

"The Letters" (Writers' Theatre): Superb Intellectual Thriller

By Katy Walsh, December 9, 2012 at 8:06 am

Writers Theatre presents the Midwest premiere of THE LETTERS. It's 1930s Russia. Anna has been summoned by her boss. The morning visit starts out awkwardly business casual. The Director claims that he wants to get to know her. He asks her random but targeted questions. Anna responds with succinct but vague answers. The Director appears congenial. Anna seems frightened. As the inquiries get more personal, both change their composure continually. What is going on? THE LETTERS is a superb intellectual thriller.

Playwright John W. Lowell conjures up a Tom Clancy-style espionage without the car chases. Lowell creates life-threatening subterfuge with a two-person conversation taking place in the boss' office. The ordinary setting makes the multiple quick turn audio action even more extraordinary. Throughout the show, I'm ear glued to their words to puzzle this intrigue together. Under the expert direction of Kimberly Senior, the intensity naturally escalates from uneasy to edgy to explosive. Senior stages the conversation with pacing perfection. The pauses, inflections, silence become just as vital as Lowell's words themselves. And the actors delivering these words are exceptional.

The biggest takeaway from this production is Mark L. Montgomery (Director) and Kate Fry (Anna) are fantastic liars! I'm constantly trying to determine who is the bigger one. Whereas Montgomery is deliciously double-talking diabolical, Fry is controlling, reserved with a hint of pluckiness. Their switch and bait interaction transfixes. Montgomery tauntingly fondles the detonator. Fry gingerly steps around landmines. And then kaboom, kaboom, kaboom... THE LETTERS has a long fuse to a volatile climax. This gripping drama will leave you wanting more.

Running Time: One hour and ten minutes with no intermission

At Books on Vernon, 664 Vernon Avenue, Glencoe

Written by John W. Lowell

Directed by Kimberly Senior