

Writer's Theatre THE LETTERS Is a Searing, Suspenseful Period Piece
Posted on 01 December 2012 by Michael Roberts

REVIEWED BY: MELODY UDELL

After being seated in the Writer's Theatre Books on Vernon location — a tiny stage nestled into the back of a quaint North Shore bookstore — the set for John W. Lowell's *The Letters* seems unassuming enough. But the minute Kate Fry enters the stage, it's clear that what was just a humdrum office is now her superior's intimidating work space, replete with looming portraits of Lenin and Stalin and a choking air of paranoia.

It's 1930s Russia, and Fry plays Anna, a mild-mannered, hard-working editor in the cog of government bureaucracy. It's her job to sanitize personal documents that could embarrass the state — her most recent project involved cleaning up nearly pornographic letters of a famous Russian composer. But it's the Soviet era in a country still entrenched in revolutionary upheaval — even your own neighbor would turn you in for the most innocuous political statement. Tensions and suspicions run high, and the truth is obscured from everyone.

Anna has been called to the office of her Director (played with the perfect amount of smarm by Mark L. Montgomery) for an undisclosed meeting. She's given a clumsy interview of sorts and eventually offered an unexpected promotion. But as more is revealed of her colleagues and the underlying reasons behind the job offer, Anna and the Director tread cautiously, knowing fully well that each question might be a trap, each response an indictment. Bit by bit, the two feed each other misinformation and dance around outright accusations. Even in Fry's most subtle expressions, she deftly portrays a character struggling to maintain composure and protect her job, her colleagues and even her life. Her initially meek character transforms into a fully engrossing portrait of an eyes-to-the-ground, obedient civil servant who, just like everyone else, has something to hide. Montgomery brings a sinister, bullying charm to the Director, keeping the audience guessing his true motives — is he cautiously guarding the truth from Anna, or is he truly ignorant of it? Director Kimberly Senior keeps the suspense high during every intimate minute of this evocative 70-minute show. With each carefully calculated line, it's not hard to draw shrewd parallels to today's age of indiscretion and misinformation. The audience is a fly on the wall in the same interrogating office that Anna and the Director are trapped in — the only difference is that we enjoy every thrilling minute of it.