

METROWEEKLY



RUSSIAN LEADERS WOULD prefer you knew nothing, or at least very little, about homosexuality among its people — especially that of its most famous composer, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

That's as true today as it was nearly a century ago, when the Soviets tried to censor the sexually frank letters Tchaikovsky wrote to his male lover. That reality serves as the context for John W. Lowell's *The Letters* (★★★★★), a potent two-hander between a Soviet-appointed company man (Michael Russotto) and a female underling who values the arts and artistic freedom (Susan Lynskey). The play, now at MetroStage, doesn't explicitly focus on Tchaikovsky — it doesn't even once mention the composer by name. And that's not just because it's making a broader point: that the government, any government, should not have this much power and control over its people.

Lowell is simply using Tchaikovsky's letters as a jumping-off point for two skilled actors to play a detective game of cat-and-mouse. The Director thinks he's above the law and infallible, and has sets a trap in which to ensnare Anna, in an attempt to get her to reveal the whereabouts of a copy of the titular letters illegally made by one of her colleagues. Unbeknownst to Anna, the Director knows this colleague is her lover. He knows a lot about her — too much — and assumes to know everything else. But Anna proves to be a better sparring partner than he bargained for during his relentless interrogation.

Lowell's drama is captivating and skillfully written, packing a punch in just 75 minutes. That's especially so in the masterful hands of Russotto and Lynksey under the taut, intimate direction of John Vreeke. The result is a theatergoer's reward: the kind of sharply realized, powerfully intense stage show that you just can't get anywhere but live theater. And even there, you don't find it very often.

The Letters runs to June 14 at MetroStage, 1201 North Royal St., Alexandria. Tickets are \$50 to \$55. Call 703-548-9044 or visit metrostage.org.