

Theatre Review: 'The Last Match' at 1st Stage Theater

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By Anne Valentino

June 24, 2023



Ethan Miller and Drew Kopas in "The Last Match" by Anna Ziegler, directed by Alex Levy. Photo by Teresa Castracane.

Anna Ziegler's 2015 play, "The Last Match," on its surface is the depiction of an intense tennis match between two rivals, the old guard and the new, and two very different approaches to the game. Yet, it is also so much more. 1st Stage's production helps underscore the "so much more" aspect of this play with highly effective and ingenious staging, a set that quite vibrantly divides the opponents, and a cast of actors who understand that their job is not just to bring Ziegler's words to life but also to transform the game of tennis into a complex and entertaining metaphor for life itself.

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Tim Porter (Drew Kopas)—let’s call him an amalgam of McEnroe, Agassi, and Ashe, in other words among the all-time winningest male tennis champs in the country—squares off against up-and-comer Sergei Sergeev (Ethan Miller). The brash, young Russian is poised to become a tennis sensation in his own right. Getting to compete against Tim Porter on the court during the US Open Semifinals is literally his dream come true. But as is demonstrated by the men’s memories as conveyed through flashbacks, dreams can on occasion be very fickle things that we perhaps place too much faith in sometimes.

For Tim, an aging star with a bad back, the question is where exactly does his dream end? Has he really even achieved his dream? And does that dream have anything to do with tennis? As we discover, he and his wife Mallory (Lynette Rathnam), a one-time tennis pro herself, have struggled to have a child. A number of miscarriages—one tragically late in the pregnancy—have them questioning their ability to continue to even try. For Sergei, it is the absence of his parents that is most keenly felt. Even with Galina (Fabiolla da Silva), his determined fiancée by his side, he still struggles with confidence, his investment in the game, and faithfulness.

In her plays, Ziegler isn’t afraid to take large subjects, such as the power of dreams for example, and strip them down to their small little “human” parts. Meaning, in this case, behind every larger-than-life tennis star there may be a sad, disillusioned wife. Behind every “next big thing,” there could be a man with some anger issues stemming from an unfulfilled childhood. Life isn’t necessarily as large or as complex as we often make it out to be, at least as viewed through Ziegler’s theatrical lens.

The four actors here complement each other incredibly well. Their back and forth (and remember this is a tennis match so there is *a lot* of back and forth) is superbly paced and brings the audience along like a happily volleyed tennis ball. Miller as Sergei seems to be the electric center who rallies the troops and sets the scenic tones with his bursts of anger, unbridled joy, and boyish disbelief that he actually is where he is. We believe him and we believe in him. Miller’s accent makes him all the more endearing as it is quite convincing. Kudos to dialect coach Adrienne Nelson.

Where Kopas excels is in the quieter moments—the aging star giving up the ghost of his “superhero-like” alter ego as he realizes some hard truths about life, love, and loss. Kopas emerges as a quiet force of emotion and vulnerability during these kinds of moments. The success of this production can only come if the director understands how to move the players around; how to use the symbolism of the court to their advantage; and how to perfectly juxtapose athleticism with emotionality. Director Alex Levy does these things to perfect pitch in this production. His handle on the script is evident. His willingness to take a

few, risky chances with stairs and staging makes this show physical, visual, and ever-so engrossing. There are key moments during which Levy leans heavily on theatricality—and it works.

Set design, as you can imagine, is a huge factor in this production. To create the authentic feel of a tennis match while allowing for spaces in which “life” can unfold is no easy feat, and yet Jessica Alexandra Cancino completely transforms the space. Along with the help of Kenny Neal’s sound design and Alberto Segarra’s lighting, you do feel as though you’re at the US Open rooting these two guys on. 1st Stage certainly has a hit on their hands with this one. The play covers so many facets of the human experience, and the cast and production team behind it are in perfect sync as they bring us an inside glimpse of those lives lived on the court and off.

Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission.

“The Last Match” runs through July 2, 2023 at 1st Stage Theater, 524 Spring Hill Road, Tysons, VA 22102. For more information and tickets, call the 1st Stage box office at 703-854-1856 or go [online](#). Masks are optional.