

I Loathe You, You're Suspect, Don't Change: "Hate Mail," at the Village Theatre through August 29

Written by Mike Schulz

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They don't touch, they don't come within five feet of each other, and with one notable exception, they don't share a moment of eye contact. But in the Riverbend Theatre Collective's current production of *Hate Mail*, Jeff De Leon and Stephanie Burrough exude such combustible comic spark that you wouldn't necessarily *want* them to interact directly; the Village Theatre might damn well go up in flames.

Written by Bill Corbett and Kira Obolensky (he of television's pop-culture touchstone *Mystery Science Theater 3000*

; she of the surrealist prize-winner

Lobster Alice

), this occasionally romantic comedy is, in design and presentation, the farcical, bitchy flip side to A.R. Gurney's

Love Letters

, featuring two characters sitting at individual tables, reading from their contributions to a lengthy correspondence. That might seem like a restrictive conceit for a two-act, 90-minute stage piece, and it probably

would

be if

Hate Mail

weren't so smartly written, or so bloody funny.

Corbett's and Obolensky's offering, though, is jam-packed with hysterically revealing lines and

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terrifically satisfying comedy: vicious comedy, tender comedy, so-subtle-you-almost-miss-the-comedy comedy. And co-stars/co-directors De Leon and Burrough (a *Reader* employee, we're proud to say) do more than provide a first-rate evening of reader's theatre - they deliver a pair of fearless, deeply felt performances in roles that could easily be played as entertaining yet one-note caricatures. There are plenty of big laughs here, but they're big laughs with *soul*; Riverbend's latest is like *Love Letters* on nitrous oxide.



Opening, as its program states, "a long, long time ago, before Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, and instant messaging," *Hate Mail* begins with a relatively innocuous missive: a carefully worded letter of complaint, written by De Leon's Preston Dennis Jr., asking a New York-based souvenir shop for a refund on his broken snow globe. Burrough's Dahlia Markle, the shop's assistant manager, replies, saying that while she sympathizes, it's store policy to not issue refunds. Then Preston - a somewhat smug Minnesotan trust-fund baby - writes again, demanding his refund in less politic, more sarcastic tones. Then Dahlia - an aspiring photographer struggling with bills - writes back, curtly stressing that there are ... no ... *refunds*. And so it goes, as the duo's increasingly condescending and nasty communications lead to a threatened lawsuit, an article in the *New York Times*, mental collapses, broken spirits, methamphetamines, run-ins with the police, and, it should go without saying, the eventual blossoming of true love. Kinda.

While Corbett and Obolensky write hilarious, biting monologues that fool you, rhythmically, into thinking they're actually *dialogues*, there are a few limitations to *Hate Mail*'s he-said/she-said presentation. The most apparent, of course, is that watching people read isn't the most thrilling of stage sights, and while De Leon and Burrough are obviously quite familiar with their material, the show (by intention) isn't

totally

committed to memory, meaning that the actors' engaging face-front delivery is routinely interrupted by quick - though somewhat unfortunate - scans at the text. (Also, as often happens when a script isn't fully memorized, Friday's opening-night production featured a few mildly distracting stumbles over lines.) And while the positioning of the intermission was a wise one, I think I would've been happier with no intermission at all; the play is already so short, and Preston's and Dahlia's ongoing

tête-à-tête

is so madly enjoyable, that it takes a while for Act II to regain the show's Act I momentum.

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Yet despite the built-in hindrances, *Hate Mail* manages, to a large degree, to be more visually dynamic than you'd expect. Designed by the invaluable Jennifer Kingry, the lighting effects here are timed with finely tuned comic precision - the quick blackouts and slow fades frequently serve as visual punchlines to match the aural ones - and the shifts in focus from one side of the stage to the other (or *not*) oftentimes take you by complete surprise. (It's a two-character piece in which the characters never leave the stage, and from one passage to another, you *still* can't predict where your attention will fall next.) Meanwhile, the presences and performances of De Leon and Burrough - who, in case you were curious, are also an off-stage couple - radiate a multifaceted dynamism all their own.



Beyond his improv work for ComedySportz, De Leon has been absent from local stages for almost a year now, and *Hate Mail* reminds us what we've been missing in the interim; the actor's Preston is a brilliantly snide, pathetic, and hilarious comic creation. Whether attacking Dahlia for her years of dead-end-job servitude (" ... and you're still only an *assistant* manager ... ?"), attempting to woo her with stalker-esque fervor, or losing himself in anti-depressants and the pastoral bliss of a questionable commune, Preston is a delirious original, and De Leon plays him with wildly ingratiating comic style and a series of boldly physical and verbal choices.

His co-star, meanwhile, equals him eccentricity for electrifying eccentricity. Burrough is so skilled and crafty a comedienne that many of her best moments here zip by practically unnoticed, such as when Dahlia casually threatens Preston with, "I *dated* a cop, and she's *very*

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protective of me!" But the performer isn't at all hesitant about going for broke, and delights in Dahlia's manic highs and riotously self-involved lows; we so rarely get to see this sterling dramatic actress throw herself headfirst into goofball comedy that Burrough's portrayal is more than a little revelatory. (Her most popular bits on Friday involved Dahlia's suggestive gag about carpal tunnel syndrome, and her derision of Preston for his "classic Midwestern sense of entitlement.")

For all of its fantastically malicious diatribes, though, the production does offer an unexpectedly potent dose of deserved sentiment, which Riverbend's actors pull off with sincerity and ease, and which *still* succeeds in scoring laughs. (It turns out that a Preston and Dahlia in love are only slightly less prickly than a Preston and Dahlia who can't stand one another.) By the play's end, our characters have progressed to the computer age, yet the show remains a powerfully funny saga of wonderfully mismatched pen pals; *Hate Mail* may take place pre-instant-messaging, but you'll likely LYAO all night long.

For information, call (309)786-1633 or visit RiverbendTheatreCollective.com .