

A Different Type of Theatre: "Love Letters" at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre

Written by Jill Walsh

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Love Letters isn't a typical stage production by the standards of contemporary acting. That's because it's not necessary for performers to act or even memorize A.R. Gurney's script; they just read it. The experience is a bit like listening to a book-on-tape, with the benefit of being able to watch the readers. Some audience members for Playcrafters Barn Theatre's current production – running weekends through January 26 – won't enjoy the lack of stage movement, but those who know what to expect beforehand will appreciate the well-written script.

Though none of Playcrafters' promotional materials say so, *Love Letters* is an example of "readers theatre." In readers theatre, plays are read to an audience from a script and brought to life by the readers' voices, facial expressions, and controlled movements. Although not defined by movement or memorization, it is considered a form of theatre. Arguably, the limiting acting style in readers theatre is more difficult, because the performers are required to convince audiences with only vocal quality and interpretation.

Love Letters is the story of a man and a woman who have been connected since they began corresponding through letters at a young age. Unfolding over a half century, audiences experience the various stages and events of these characters' lives. Melissa Gardner is the wealthy and rebellious artist whose life eventually follows the same tragic path as her alcoholic mother's. Andrew Makepeace Ladd III is a straitlaced lawyer who always strives (as his middle name suggests) to avoid conflicts.

Their relationship begins casually in grade school, and over time evolves into friendship, love, and companionship. Melissa tells Andrew of her struggles with her ex-husband, her frustrations with her artwork, and of her college flings. Andrew discusses his love for writing, his dedication to his family, and his pursuit of a Senate seat. Though we only hear the characters' thoughts and actions as they wrote in letters to each other, the playwright captures their depth and emotion.

This play is effective because the characters' situations are believable and engaging. Humorous at times and heavy at others, there's always an interesting subtext under the written

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words – such as Melissa's jealousy of Andrew's happy life. And like anyone, Gardner and Ladd both hold back and give forth their feelings and thoughts in their own unique way. We easily believe these are real people with real problems and emotions.

The appeal of readers theatre depends of the interpreters' ability to involve the audience emotionally in the ideas of the author. The readers of the performance I saw, real-life couple Susan and Michael McPeters, managed to engage most of the audience with well-enunciated and sometimes-emotional presentations. (The rest of the audience seemed to expect the characters to stand up and move around.) Facial expressions and gestures were subdued, but this was appropriate, given that the characters were reading letters throughout.

Audiences will have opportunities to see other actors portray Gardner and Ladd. Melissa McBain, Andrea Zinga, and Greg Bouljon will also present their interpretive skills on various performance nights.

As far as staging, the couple was seated side-by-side throughout most of the performance, and I'll admit that the lack of movement made it difficult to concentrate at times. On the other hand, the simplicity of most elements, such as the tasteful set and costumes, was a nice change from the sensory overload of most productions.

When seeing *Love Letters*, don't expect to be awed by any actions on stage. The chance to experience readers theatre is an unusual one that requires auditory concentration, but it's a good opportunity to hear a sentimental and humorous love story.

Love Letters will be performed at Playcrafters Barn Theatre on January 17, 18, 24, and 25 at 7:30 p.m., and on January 19 and 26 at 3 p.m. Tickets are \$8. For reservations, call (309)762-0330. The theatre is located at 4950 35th Avenue in Moline.