

THE LETTERS REALLY DELIVERS AT THE NEWPLACE THEATRE IN NOHO

By Mike Buzzelli 03/16/2009

When Anna Borisovna (Julia Fletcher), editor and archivist for the Soviet Ministry of Information, is summoned to the office of the Director (Norman Snow), an epic battle of wits begins in John W. Lowell's thought-provoking two hander, *The Letters*.

In 1931, Russia's Ministry of Information itself is a punch line. Anna's job is to redact documents that compromise the ideals of the Soviet society.

She is summoned to the office of the Director on the pretense that she is to be promoted.

The two of them discuss her latest project. She and her co-workers are poring over the personal effects of a great Soviet composer, a hero of the people. Unfortunately, the composer's personal letters are sexually explicit and detail his 'perverse' nature (Anna and the Director dance around the subject of perversion, but the name of the composer and the nature of his sexual proclivities are never spoken). She and her comrades must redact large passages of text. She elucidates, "Director, hardly a diary entry was noted, hardly a personal letter written where there were not fully limned accounts of the man's sexual exploits. In some cases it's been impossible to leave more than the salutation and the signature."



It is surmised that if the content of the letters were revealed to the public, it would mar the Communist ideals and damage the composer's reputation. Of course, all hell breaks loose, when the aforementioned letters go missing. It is suspected that the letters have been smuggled out of the government office.

Anna's colleague, Pavel Alexandrovich accuses another office worker, Josef Mikhailovich, of absconding with the letters. Mikhailovich's apartment is searched and he is arrested. Anna's interview becomes an interrogation. Not only is her promotion in jeopardy, her life may be as well.

The Director suspects that Anna knows more about the disappearance of the documents, and Anna's secrets begin to bubble to the surface.

The Director perceives himself as loyal to the government and not as a villain, but pursues his version of justice with Machiavellian glee; he believes the ends justify the means (Subtextual commentary about the parallel to Pre-Glasnost Russia and the Bush years notwithstanding).

Anne McNaughton oversees this suspenseful political potboiler (There was a small problem with blocking; in maneuvering the two performers around the tiny space, the actor's faces aren't visible during key dramatic moments). One note about the performance space: Anna lights up a cigarette or two and the venue is not properly ventilated for anyone allergic or annoyed by the smoke.

Lowell's script is witty and crisp. Fletcher gives a masterful performance. She is the very model of humble editor stuck in a perfunctory role. Snow stumbled a few lines on opening night, but he is a fine actor with enormous talent. His character seethes with inner rage, a "simple soldier in charge of intellectuals."

Dean Cameron's set is perfectly suited to reflect a dreary Communist government office, complete with a Communist flag and stately photographs of Stalin and Lenin.



The Letters really delivers.
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