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In the office of The Director, let the dance begin

THEATER REVIEW: "The Letters" at Writers' Theatre at Books on Vernon in Glencoe ★★☆☆½

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Theater critic

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Great actors — and Chicago's Kate Fry, to my mind, can compete with the Hollywood best of 'em — are able to show you the gamut of human emotions without ever saying a word. That's pretty much what is happening behind Books on Vernon, where Kimberly Senior, a rising Chicago director, is staging a rather smart and sexy thriller set in Soviet Russia.

Playwright John W. Lowell's "The Letters," a little chamber piece receiving its first Chicago-area production, is not exactly "War and Peace." But this taut two-character play certainly holds one's attention for 80 minutes, partly due to Fry's beguiling performance and partly by keeping you guessing as where it will slither next.

At the start of the action, we meet Anna (Fry), some kind of editorial apparatchik within some unspecified Soviet bureaucracy, whose job seems to be censoring the correspondence of others. Anna has been called into the office of her boss, The Director (Mark L. Montgomery). It's not clear why. Perhaps The Director is offering her a promotion. Perhaps he is abusing his position of authority to make a sexual pass in this young widow's direction. Perhaps this is a political prosecution. Perhaps he is just looking for information, or a confidante, or a mother confessor, or a lover, or a victim.

The trick of this very engrossing piece — an ideal selection for this space and these actors — is that Anna knows nothing more about why she is in this room than do we, and thus we experience both her unease and her need to find out what's going on without saying the wrong thing simultaneously. Fry's intensely cautious character has very little to say — she is smart enough to know that actually talking in these situations mostly just digs yourself a deeper hole — but as her character suffers through the agonizing series of revelations coming her way, Fry's face registers everything from ignorance to fear, pride to unease, defiance to raw terror.

Her character is a buttoned-down good servant of the state (or so it seems). Demurely costumed by Rachel



Anne Healy, Fry not only shows us the grays of her woman's repression, but she deftly hints that there might just be some blood-red passion lurking far, far beneath. In other words, she paints one heck of a complex human canvas in almost no time. It is very difficult to take your eyes off her face for a moment.

Nonetheless, you'll spend also plenty of time looking at Montgomery, whose richly wrought and deftly ambivalent mystery-man is the yang to Anna's yin. How cruel is this fellow? How competent? How clever? How kind? All of these questions swirl in your mind as the plot of "The Letters" (and any more information would impede your enjoyment) twists in deliciously serpentine fashion.

Senior has created a small, subtext-dominated world that feels entirely believable — and she's shrewd enough a director to know how to harness the life-and-death stakes of the setting, where loyal workers are well aware that, by making just one wrong move, they could be rendered an Orwellian un-person, even if they seem to be in control in the moment. Yet at the same time, Lowell's play is also a personal, Pinteresque dance of menace that, for full effectiveness, has to be an intimate sexualized encounter as well as an evocation of a style and era.

So it goes here. I was put in mind of one of those workplace moments when you're desperately trying to read between the lines to assess prospects and the motivations of others, although most of us, thank God, are not quite as easily subject to thorough investigation by our superiors as is Anna.

Or so it seems.

When: Through March 3

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

Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes

Tickets: \$35-\$70 at 847-242-6000 or writerstheatre.org

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