

A CurtainUp Los Angeles Review

The Letters

By [Laura Hitchcock](#)

I don't revel in games of the mind; those are the decadent recreations of intellectuals.— The Director

This historical cat-and-mouse game was partially inspired by the Soviets' attempts to sanitize the papers of their famous men, particularly the composer Tchaikovsky. Playwright John W. Lowell sets his play in pre-glasnost Russia, 1931, but he confides another inspiration was the trial of President Bill Clinton. Infuriated by the government's incursion into private lives, he dipped his pen in vitriol and dashed off this 80-minute duel, having its world premiere at the Andak Stage Company, co-founded by actor/director Dakin Matthews and his wife, the director Anne McNaughton.



Julia Fletcher and Norman Snow
(Photo: John Demita)

Anna (Julia Fletcher) opens the show with intense nervousness, waiting in The Director's office. She tries to smoke but has no matches. The lighter on The Director's desk is dysfunctional. The Director himself (Norman Snow) bursts through the door and attempts to put Anna at ease.

At first, all seems to go well. The Director sympathizes with her widowhood and offers the astounded Anna a promotion. But beneath the bluff heartiness, we hear hints of hostility and sense a dark miasma of something else at play when The Director calls himself a simple soldier, not the intellectual equal of his employees in the ministry. He reveals that Anna's young colleague, Iosif, has been arrested for copying the homosexual love letters of a late composer and smuggling them out of the building. Iosif was accused by their third colleague, Pavel, but, even under torture insisted the letters are in his desk. A search has not turned them up in the office or in Iosif or Anna's apartments. Oh, yes, The Director has had them followed and has a dossier recording their love affair. Anna gradually realizes the nature of the game being played and, as she does, she grows in strength as we come to the end of this tour de force.

Fletcher's beautiful voice has a soft quality that is all the more effective as Anna finally reveals her quick and steely intelligence. Snow brings a bravura charm to the lengthy monologues of the obtuse Director with an inferiority complex. We get to see his brutal side and the hidebound conformity of a party man.

The Andak's usual excellent production values include Dean Cameron's drab office set enlivened by a Persian rug that could have been looted from some hapless aristocrat. Peter Strauss's lighting design implies a world that is lit by the pre-glasnost equivalent of 40-watt bulbs.

Anne McNaughton helms the production with an astute flair for pacing and a realistic sense of the emotional shadings in Lowell's piece. Her blocking on the Andak's tiny set miraculously keeps the action fluid and exciting simply by moving the actors from chair to sofa or back and forth across that rug.

"Truth doesn't matter here," Anna tells The Director in the end. "But success? Now that's the alpha and omega of our lives." It has a dolefully contemporary ring.

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