

Shakespeare & Company, Lenox, MA

*Dear Jack, Dear Louise*, by Ken Ludwig. Directed by Ariel Bock.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

***“I’m not sure anything is normal anymore.”***

World War II is dominating our regional theaters right now. “East of Berlin” at Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill, NY, “The Happiest Man on Earth” at Barrington Stage Company and “Dear Jack, Dear Louise” at Shakespeare & Company. No three shows could be less alike. The play at Shakespeare & Co. in Lenox is a delicate comedy about the wooing of the playwright’s parents. Louise woos Jack and Jack, eventually, woos Louise. He is a young doctor recently inducted into the army and she is an aspiring singer/dancer/actress trying to find her way into the theater. She is big city Brooklyn and he is small town Pennsylvania. They woo through letters and their wooing is charming. It would be easy to be captivated by either of them. In this production the actors are as charming as their characters so falling in love is a no-brainer.



David Gow, Zoya Martin; Photo: Oskar Ahlstrom

As director, Ariel Bock has given her actors room to move through while they develop their personae. She has allowed the show to have a very natural flow. David Gow’s Jack S. Ludwig, an army Captain stationed in Oregon, is a bit stiff, a trifle reluctant to reveal himself and a man of few words. Zoya Martin’s Louise is his opposite, a loquacious correspondent who holds nothing back. Her dreams, her reactions, her love of dancing, her professional missteps are all a

part of the letters she writes. He shares very little at first and later on he reveals his disdain for dancing. This play honors the opposites attract concept and, indeed, these two opposites did eventually marry and have Ken Ludwig as their child. He has said that the letters are real, that they exist and that this courtship was exactly as he has written it. Ludwig is one of our best comic authors and so one might question that level of reality in this most amusing play. But then, think about it, he is a writer of very funny plays and that humor must have come from somewhere, so why not from his parents.

Gow presents Captain Doctor Ludwig as a straight shooter who is unable to prevaricate. He keeps things simple and real and he tries not to expose himself to any criticism. His efforts to keep himself both aloof yet inviting make him overwhelmingly attractive. Gow plays this challenging dichotomy very well, bringing Jack to the fore easily and inexhaustibly. This very curious country boy is self-protective and open about it. Gow handles all of this perfectly, making Jack the most interesting hero in a romantic comedy I've ever seen. It would seem as though Jacki, this country kid who grew up in the 1930s has never seen a Gary Cooper comedy film; he just naturally is Gary Cooper.

Louise Rabiner, on the other hand, has a life in the outskirts of New York City to bolster her dreams and aspirations. Martin portrays her as a girl with gumption and that feels just right. She attacks everything from her roommate to her letter writing swain with energy and an honest compulsion toward satisfaction. She wants what she wants when she wants it, to quote an old song and ultimately she wants Jack, even after she discovers his one big secret.



David Gow as Jack; Photo: Oskar Ahlstrom

Shakespeare & Company's production is set in their Roman Garden Theatre across the Plaza from their mainstage, the Tina Packer Playhouse, and is played at dusk. In two acts with an intermission it runs just under two hours. The set designer, Patrick Brennan, has kept the show simple with two separate playing areas that help define the characters and their whereabouts. Sound designer Amy Altadonna has kept the show alive with the sounds of war and period music and Lenox-based birds add their trills to the sound patterns that keep the show real. Govane Lohbauer's costumes are perfect for these characters, each of Martin's dresses, coats and hats grounding us in the period of the show. Stage Manager Amelia Heastings does a fine job keeping all this in place and on time.



Zoya Martin as Louise; Photo: Oskar Ahlstrom

Believing in these characters is an easy task thanks to the combination of playwright (who knew them well), actors (who define them perfectly) and director. Bock, herself a wonderful character actress, knows exactly what it takes to make a written word seem natural and instantly evoked. She has clearly coached a naturalness out of her actor's bodies and minds. She has brought this play to life through her fine understanding of who these people were. She has delivered the sort of play that this company can take great pride in having as an opening volley for their season. Go see it!

+ 05/28/2023 +

**Dear Jack, Dear Louise** plays in the Roman Garden Theatre on the site of Shakespeare & Company, 70 Kemble Street,

Lenox, Massachusetts through July 30. For tickets and information call 413- 637-3353 or go on line at [Shakespeare.org](http://Shakespeare.org).