

The Letters: They're The Ball In This Tense Tennis Match

From the moment that actor Lee Stark looks back apprehensively as the door into the Ivy Tech John Waldron Arts Center's Rose Firebay closes behind her tensions begin to build in John Lowell's drama *The Letters*. After what seems a long fidgety wait, her Director, Mike Price arrives and an hour of increasingly complex parries and thrusts begins between the two.

Stark plays Anna, an editor in Stalin's bureaucracy of 1931. Her current project is to expunge any suggestions of aberrant sexual behavior in letters from a famous Russian composer. As the Director describes it she is to filter the filth from items that might bring shame to the memory, the family and the state. Their complicated meeting is both an offer of promotion and an interrogation. It seems the perhaps copies of the damaging original letters are suspected to have been removed from the bureau and first Anna and then the Director's own careers and even lives may be at stake.

In Cardinal Artistic Director Randy White's setting of *The Letters* the Rose Firebay is arranged in "tennis court seating" with half the audience on each side. You see the players but are also frequently conscious of the reality of the audience. This play lends itself to tennis metaphors. At first the Director is clearly in charge, with a commanding but exploratory game. Anna is a bit baffled and her tentative responses tend to be basic forehands from mid court. As the game goes on the Director begins to exploit a power serve and Anna is driven back to the base line for the volleys. From time to time each tries an experimental lob. It's quite a give and take.

The world that Anna and the Director inhabit in *The Letters* is a barren place. She was interested in the truth of literature and now does the most menial of editing job. He was a cavalry officer with a horse, a saber and a pistol and now finds himself with a desk, an intercom and a telephone. Kindness is a weakness. Friendship is a danger. Loyalty is always suspect and Truth itself can be an embarrassment.

As often happens in tennis...and even in theatre...there's a bit of middle game when neither player seems dominant. The action and the audience's attention flags a bit, but then as *The Letters* continues the tension builds again as new possibilities, a couple of surprising shots and some aggressive net play brings things back towards a dramatic finish.

The Cardinal Stage Company's production of John Lowell's *The Letters* with Lee Stark and Mike Price continues in the Rose Firebay of the Ivy Tech John Waldron Arts Center through May 18.

At the theatre for you, I'm George Walker