

**GO THE LETTERS** in John W. Lowell's new play refer to the explicitly lascivious correspondence of a musician in Soviet Russia, which The Director (Norman Shaw) of a Ministry of Information is trying to locate. It takes a short while for us to realize this in John W. Lowell's two-character drama, because at the outset, it appears that the Director has called in his subordinate, Anna (Julie Fletcher) for a promotion, which - knowing the corpse-strewn wasteland of the Soviet bureaucracy - she's very reluctant to accept. She'd rather keep her head low. But The Director will hear none of that ("We're not interested in what you want"), and soon the widowed Anna finds herself entrapped by defending a colleague/lover who's implicated in a breach of security by the gossip of an alcoholic bureaucrat whose dubious words The Director now takes as gospel - or he pretends to. Lowell's cat-and-mouse game of paranoia and entrapment is old stuff, and, under Anne McNaughton's staging, it unfolds at a pace a little too measured for a new play in 2009, even as Anna transforms nicely from servility to defiance. The world of the play is rendered with such verisimilitude, with Dean Cameron's costumes, and his set that features none-too subtle portraits of Lenin and Stalin gazing down on the action, that one is inclined to heave a sigh or relief that we're not in Soviet Russia, though I very much doubt this is Lowell's point. There are two small keys to the lockbox of this play's meaning: One is The Director's insistence that the alcoholic witness' testimony is reliable, despite the appalling lack of corroborating evidence. This is the embodiment of the nastiest aspect of despotism: an "investigation" fueled by a foregone conclusion, which in the recent past has been every bit as American as it was Soviet. The other key is the power of accusation embedded in gossip - in the accusation rather than the investigation of it lies the truth. These are eternal, universal verities that lead directly to the horrors of tyranny. The quality, the detail and the nuance of both performances is among this production's strengths. Both roles are filled with torrents of language that's not so easy to render plausibly, and yet both Shaw and Fletcher accomplish just that. NewPlace Studio Theatre, 10950 Peach Grove Street, North Hollywood; Thurs.- Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m.; through April 19. (Steven Leigh Morris)

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