

STAGE

Dear Jack, Dear Louise is Filled With Letters, Not Much Tension

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Photo by Jeff McMorrough

The problem with playwright Ken Ludwig is that you never know what you're going to get.

Is it silly farce (*Lend Me a Tenor*), stupid farce (*Leading Ladies*), wayward adaptation (*The Three Musketeers*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Treasure Island*), somewhat acceptable (*Crazy for You*), or unwatchable (*Be My Baby*, *Shakespeare in Hollywood*, *An American in Paris*)? He's all over the place.

One of America's most successful playwrights and a two-time Tony Award-winner, his plays are constantly produced the world over. His latest, *Dear Jack, Dear Louise* (2019), is a deeply personal, heartfelt valentine to his parents who had a correspondence courtship from 1941 through 1945 and never met until V-E Day in New York City. I suppose this is basically true, since there are hundreds of letters between them that Ludwig has mined to construct his play. It's so improbable, why bother to make it up?

Jack (Nick Farco) is a young doctor fresh from medical school; Louise (Alexis Santiago) an aspiring actress. Their parents are friends and think this unlikely pairing might be a good match. Write to her, his father cajoles. Jack does, asks for a date, and the play begins.

What we get is an epistolary drama, where both parties write and receive letters. They inhabit their own side of the stage with a mailbox in between. They look at us as they read and write their letters, but never at each other. This device saps any tension right out of the play, no matter how authentic the actors.

Farco and Santiago make a good pair. At first, he's awkward and shy, she's brass and confident. As the years pass, his war experience opens him to buried emotions, while her attempts at Broadway stardom soften her. The big question is whether their relationship will survive the long distance romance amid the devastation of WWII? Well, of course it will, because we know from the outset that Jack and Louise are the author's parents. How else could there be a little Ludwig?

So where's the drama? I guess in the small details of their daily lives. Against his advice, Louise visits Jack's parents in Coatesville, Pennsylvania. Jack's family is huge – 11 aunts – and one of them accidentally knocks Louise out of an upstairs window. True or not, this is classic Ludwig: go for the easy laugh. Meanwhile, Jack is in the hellish throes of D-Day, his medical scrubs blood-drenched from amputations. The dichotomy between Louise's benign hostess duties at the Stage Door Canteen and Jack's traumatic surgeries couldn't be more disparate. At a certain point, we stop caring because we know where this is going. All the angst, all the primal screams (Louise gets two dramatic outbursts) are window dressing.

As usual, the A.D. Players' production is lovingly detailed. In Kirk A. Domer's impressive set design, Louise has a makeup table with marquee lights, a dressing screen plastered with posters of '40s shows, and a handsome cathedral radio; Jack's space has a footlocker and desk with a large airplane wing as backdrop. At the play's start, large panels drop into view: a letter, a ticket from the Booth Theatre, a 3¢ stamp, a cutout of Hedy Lamarr (Jack's favorite star), a Western Union logo, an impressive Empire State Building. Kristina M. Miller's costumes bespeak '40s everyday glamour: pleated blouses, bedroom mules with pompoms, army mufti, seamed stockings. Shawn W. St. John's sound design overlays the action with catchy Big Band numbers and incoming artillery fire.

Director Kevin Dean keeps the action as mobile as he can, though he's hobbled with a static script in which the actors never interact. This improbable love story, never wholly satisfying, becomes more improbable the longer it goes on. Is that a truism about love, or Ken Ludwig's unfailing ability to turn true romance into a dime novel?

Dear Jack, Dear Louise continues through October 31 at 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays; 8 p.m. Fridays; 2:30 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturdays; 2:30 p.m. Sundays. A.D. Players at The George Theater, 5420 Westheimer. Temperature checked at the door. Social distancing in the theater. Masks required. For more information, call 713-526-2721 or visit adplayers.org. \$36.50-\$75.

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