

Much is revealed in compelling ‘Letters’ at Writers’ Theatre

By Hedy Weiss Theater Critic/hweiss@suntimes.com November 29, 2012 5:08PM



Kate Fry and Mark L. Montgomery star in “The Letters” at Writers’ Theatre in Glencoe.

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In his riveting, airtight, two-person drama, “The Letters,” playwright John W. Lowell captures the insidious mix of manipulation, terror and hypocrisy that is at the root of all totalitarian regimes.

Lowell’s scorching 75-minute exercise lays bare the psychological gamesmanship at work in a 1930s Soviet era office as the director of a state archive engages in a pernicious “interview” with a well-established employee who works as an editor. As it unfolds, the play simultaneously sends a chill down the spine, and raises the hackles on one’s neck.

This dramatic stranglehold of an encounter, now being played out in a mesmerizing production on the intimate bookstore stage of Glencoe’s Writers’ Theatre, features Mark L. Montgomery (as The Director), and Kate Fry (as Anna) in incendiary performances in which every twitch of the lip and blink of the eye have significance, every seemingly innocuous question can serve as a trap, and every carefully worded response can be twisted into an indictment. Here is a Cold War fueled by that most heated of emotions — absolute fear. And the more polite the tone of the conversation, the more deadly it begins to feel.

‘THE LETTERS’

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

When: Through March 3, 2013

Where: Writers Theatre at Books on Vernon, 664 Vernon Ave., Glencoe

Tickets: \$35-\$70

**Info: (847) 242-6000;
www.writerstheatre.org**

Initially it all seems like a cat-and-mouse routine with subtle sexual undertones in which the male boss is teasingly dangling a job promotion in front of a serious, wholly qualified female employee. It soon becomes clear that Anna and her skilled colleagues — one older and one younger man — have been working on a difficult project, trying to clean up the “pornographic” diary of a famous composer whose writings, as The Director suggests, would reflect badly on both the artist and the state should they appear unexpurgated.

Of course things are more complicated than that. Apparently someone has made a personal copy of the diary. The Director feels threatened by this breach, and has launched an investigation that permeates the most personal corners of many people’s lives.

The two actors, under the sharp direction of Kimberly Senior, generate just the right complicated chemistry. Montgomery brings a sly, slick chill to every question and insinuation, giving us the portrait of a man who instills fear yet also is forever in a cold sweat. And Fry, with her tailored suit and prim haircut, her palpable intelligence and painfully suppressed emotions, is a marvel as she suggest the full magnitude of her hidden inner life.

Jack Magaw’s set also is a neat dialectic — with the audience seated on either side of the tiny stage, and the piercing gaze from portraits of Lenin and Stalin helping to maintain the tension.
