

HERALD-TIMES THEATER REVIEW: 'THE LETTERS'

Interrogation in play raises many contemporary issues

Monday, May 5, 2014. By Doris Lynch H-T Reviewer

Friday night at the Ivy Tech John Waldron Rose Firebay, Lee Stark gave a complex, riveting performance as an employee of a ministry being interrogated in 1931 in Stalinist Russia in "The Letters." Directed by Randy White, a decided air of surveillance, betrayal and not knowing whom to trust hangs over this two-character play. It captures the uncertainty of life under totalitarianism when a single phrase or hastily spoken response could send you to the Gulag or even death.

A lone woman, Anna (Lee Stark), enters an early 20th century office, obviously ill at ease. White allows her restlessness and anxiety, her inability to relax to prefigure the tension ahead. Anna's clear eyes notice every item: the six cabinets brimming with files, a crystal water pitcher, an empty rolling chair that belongs to the Director of the Ministry. After the Director enters, the audience notices right away his mock friendliness and the way he nearly oozes with power. While the Director pretends they are engaged in an everyday ordinary chat, it's obvious from Anna's demeanor that far more is at stake.

Before long the Director promotes Anna to a job with duties unknown that she neither wants nor can refuse. Thus proceeds this focused chess game of a play. Three characters become linchpins in the dialogue although they never appear on stage. These include the former Director Lukovsky, who mysteriously disappeared, and Anna's two colleagues, one of whom is her lover. He has not appeared at work that day because he is being interrogated elsewhere. Or has he already failed the questioning?

The air of menace increases as the Director's harassing questions focus on Anna's private life and relationships. Although the questions are invasive and at times terrifying, she stares calmly, visually assaying the cruelty of this man. The real work of the Ministry is never mentioned although Anna and her colleagues' latest project involves the editing of letters of a famous musician. The Director describes these as racy, but Anna, a woman who has spent her life finding the exact word, calls them pornographic.

What a delicate, life-threatening art conversation is under a dictatorship. Both Anna and the Director engage in clever repartee that at times is humorous, but always reveals undercurrents of danger.

In a wonderful performance, Stark emits no false notes. Often, her face becomes a conduit for her feelings. Anna only cracks once during the interrogation — emotion, that untrustworthy response, suddenly invades her voice when the Director reports the results of another investigation. Seamlessly, she evokes the anger of a woman who recognizes that his probing questions put her career on the line, and that her life depends on the absolutely perfect response whether it is based upon truth or lies.

Once or twice, Price made the Director's anger appear too bombastic to be authentic, and once, lowering his voice to a near whisper, several words of dialogue were lost, but on the whole the actors performed their verbal sparring match excellently.

Emily Holmead's lighting summoned up a room where the light was obtrusive and probing.

Ellen MacKay's costumes with their natural fabrics fit the era they represented. They included a sweater, which Anna used to protect herself and hide her sexuality.

The play raises many contemporary issues: what kind of government spies on its citizens, why would an employer lay claim to his employees' private lives, and why do some leaders take such exuberant pleasure in being cruel to those they control? In the character of Anna, we see a wry and intelligent combatant, but what would happen if the interrogation were to happen at night or if the Director's superiors demanded an increase in the ante?

For a night of smart, well-acted theater, don't miss this show.