



Kyle Leibovitch (left)
and Dylan Gutridge
in *Rock N Roll*

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All Tomorrow's Parties

UO's *Rock N Roll* channels Czech Velvet Revolution

"I'm down to one belief," huffs Max, the stubbornly unsentimental hard-line Marxist in Tom Stoppard's *Rock N Roll*, currently at the Hope Theatre under the direction of UO theater veteran Joseph Gilg. "Between theory and practice there's a decent fit," Max goes on. "We just have to be better." Being better, being right, wrong, confused, surveilled, enraged, engaged, imprisoned, impassioned — following the arc of Czechoslovakia's political turmoil from the "Prague Spring" renaissance in 1968 to Vaclav Havel's peaceful "Velvet Revolution" against the communist regime, Stoppard's play goes to great lengths to make the political personal, and vice versa. It's a delicate balancing act. Stoppard, with his fine grasp of Eastern Bloc politics and a subtle touch for displaying the depths and complexities of character, is able to create a drama that is both politically charged and

emotionally moving, without falling into bombast on one side or bathos on the other.

University Theatre's production keeps pace with the rapid clip of events *Rock N Roll* depicts, and it handles the play's difficult subtleties with uncommon charm and spunk. As the story jumps forward in time, ticking off the years, it also moves back and forth between Cambridge and Prague. This shutter-click technique presents the audience with short but powerful domestic scenes loaded with the colliding tensions of individualism versus ideology. The tectonic shift of Czech society during these years is personified in the play's two main characters: Max (Russell Dyball), the browbeating Cambridge ideologue who refuses to admit the youthful cultural revolution taking place before his eyes, and the younger Jan (Dylan Gutridge), a visiting Czech student obsessed with the artistic and personal

freedoms represented by bands like the Rolling Stones, the Velvet Underground and Pink Floyd (the production, by the way, is full of great music).

"It's not the music, man; it's the oxygen," Jan says at one point, providing the antithesis to Max's hard-core materialist harangues about the primacy of socialism over the lone individual. Stoppard is adept at capturing the struggle between realpolitik and Marxism, between lofty theory and gritty practice, and the way these battles play out with messy ambivalence and hurt feelings in the day-to-day lives of thinking, feeling people.

Director Gilg and his cast do a superb job of giving the play — which in the wrong hands could be annoying and tendentious — a real, live beating heart, pumping with spirit and courage. Both Gutridge and Dyball are excellent, as are Emilie Martz (in the dual roles of Eleanor/Esme, Max's

wife and daughter, respectively), Maggie May Stabile as Lenka, and Kyle Leibovitch as Jan's politicized friend Ferdinand.

In fact, there is scarcely a misstep in University Theatre's sharp adaptation of *Rock N Roll*. George Orwell argued that all art is propaganda, but there are yet those works (like *1984*, for instance) that make that extra reach into the realm of political fable — often at the expense of artistic grace and subtlety. This certainly isn't the case with *Rock N Roll*, which anchors its momentous politics in the loves and losses of a small clutch of tight-knit characters. And this entertaining and intelligent production shows a genuine understanding of the Velvet Revolution, with its human foibles and triumphs on scales at once small and enormous. **EW**

Rock N Roll plays 8 pm Thursday through Saturday, Jan. 29 & Feb. 4-5, with a matinee 2 pm Sunday, Jan. 30, at the UO's Hope Theatre. \$7-\$14; tickets at www.tickets.oregon.edu or 346-4363.

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