

'Love Letters' captures push and pull of long distance relationship

Even as he tries explaining why he loves writing letters, Andrew Makepeace Ladd III admits that “it’s a dying art.”

Those words were written by playwright A.R. Gurney nearly 30 years ago; Andy, one of the two characters in Gurney’s “Love Letters,” puts them in a letter written more than 70 years ago. How can a play involving two characters reading from 50-plus years of exchanged letters still resonate, in our post-literate age of instant texts and tweets?

The answer was driven home for me Friday night, as it is every time I see this oft-performed but nevertheless underappreciated play, a onetime finalist for the Pulitzer.

And that’s because the play’s letters ingeniously capture what’s frequently true of people in love: Whether it entails holding a pen to paper or using thumbs to text, their writing simultaneously fosters intimacy and creates distance, bringing them together while also keeping them apart.

Staged by the [Milwaukee Entertainment Group](#) under the direction of Zach Thomas Woods, this latest iteration of “Love Letters” features stage veterans Tom Marks and Gladys Rhodes Chmiel, embodying Wasps Andy and Melissa from their first written exchange as 1937 second-graders through the late 1980s.

Even when these two are children, Andy is the prim and proper one, dutifully obeying his parents while taking the first steps down a straight and narrow path that leads to Yale, Harvard Law School, military service and an eventual career as a U.S. Senator.

It’s Andy more than Melissa who wants to write letters, and Marks helps us see why: They give this pent-up and buttoned-down man a means of expressing on paper all he isn’t getting from his blueprint suburban life and comfortable but passionless marriage.

“I feel like a true lover when I’m writing you,” Andy says in one of his warmest letters to Melissa, the great love of his life. Marks reads these words with deep emotion, conveying through his voice what he won’t show in his poker face or stiff body.

Meanwhile, the more impulsive Melissa is careening through a life with too much booze and too many men, too few options and too little love.

Melissa urges Andy to write letters that truly express all he feels while revealing something of himself; Chmiel’s more emotive Melissa does both – often leaving her exposed and hurt. As Melissa’s mistakes catch up with her, Chmiel chronicles the consequences, giving us a woman who morphs from feisty and flirty to desperate and desolate.

And nostalgic. Both of these actors have been performing for a long time; not surprisingly, they’re at their best following intermission, as their characters grow older and look back on all they might have been, if they’d actually come together instead of living their love through their letters.

“Love Letters” continues through Feb. 25 at the Brumder Mansion, 3046 W. Wisconsin Ave. For tickets, visit

www.brownpapertickets.com/event/2825515. Read more about this production at TapMilwaukee.com.

TAKEAWAYS

Further thoughts on Milwaukee Entertainment Group's production of "Love Letters":

Through the Eyes of a Child: The early phases of Andy and Melissa’s journey, which begins when they’re just seven, is the weakest; it plays cute.

Attempting to convey what it means to be a child, Marks and Chmiel both try a bit too hard, suggesting their own discomfort with the material.

“I’m a Stuff Bastard Sometimes, Aren’t I?”: This line belongs to Andy; the breezy question at the end suggests something cavalier about his

accompanying apology, made after Andy has once again demonstrated what a cold prig he can be. Marks’ version of Andy isn’t so much cold as wary; he

gives us an Andy who gets stuffy when he’s afraid – and who puts up fences around his feelings because he doesn’t know how to control them. That’s why

he writes; it allows him to express what he feels, while doing so at a distance and confining those feelings within the four corners of his letters.

“Help! Lemme Outa Here!”: This line belongs to Melissa; she’s ostensibly speaking about the boarding school she’s in but she’s also talking about the

confined spaces of her conforming WASP world – and about the sometimes equally confining parameters of this duo’s letters. Melissa is constantly

urging Andy to move beyond the boundaries of his letters and viscerally feel; Chmiel conveys a character who similarly refuses to be corralled. Chmiel

occasionally overeggs the pudding, particularly in the first half of the show. But even a slower burn and longer dramatic arc wouldn’t much augment the

emotionally raw and wholly credible Melissa that Chmiel delivers following intermission.

Writing and Reading: Above and beyond its intrinsic merit, “Love Letters” gets performed so often because it’s relatively easy to produce; just a table (or

tables, in this production) and two chairs, behind which actors read lines. And I do mean read: Gurney’s stage directions – vigorously reinforced by

director John Tillinger in both the initial New Haven production and the first two New York productions – make clear that performers are not supposed to

memorize their lines. Reading them instead helps an audience remember that there’s a filter between what a character feels and what that character

conveys (I’m guessing that’s also why Woods has both characters ostentatiously don glasses at the top of the show; it’s as though they’re

putting on protective armor that can shield otherwise naked, overly revealing eyes). Language always lies; writing is unthinkable without repression.

Déjà vu All Over Again: Fifteen years ago this month, I saw a particularly memorable performance of “Love Letters” in the exact same Brumder

Mansion basement theater space that’s being used for the current production. Staged by the much-missed Cornerstone Theatre Company, it

featured Cornerstone co-founders Cotter Smith and Heidi Mueller Smith, who’d married one year earlier. In my theater journal entry at the end of

2002, I included this production as one of the best I’d seen that year. That was a testament to the Smiths. But it’s also testament to the many layers in

Gurney’s play, which isn’t nearly as simple as it initially seems.