehearsal process and how Tom Stoppard contributed to it?

Lee Sunday Evans: People were talking about the text and characters, various things Stoppard's learned about, the plays he's done over the years. A lot of it was about talking about the double meanings that he has written into a lot of the scenes. For instance, from scene one to scene two, you see that at the end of scene one, the character played by Charlotte leaves, as if she's going, potentially, to meet her lover, and at the beginning of scene two, there's a period where there's a double story going on, like maybe this man is the lover that she left her husband for in scene one. We learn that it's actually her husband, Henry. So Tom's written this double meaning with both the actual words and how the stories overlap. We spent a lot of time getting Tom's knowledge and understanding of all that into the piece.

TS: I read an interview with Stoppard around the time of the 2010 revival in London with Toby Stephens playing Henry, and he wondered if an audience who has seen the play before will still get caught up in the sleight of hand of the play within the play. Did he talk about that in rehearsals?

LSE: In various ways, yes. I think Stoppard's really interested in how the structure of this play has a lot of sleight of hand in it, about fiction versus truth, what's real and what's performed, about the play's theatricality, and blurring the lines between those things.

TS: It seems like Sam Gold, the director, has made us very aware that we're watching a play. Would you say that that was one of his perspectives in directing it?

LSE: I think Sam was very interested in the relationship between what feels real and what feels like fiction. And I think he was interested in making everything in the play feel as real as possible.

TS: And in the play's text, Stoppard asks for specific pieces of music, which are Henry's favorite pieces of music, and in this production there is some singing by individuals in the cast. How did that come about? Can you talk a little bit about Sam's decision to do that?

LSE: Sure. Some of the music in the play is written into the script but not all the music that you hear in the production is. Sam and Bray Poor, the sound designer, spent a lot of time thinking about how to make the music of that era feel very relevant, personal, visceral and emotional to the cast on stage and also to the audience.

TS: I really love the fact that we get to meet some of the characters before we even know who they are. Madeline, who plays Debbie, comes out and sings at the very beginning of the play. We're not quite sure who she is, and then ultimately we find out. Was that something that was deliberate in terms of keeping us off guard? Did Sam want us to ask ourselves, "Who's that? And when will she appear again?"

LSE: Yes, I think so. Sam was really interested in incorporating live music throughout the entire show.

TS: Because at the top of Act II, I noticed that Alex, who plays Brodie, is turned upstage, because we haven't quite met him yet. A lot of times when people make their entrances, I imagine the audience thinks, "Who are they? And what are they doing here now?" I love that surprise element in it.

LSE: Sam's interest was in working on this as an ensemble piece. And during rehearsal, a lot of work we did had the entire group, including Brodie, who is only in the last scene. There was a sense of building the production with the ensemble and making them a part of it. The audience sees the fluidity in the scene changes and Sam's making this world for us. That real connection, where everybody on stage is making this play happen.

TS: I want to talk a bit about the design, because it's quite extraordinary. First of all, David Zinn, the set designer, has used the entire width of the stage. And this stage is notoriously wide. And you, Kaye, as costume designer, have made the women all have individual styles. Can you talk a bit about how you started? It could have been a nebulous time period or am I wrong about that? Is it specifically '80s/'90s in your mind?

Kaye Voyce: To me, it's quite specifically early 1980s, which is actually, I think, a really beautiful period in clothing. In doing this play, first of all, you have to go along with the script. But you also have to consider the idea of how important the music is from the '50s and '60s that Henry loves. So, once we figured out how that was important, my job was to figure out how to think about the play as a period play. When a play is set in a period that isn't really so far away, we can look at it almost in a retro/hipster way. Most of the costumes are vintage clothing from the period. And we would have the actors try things on, and try things on, until it didn't feel like a cliché of the period. It had to have an authenticity. In a way, we were always trying to go for what felt like "the real thing." For example, there are no wigs on stage. It's trying to grapple with what is real. When you think of a play, you think it's inherently artificial on some level. So, how do you make it seem like it's really happening every night, and how do you honor that? That's really the interesting question we were faced with.

TS: And you're dressing two actresses playing actresses. Can you talk a bit about how you start? Can you give us some idea about your process?

KV: It's very complex and a big part of it is collaboration. First of all, there are conversations between me and Sam, the director. I look at what he and David, the set designer, are doing. I study what the world is that we were playing inside, so I get a sense of the language of it. Then I try to get very specific. I spent the first week, if not more, just being in rehearsal, listening to the words, understanding the way these characters were living their lives. I was privy to the conversations they were having about the characters. And also, just to watch the actors move, so I could get a sense about how they would embody their clothes. That's a very interesting thing about this play...the clothes are costumes, but they have to feel like clothes. There's a different energy between the way Maggie, for instance, wears clothes and how her character, Annie, wears clothes.

TS: Lee, this play deals with a lot of different themes: marriage, infidelity, sharing parental duties with a spouse you're no longer attached to, what real love is. Can you give us some insight as to what some of the conversations that went on in rehearsal were like and if there was something that you personally remember as being fascinating?

LSE: I think that one of the biggest things that we talked about is the connection between what good writing is and Henry and Annie's relationship. Annie takes up Brodie and his cause and this piece that Brodie wrote. She wants to get it produced and get Brodie's story out to the world and she wants Henry to help – but he can't get behind it. And, in a way, Henry's reluctance is not about Brodie's play or about the platform, it's about their relationship. The way that those two things are intertwined in the play is interesting to explore. The conflict is not just about the thing on the surface. They're having a conflict about their emotional disconnection.

TS: Well, ultimately, even though Henry resists it, he does do a rewrite. Do you feel like that's all because of Annie and not because he has any investment in the cause?

LSE: I think the play doesn't say, so it's really up to our personal experience of it. I think that's part of the complexity of the story.

TS: I also think it's fascinating that Annie wants him to write a play for her to do onstage and Henry can't quite write it because he feels like everything he writes about love is a cliché. Did that come up in rehearsal? The idea that if you try to express what love really is it usually results in a cliché?

LSE: Yes. In the play, it says you can't write about love because it's just finality expressed with happiness and lust. There's the famous line from Anna Karenina that says all happy families are happy in the same way and that all troubled families are troubled in different ways. And that's why you write about troubled families, because they're interesting and they're different. I think that that's an idea that exists in Tom's play because if you're happy and you write about it – it sounds like a cliché.

TS: Kaye, will you talk to us a bit about your collaboration with the other designers? Was there a color palette in your mind?

KV: Yes, there was a color palette, in some way. But because it is essentially one room as the setting for everything, the question became: How often do the characters change clothes? When is it essential to change outfits, when is it not? How do we mark those things? And you just experiment with it.

TS: Will you talk a little bit about how you came up with Ewan's look, which is a little bit more conservative -- yes? Did you start with the fact that he's a writer?

KV: I think that for me his look actually comes from the cricket bat speech and the idea that the character of Henry is aware of the quality of things. And even in the play within the play, he has Josh Hamilton's character talk about quality. I think that Henry is someone who knows what nice things are and understands that some things are better than others. I started with a lot of classic clothing. And in collaboration with Ewan, we saw what would fit. We looked at a very traditional sport coat and things that had a very 80s touch to them. I also think it's still a work in progress at this point.

TS: How do you handle it if you are in love with something and you put it on an actor and the actor says, "Hmm...I don't think so." Do you always acquiesce or do you move into psychologist's land?

KV: It really depends on the situation. In this play, in this process, I haven't had that at all. I mean, it's a really beautiful collaboration with all of the actors. In fact, with Maggie's costumes, there are a few things that we had put into second choice position that ended up coming back into first choice position... that happened with a few different options. But, there's nothing that any of them wanted to wear that I thought was taking a wrong turn. I think that there are healthy compromises when you do this kind of play with really smart actors. Plus, I'll only present them with things that I think are possible. So, we already narrow the choices down that way.

TS: Was there a character that was particularly challenging to dress?

KV: Not particularly challenging. I think they all have their own challenges and what's interesting about this play is that you have a character who appears in only one scene and you have to find a look that explains that character. Maggie's character appears in ten scenes. And in a way, that can be more difficult because you don't find that one thing that nails Annie. You have to find a lot of things that deal with that character. So, there are different challenges with each character.

TS: Lee, I know that Stoppard has been at the performances. Do you have a sense of what has to happen in the rehearsal time that you have between now and opening?

LSE: I think some of it is learning as we go. It's been really exciting these last few days to have audiences. Particularly because the words are so specific and lush and dynamic in this play that to just say these words, especially in front of all these people, feels incredibly different. After this weekend, I think we'll have a clearer sense of what the work is. There's all kinds of small and large choices that we make in the course of building our production that wind up having a big impact on the way audiences experience the story. The actors learn about their characters anew based upon how the audiences respond and I think that will form a lot of what happens within the next three weeks before the production opens.

TS: We'd like to give you an opportunity to ask some questions now.

Audience Member 1: The thing that's always interested me about the play is Henry's evolution because early on he's saying, basically, "I don't care," and at the end he turns out being a very passionate romantic who does care. I'm wondering if he was in denial at the beginning and to what extent his feelings for Annie evolve. Where does that come from?

TS: There is a two-year difference between the first act and the second act. And there's really only one line to establish that. Lee, do you have a sense of his trajectory?

LSE: One thing that Tom said is that the subtitle of the play could be "The Education of Henry," which I think is really great, and I think that in terms of what Kaye said about him being a character who has a sense of quality, a sense of discernment, and he calls himself a snob and says it doesn't matter if you think I'm a snob, I care about what I care about, so in that way it's very dogmatic and I think that you can direct the play so that Charlotte's prophecy about Henry comes true. She says, "You've got one to lose, you haven't learned what it's like to not be in control of what you want or how you want to be." He struggles in the new relationship with Annie, he faces a major crisis in his life that he doesn't quite understand – he doesn't get what's going wrong in their relationship. So, I think there are a lot of different ways to read how their story unfolds; there are a lot of different choices to make about how you play Henry. It's a really meaty, complex role. I do think that Tom is interested in us watching Henry confront a crisis. In his relationship with Annie, he's on a journey of self-knowledge through pain, which he said is what his play *House of Cards* is supposed to be. It's about someone going on a journey of self-revelation through experiencing pain. In *House of Cards* what we see is someone who is able to deal with the pain in a very verbal, needy way, and then actually when Henry goes through the same experience at the end of the play, he loses his composure as Charlotte predicts.

TS: When he has that goodbye scene with his daughter Debbie, I thought to myself, this is a man who is trying to protect and, at the same time, figure out the dynamic of what it means to be a lover and to be in a relationship. I feel by that time he's still grasping, but he does send her off with some information. Would you agree?

LSE: Well, there's this great thing in the structure of the play that the audience has seen. We've seen Annie and Billy on the train together, but Henry doesn't know anything about their meet up. And so, in that scene, we get that really incredible speech about the knowledge that lovers have of each other. It's so specific that we, the audience, are unsure as to whether Annie is going to have an affair or not. So, yes, he's onto something, but it's the first step in his journey, I guess.

TS: Yes, it's early on. I also think it's so transparent in terms of how his mind works. I think Stoppard really gives us a sense of how somebody's mind can take over. Their ideas about what's going on in terms of infidelity or what they're conjecturing about infidelity is more powerful than the real thing. So many people relate to this play, no matter what kind of relationship they are in, because of jealousy and doubt. "Are they true to me?" is something that a lot of people think about regarding their respective partners. Do we have another question?

Audience Member 2: I have a costume question. The black-and-white caftan that Cynthia wears in the second scene... it's magnificent. Is that vintage? Was that constructed for the show? Is it buyable?

KV: Weirdly, it's one of the very few things in the show that is contemporary fashion. We purchased a bunch of caftans, but the pattern on that one really worked. Yes, it is purchasable.

TS: Do you want to tell her where, because I think that's the next question.

KV: I think it was either Saks or Bloomingdale's.

TS: Saks or Bloomingdale's. Happy shopping! It did look great on Cynthia. Do we have another question?

Audience Member 3: At the end of the play, Henry is writing television movie scripts. What's that supposed to say about the relationship to Annie?

TS: He owes alimony to the first wife.

LSE: Yes, he's writing TV scripts because he owes alimony. I was researching what TV movies were like in Britain in the early '80s. It's actually a really cool time in Britain because they were just starting to produce more political dramas and it was a new era in British TV. So, it could be chalked up to the fact that he was doing it as a money gig, as Ted said, for alimony. Or he wanted to write a political, hard-hitting TV drama like the ones that were being made and did actually have a big impact. There was a shift in the way the content was being done on TV at the time, so the conflict about the quality of what was on TV actually was very current when the play was written. I don't know the details of Tom's TV writing work in the '80s, so I don't want to say that he was involved directly, but I'm sure that he was aware of those conversations going on in the TV writing world. It's all about quality and money and speaking to those same questions that are coming up in his relationship. Do you compromise yourself? Or do you stay true to your ideals?

TS: Stoppard has written quite a bit for television and some of his teleplays are in collections, which you can buy on Amazon. We have time for one more question.

Audience Member 4: How did the actors work on their accents? Is there a specific accent that they're going for? How do they come up with it?

TS: Do you want to talk about that, Lee?

LSE: Sure. Sam cast a Scottish actor playing a Brit and American actors playing Brits and then an Irish actor, Ronan, is playing an English actor who then has to play a Scottish character. There's a lot of fun accent work going on in the play. There's an amazing dialect coach on the play and she works with the actors. They all came in with the ability to do the accent. I don't feel like I could speak to the specifics, but there are different ways in which an actor can take on a British accent that will indicate different things about their class, where they were educated, etc. The actors make their own creative choices approaching the accent and work with the coach.

TS: Who is the dialect coach on this show?

LSE: Her name is Kate Wilson and she's extraordinary.

TS: And when the actors aren't rehearsing their particular scenes, they're working with Kate in a one-on-one. Correct?

LSE: Yes.

TS: So usually, when a play involves accents, Roundabout will hire a dialect coach and the actors have the opportunity to work with them directly. They'll get notes from the dialect coach during performances, so they're all inhabiting the same world.

Can we take this opportunity to thank Lee and Kaye for joining us today? And we thank you for coming to the Roundabout. Our next lecture is for Indian Ink, which will be on November 15th. Our guest will be Romola Garai. We hope to see you then.