

A genuine -- and very funny -- 'Love Letters' at the Opera House

By MICHAEL WATERSON, Register Correspondent

For a pure theatrical experience of the best kind, you would have to go a long way, probably all the way to New York, to beat what's playing at our own Napa Valley Opera House this weekend. Anyone who wants to see topnotch professional actors performing the work of a topnotch playwright need go no further.

Michael Tucker and Jill Eikenberry, husband and wife, are both veterans of stage, screen and television, perhaps best known for their roles on the long running series "LA Law." Eikenberry has garnered four Emmy nominations and two Golden Globe nominations and won a Golden Globe award. Tucker has received three Emmy- and two Golden Globe nominations. Their film credits and on and off Broadway resumes are lengthy and distinguished.

A.R. Gurney's "Love Letters" is a not- so-simple story simply told. Gurney has the ability to capture what is genuine in middle class American life, the humor and the anxiety, the joy and despair. And he captures it with a deceptive ease.

Written in 1989, "Love Letters" is that rarest of gems, a very funny serious play. It is the story of the lifelong friendship, or rather the incompletely realized love affair disguised as friendship, of Andy and Melissa as told by their correspondence.

Andrew Makepeace Ladd III is a very middle class boy of limited means and even more limited imagination. He follows the path a good boy should follow, the path set down by his father. From boarding school to Yale to the Navy and beyond, he follows it sometimes reluctantly, but always steadily.

Melissa Gardner is free spirit, an artist even in the second-grade, with a wealthy family, a nose for phoniness and the absurd, a series of fathers and an alcoholic mother. Where Andy tows the line, she rebels.

The pair begins writing letters and notes to each other in grade school and continues the habit on and off the rest of their lives. They embody the push-pull dynamic at the heart of the attraction between men and women. Together they live their lives drawn to each other yet pushing each other away in the funny, poignant dance we call romance.

Melissa is sharp and terribly funny. Andy has a sense of humor as well, but he's a bit stuffier with less self-awareness. From early on, Melissa wants to stop writing and start talking, to move beyond the page to the real person. But Andy likes letter writing, the distance and serenity it affords, the platonic ideal it offers.

The play's strength is to make the letters conversational, revealing and very funny. The audience on opening night laughed continuously. Eikenberry and Tucker are masterful with the pauses written into the script when one or the other stops writing for a time, conveying with silences what no words could say. What adds to their considerable professional ability is the almost instinctive awareness of each for the other that only comes with 30 years of real life marriage.

If you like to laugh and like to be moved go see "Love Letters" and appreciate how lucky we are to be able to stroll down the street to see it, and not have to hop a plane.
