

It's no act - this married duo really in love

Louise Rafkin, Special to The Chronicle

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It's been such a harrowing month for this couple that the wife thought she was going insane. While her outwardly devoted but privately abusive husband doted on her, she wondered ... was he really trying to drive her crazy? And where were the rubies? And who was the murderer? Her husband?

Yes, but don't worry. This is the arc of "Gaslight," the play these two Equity Actors recently closed at Antioch's Hapgood Theatre. Alexandra Matthew, 38, and Bill Elsmann, 33, played the leads in this suspenseful psychological thriller first made famous by Charles Boyer and Ingrid Bergman in a 1944 film. Reviewers cited Elsmann as "masterfully creepy," "devilishly handsome" and "talented," and noted the pair's "natural chemistry."

That makes sense. These two have been playing together on and off stage since 2007, having now acted together in six plays since their introduction at a party. Bill was visiting from New Jersey for the summer, appearing in a play with the Marin Shakespeare Company. When he caught sight of Alexandra, he couldn't believe she was traveling solo. He secured a number from the "attractive" and "compelling" actress, and within a week, they hooked up for some Bay Area sightseeing.

"It seemed harmless," says Alexandra, who, having recently been through a breakup, wasn't on the lookout for anyone new. "I figured after the run, Bill would head home to New Jersey and that would be that."

But everything flowed. Soon the two were headed east to bring Bill's car back west. They started to play the "what-if" game: What if they performed together? The cross-country drive, with stops at national parks, proved fantastic.

"Together, we could see an open road ahead," says Bill, who soon settled into Alexandra's Bay Area apartment. "I simply followed my heart." By the following summer, they were both onstage at Marin Shakes.

It was around the time of their anniversary that they slipped in a vacation to Utah. High on a mountain peak, after a two-hour hike, Bill pulled out a ring. A handful of other accomplished hikers were treated to the sight of the tall actor, on one knee, asking for a forever commitment. As if on cue, the group of

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onlookers applauded. Bill had previously obtained permission from Alexandra's parents, an opera singer and a conductor. The two married last October.

Now they have a few weeks free before they're booked solid through the summer. Both will appear in three productions with Marin Shakespeare, beginning with "Travesties." The commute from their hilltop San Rafael apartment to the theater is an easy 10 minutes. Because their work is so entwined, they're able to work "overtime" on their parts outside of formal rehearsals. And both have dreams for future productions.

" 'The Crucible?' " Bill suggests. Alexandra nods and suggests "Measure for Measure." As other plays are tossed out, it seems the list might be endless.

The marriage helps the acting, but does the acting help the marriage?

Alexandra: "We're side by side, both pursuing our dreams; there's no competition, and we're ruthlessly honest."

Bill: "We're able to talk constructively about things we both notice."

Louise Rafkin has contributed to the New York Times and NPR's "All Things Considered." Couple suggestions? Send a story to onthecouch@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/05/30/LVN61DAB2I.DTL>

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