

## Saboteur Guide: "Lettice & Lovage" at St. Ambrose University

Written by Mike Schulz

Monday, 23 February 2009 07:02

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One of the great joys of having attended so many collegiate productions over the past several years has been in watching promising freshman performers grow into confident and inspired senior performers.

And while there were plenty of reasons to be impressed with St. Ambrose University's Friday-night production of *Lettice & Lovage* - the clever and trenchant script by Peter Shaffer, the first-rate comic portrayals, the unexpected makeover of the Allaert Auditorium stage - nothing jazzed me more than getting to see senior Emily Kurash in a complex, meaty role wholly worthy of her talents. She made a lovely freshman debut in the 2005 musical *Urinetown*, and while Kurash has been outstanding numerous times since, her subtle, nuanced, and magnificently funny turn here shows what three-plus years of continued experience, effort, and commitment to one's art can yield. As I saw it, the only way her performance could've been

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more pleasing was if she were also allowed to  
*sing*  
it.

The added perk to Kurash's portrayal, and to those of her co-stars, lied in just how closely we were allowed to view them. The Galvin Fine Arts Center's Allaert Auditorium is a large, inviting space that has provided more than its share of stage miracles, most recently with the hugely-scaled, storybook playground of *Seussical Jr.* Smaller-scaled works, though, can sometimes get lost in the venue, and so it was incredibly smart of director Corinne Johnson to make the compromise she did for Shaffer's intimate, character-driven piece (which closed its run on February 22):

*Lettice & Lovage*

was indeed on the Allaert stage, but we audience members were, too. With risers and chairs surrounding three quarters of the playing area (a set-up that was equally well-employed for Johnson's excellent

*Our Town*

in 2004), we were so near to the actors that it took no time at all to feel uniquely immersed in Shaffer's universe - and it's a wonderful universe to feel immersed in.



This genially loopy and touching comedy concerns Lettice Douffet (Katie McCormack), a former actress and current tour guide for a defiantly unremarkable English manor. As the play opens, Lettice decides to spice up her droning narration - and wake up her bored clientele - with flamboyantly theatrical "improvements" on the dwelling's tiresome history, a choice that doesn't sit well with the home's preservation society, nor its head of personnel, Lotte Schoen (Kurash). Lotte is forced to give Lettice the boot; and as Shaffer's work progresses, these initial adversaries, who would seem to have nothing in common, gradually discover in one another kindred spirits, sharing a love for the fanciful and a loathing for the rudeness and dreariness of modern society.

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*Lettice & Lovage* is an ingratiating and rather beautiful tale of unanticipated friendship, and my only real grievance with Johnson's presentation was that it wasn't quite as funny as the script itself is; Shaffer is so clever about weaving gags into his characters' conversation that many of his most hilarious bits, perhaps understandably, were missed completely. (At one point, Lettice read aloud the letter of recommendation Lotte has composed for her, and while there are at least three laugh-out-loud lines in Shaffer's carefully worded essay, none of them registered.) Yet a *Lettice & Lovage* that nails even 50 percent of its jokes is still doing something wonderfully right, and the deadpan comedy provided by Kurash was as tart and effective as anything offered by its playwright.

With her stoically grim demeanor and deliveries - Lotte's hissing of a vexed "yes" turned the word into an angry, four-syllable rejoinder - Kurash was, in her opening scenes, marvelously implacable; she fashioned a character whose abject humorlessness made her both deeply intimidating and richly enjoyable. As Lotte began to lower her guard, however, the actress exposed the years of defensiveness and hurt built into her steely façade, and Kurash's portrayal grew in dramatic and comedic texture, leading to both earned sentiment and gloriously unexpected laughs. Her most hysterical moment - Lotte's not-unpleasant shock after imbibing a questionable alcoholic concoction - was pure, and purely delightful, vocal slapstick.



Kurash did spectacular work here, and in truth, it took a while for McCormack to match it, mostly because we were never given as firm a grasp of Lettice's character as we were of Lotte's. (Early on, especially, it was difficult to determine whether Lettice was merely an unbridled ham or a good actress purposefully playing a bad one - she rolled her eyes when others fell for her hypochondriacal shtick.) But once she was freed from *Lettice & Lovage's* initial one-woman-show sequences, McCormack's power and comic authority increased considerably, and her fizzy eccentricity became more and more enchanting. By the production's end, she and

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Kurash had developed a sensationally believable and honest rapport, and one greatly enhanced by the audience's close proximity; nothing exposes performance fakery quite like theatre-in-the-round (or, in this show's case,

*almost*

-round), and McCormack's and Kurash's truthfulness here was inspiring.

Given Shaffer's buoyantly enjoyable writing, it was also *endearing*, and while *Lettice & Lovage* provided a tour de force for its leads, St. Ambrose's presentation also offered sterling support via the consistently expert Seth Kaltwasser (riotously fastidious as an understandably confused lawyer), Grace Allen (a hoot as a too-briefly-seen, dim-bulb assistant), and the 10 performers recruited to play Lettice's audience of tourists, all of them firmly in character and fully, though not distractingly, amusing. And a special shout-out absolutely must go to the debuting Carl Bonde, whose appearance elicited a surprised and delighted "

*Aw-w-w*

!" from Friday's crowd, whose improvised vocals were timed with almost frightening perfection, and who - if his name is to be trusted - was more than convincing playing his opposite gender. That's one freakin' talented kitty.

For information on the remainder of St. Ambrose's theatre season, visit [SAU.edu/galvin](http://SAU.edu/galvin) .