

## REVIEWS

# 'Love Letters' cast mails in performance

By CHRISTINE MCBURNEY

A.R. Gurney's "Love Letters" is a play whose stakes are high because its stage directions include "no staging, no music, and not too much rehearsal."

What that leaves is the actor and the text: the barest essentials for what is theater. Under those circumstances, Karamu's intimate, black-box theater is the perfect space for the epistolary relationship between Andrew Makepeace Ladd III and Melissa Gardener. Yet the production, at least with its first-night cast, did not live up dramatically and emotionally to the setting.

Director Caroline Jackson Smith follows Gurney's instructions to the letter from the casting to the stage directions. As in the New York production, "Love Letters" has been cast with different couples who alternate performances. On Sunday, Smith and actor Freddie Cox played Andy and Melissa. Others who will take the stage are actor Dolly Turner and media personalities Leon Bibb, Dee Perry, Wilma Smith and Don Webster.

Smith adds the additional challenge of "taking these 'two old

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## THEATER REVIEW

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"Love Letters" runs through April 26 at Karamu House, 2355 E. 89th St. Written by A.R. Gurney. Directed by Caroline Jackson Smith.

**Andy** - Freddie Cox  
**Melissa** - Caroline Jackson Smith

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WASPs' and seeing them in various American hues," as she says in her program notes. Her multi-racial casting successfully illustrates that, although Gurney's WASPs are famous for covering their emotions, they do not hold a monopoly on suppression. It is a universal heart condition.

As Andy, Cox was dressed in a navy blue suit with navy-and-gold tie and gold wire-framed glasses — every inch a stuffed shirt. As Melissa, Smith also was costumed to convey her "WASPness," but her rebellion was accented by her large, earthy jewelry and the long slit in her skirt.

As Smith's Melissa read her letters, the audience watched her grow from sassy second-grader to a boarding school rebel, artist, wife, mother and, finally, alco-

holic "old broad." Smith's Melissa reacted to Andy's letters, often punctuating them with a facial expression or a change of posture.

Andy, on the other hand, remains on the straight and narrow from grade school to the Navy to the Senate, living life vicariously. But Cox barely lifted his eyes from the script and never reacted to Melissa's funny and provocative letters. In his final condolence letter to Melissa's mother at Melissa's death, Andy's poignancy was deflated because Cox never engaged his viewers.

Although Gurney requires that scripts not be memorized, "Love Letters" is not about merely reading. It is about expressing what is not expressed. With Smith and Cox, the production lacked any subtext about the tension between these two friends who, unknowingly, have been in love all their lives.

Perhaps another of Smith's casts can find the liberating creativity that exists within Gurney's strict guidelines.

*McBurney is a theater artist and educator in Cleveland Heights and the area correspondent for InTheater magazine.*