Dear Friends,

After the success of our recent production of Hamlet, we are thrilled to open our first Books On Vernon show this season with John W. Lowell’s taut and gripping play, The Letters. Featuring acclaimed actors Kate Fry and Mark Montgomery, our intimate bookstore space is the ideal way to savor this piece—we hope it will have you on the edge of your seat!

In this issue of The Brief Chronicle, we’ll profile Director Kimberly Senior—an established star in the Chicago theatre scene who will be making her debut at Writers’ with this production. We’ll also provide some context for The Letters by exploring the USSR during the reign of Josef Stalin. Finally, we’ll chat with playwright John W. Lowell about his motivation and inspiration for writing this powerful play, and discover how the themes of a piece set in 1930’s Russia remain relevant in our America today.

We were pleased to see many members of the Writers’ Theatre family at the opening of the Studio Gang Architects exhibit, entitled Building: Inside Studio Gang Architects. If you’ve not had the opportunity to explore the exhibit, we highly encourage you to do so. Along with highlights of the work that has made Studio Gang an internationally acclaimed firm, the exhibit includes insight into the work that Studio Gang has undertaken for Writers’ Theatre, including early conceptual designs and in-process sketches of the proposed new theatre center, which we hope to make a reality in the coming years.

That said, there’s much still in store this season. With the captivating music and dance of Sweet Charity, the irreverent wit of David Ives’ interpretation of the Corneille classic, The Liar, and the lyrical beauty of the new play Yellow Moon, there’s a wealth of theatrical experience still awaiting you this season. We have a limited number of three and four-play packages still available, but we’re very nearly at capacity, so for anyone that has yet to subscribe—now is the time!

As always, we extend our deepest thanks and appreciation for your continued support, your enthusiastic response and your constant engagement with the Theatre and with the art on our stages. None of this would be possible without you!

Yours Sincerely,

Michael and Kate
PROFILE: Director Kimberly Senior

By Bobby Kennedy, Producing and Literary Associate

By her own admission, director Kimberly Senior was so uncertain about her future in Chicago when she first moved here that she didn’t own anything that couldn’t fit into the backseat of her car. “I did not have any furniture until I was 30,” she reveals. “I just had crates and a futon.” In the 17 years since she moved to the Windy City, Senior’s tenacious pursuit of directing projects has made her one of the most prolific theatre artists in the city, helming productions at more than 20 of Chicago’s most celebrated companies. With The Letters, this inspiring director makes her Writers’ Theatre mainstage debut.

Senior grew up in New York and New Jersey, the daughter of highly educated Jewish parents with an intense passion for culture. Senior’s father was a commodities broker who sold and traded pepper in places such as India and Brazil. Her mother was a stay-at-home mom who took her children to many kinds of performing arts: theatre, music and dance. Senior initially took an interest in arts: theatre, music and dance. Her parents advocated for higher education with a more diverse curriculum. She ended up attending Connecticut College, a small private liberal arts college in New London, Connecticut, where she was one of eight theatre majors in her class. The three full-time faculty members in the department taught the courses to their students’ interests, and Senior quickly discovered that hers was directing. “Most of my education was on my feet and through my own reading of theory,” she says. “There was no formal directing course or program. It was more doing than studying."

After graduating in 1995, Senior obtained an internship in the administrative offices of Steppenwolf Theatre Company, even though the Theatre did not have an official internship program at the time. Steppenwolf’s high school acting program was being run by director Curt Columbus and actress Mary Ann Thebus, who became important mentors for Senior. The young director was considering returning to New York for an administrative theatre job but was talked out of it. “Everyone was saying ‘you’re never going to be a director if that’s what you go do.’ And so I stayed.”

In 1997, Senior founded her own theatre company, Collaboraction, in order to start directing but also because she still felt like somewhat of an outsider in Chicago. “I didn’t grow up here or go to college here, and I felt like all the companies in this town were formed by people who had a common knowledge base,” she relates. “What’s exciting to me about making theatre is bringing together people who don’t know each other and who have different ideas about making theatre. That was the genesis of Collaboraction, seeing what would happen if people with disparate backgrounds came together, and creating a place where audiences felt a sense of ownership of the work.”

Senior’s work at Collaboraction soon led to directing jobs at other storefronts in Chicago, including Rivendell Theatre Ensemble, Strawdog Theatre Company and Seanachai Theatre Company. She also started to transition from being a full-time teaching artist at Steppenwolf to putting her main focus on directing, with teaching as a supplement. However, the driven director still felt that she was being hired based more on personal relationships than professional reputation. To reach the next level, Senior identified two companies she wanted to direct for—TimeLine Theatre Company and Next Theatre Company—and started actively campaigning for herself. “I saw every show and stayed after the performance and reached out to the artistic directors and talked to them constantly,” she confides. Within a few years she had directed productions at both companies and was made an Artistic Associate at Next.

Writers’ Theatre was one of the next theatres that Senior set her sights on, having long admired the programming and audience engagement on display in Glencoe. She started inviting Artistic Director Michael Halberstam to see her work around town and continued her dedication to seeing most of the Theatre’s productions. After her friend Stuart Carden joined the staff as the Associate Artistic Director in 2009, the conversation about her directing for Writers’ intensified. Senior directed a developmental workshop of a new education outreach play for Writers’ Theatre in 2011 and then some of the audience enrichment programs surrounding Randall Colburn’s Hesperia in 2012. As season planning progressed for 2012/13, Michael Halberstam shared a few scripts with Senior and she immediately took a strong interest in The Letters—and now the play is the first Books on Vernon offering for the Theatre’s 21st season.

Immediately prior to starting rehearsals at Writers’ Theatre, Senior will have directed her highest profile production yet: the New York debut of Ayad Akthar’s Disgraced at Lincoln Center Theater. Nevertheless, she insists her career—and her furniture—will remain based in Chicago. “All I’ve ever really wanted to do is work and that’s why Chicago has always been so attractive,” she confirms. “That working class aspect of the city has really spoken to me as a director. That’s also my ethic. I just want to do some good work and hopefully some people will want to see it and like it.”

THE LETTERS
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LIFE IN
STALIN’S
RUSSIA

By Bobby Kennedy, Producing and Literary Associate
The Letters, by New York-based playwright John W. Lowell, is not a period piece in the traditional sense of the term. The play, while set in 1931 in an unspecified city in the Soviet Union, is purposefully written to transcend its historical time and locale. Its atmosphere of suspicion and corruption and its examination of the cost of telling the truth reveals as much about our current culture and political climate as it does Soviet era Russia. Some historical context however is helpful to establish the political and social pressures that shape the characters’ lives.

By 1931, the Soviet Union had been under Joseph Stalin’s control for about 7 years. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 had replaced hundreds of years of Tsarist rule with the world’s first socialist government, led by Vladimir Lenin. After Lenin died in 1924, Stalin manipulated his way to sole control of the Soviet Union and instigated his Five Year Plan to transform the country from an agrarian nation into an industrial world power.

Collectivization brought land that had been privately owned by peasants since the emancipation of the serfs under state control. By 1936, 90% of agriculture was collectivized. The new farms suffered a drastic loss in productivity which led to widespread famine, with allegedly up to 12 million perishing. Without private land ownership, citizens flocked to the booming cities. Urban population in the Soviet Union increased by 30 million between 1926 and 1930.

Another result of this massive societal transformation was the creation of “a silent and conformist population.” In The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia, author Orlando Figes documents first-hand accounts of people who lived through this period. Figes writes: “In a society where it was thought that people were arrested for loose tongues, families survived by keeping to themselves. They learned to live double lives, concealing from the eyes and ears of dangerous neighbours, and sometimes even from their own children, information and opinions, religious beliefs, family values and traditions, and modes of private existence that clashed with Soviet public norms.” A Bolshevik in 1924 wrote: “When a comrade says: ‘What I am doing now concerns my private life and not society,’ we say that cannot be correct.”

These years of profound change are significant to note because our two characters, Anna Borisovna and the Director, lived through them. Playwright John W. Lowell articulates this journey wonderfully: “[Anna] was born in Russia, raised and educated in Russia, but without moving from her home, she is now in the Soviet Union, and has been for almost fifteen long years. She has adjusted to this change but it has cost her.” The Director has also adjusted to the change, rising from a cavalry officer to his post as Director of the Ministry. But unlike Anna, he has been quick to attach his ambition to the communist party’s success. The evolution of their country has left these two people with different values and outlooks.
Writers’ Theatre’s Education Programs reach more than 8,000 students each year, which is as many students as organizations four times our size.

Our educational touring production, The MLK Project, has been performed for more than 35,000 students throughout Chicago and the northern suburbs.

We work with dozens of classroom teachers and more than 750 students on the Novel Series Study Plan – our theatre and literature program for elementary school students.

We customize lesson plans to suit each school and group of students.

We work with schools in Chicago, on the North Shore, and in Lake County.

We offer in-school artist residencies, touring performances, after school programs, summer programs, writing workshops, and more!

Hear what students have to say about working with Writers’ Theatre in the classroom:

“I enjoyed studying the book with Writers’ Theatre because it helped me learn new things like presenting before an audience, speaking with people, and being active and creative.” –Student, Mitchell Elementary School

“I felt that with Writers’ Theatre we go deeper into the relationships between characters and I can connect them to myself.” –Student, Peirce Elementary School

“I really liked reading this book and working with Writers’ Theatre. I learned a lot about imagining, having a clear voice and using my body.” –Student, Penn Elementary School

“It was the best experience I have achieved so far in my life! Working with Writers’ Theatre was great and I would love to do it again.” –Student, Mays Elementary School

“I used to only read for reports but now I have my eyes glued to words in books 24/7!” –Student, Pilsen Community Academy

For more information about our education programs, or how you can bring Writers’ Theatre to your school, contact Director of Education Nicole O’Connell at 847-786-3512 or noconnell@writerstheatre.org.

Did you know that Writers’ Theatre reaches into the community to bring high quality theatre programs to students?
Writers’ Theatre celebrated the kick-off of its 2012/13 season on Friday, September 14th with the Opening of Hamlet, directed by Artistic Director Michael Halberstam. After the show, guests joined the artists and staff to raise a glass and celebrate this outstanding production and the beginning of the 21st season.

A special thanks to our sponsors for Hamlet:

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1. Season Sponsor Mary Winton Green and her grandson Jeremy Green with Executive Director Kate Lipuma and Artistic Director Michael Halberstam 2. Artists’ Council Member Rich Tinberg, Mark Schendel and Jeanne Gang of Studio Gang Architects, and President of the Board of Trustees Elaine Tinberg 3. Trustee Joe Dillon of BMO Harris Bank, Season Sponsor and Director of Institutional Advancement Kim Swinton 4. Woman’s Library Club President and Artists’ Council Member Roberta Olshansky with Michael Halberstam 5. Artists’ Council Member Gail Huggins, Director’s Society Members and 2013 WordPlay Gala Co-Chairs Stephanie Sick and Bill Sick with Michael Halberstam 6. Martina Mead and Director’s Society Member Linda Stephens with Scott Parkinson (Hamlet) 7. Director’s Society Members Jack Segal and Pam and Russ Strobel with Dr. Christopher Straus 8. Director’s Society Member Irene Pritzker with Liesel Matthews (Ophelia) and husband Ian Simmons 9. Michael Halberstam and Artists’ Council Member Merle Reskin 10. Sharon Kushiner of The Davee Foundation and son, Andrew Ochwat 11. Associate Artistic Director Stuart Carden and Trustee Barbara Melcher
On September 24, Trustees, friends and supporters of Writers’ Theatre gathered at the Art Institute of Chicago for an exclusive event celebrating the opening of the new Modern Wing exhibition Building: Inside Studio Gang Architects, which features the work of Chicago’s very own internationally-renowned architectural firm, Studio Gang Architects. The evening included Michael Halberstam and SGA Principal and Founder Jeanne Gang in an intimate conversation about the design process for Writers’ Theatre’s proposed new theatre center in Glencoe. After a cocktail reception, guests enjoyed a private, after-hours guided tour conducted personally by Jeanne Gang and SGA Managing Principal Mark Schendel, and saw early conceptual designs and in-process sketches of the new theatre center.

Best known for Chicago’s Aqua Tower, Studio Gang has quickly become one of the most important architectural firms in the country and world. The project combines a one-of-a-kind theatre and architect on a singularly unique site on Chicago’s North Shore at the Woman’s Library Club of Glencoe. Upon completion, it will provide Writers’ Theatre with a world-class home equal to the art on its stages, and will make Writers’ Theatre a permanent resource for our community and the American theatre for generations to come.
Writers' Theatre welcomes back Urban Innovations as the Corporate Sponsor Partner of The Letters, having sponsored last season's Hesperia. Writers' Theatre is pleased to have Urban Innovations' renewed partnership in support of its 2012/13 Season.

Richard (Dick) M. Lipton

Dick Lipton is a partner at Baker & McKenzie LLP, where he provides tax planning advice for corporations, partnerships, tax-exempt organizations and limited liability companies. He has handled numerous engagements for clients in structuring real estate transactions, and has given speeches at organizations throughout the United States. Mr. Lipton served on the Internal Revenue Service Advisory Council, and is former chair of the Tax Section of the American Bar Association as well as the Chicago Bar Association Federal Tax Committee and the American College of Tax Counsel. He serves as a member of the House of Delegates of the American Bar Association. Dick is a graduate of Amherst College and the University of Chicago Law School. He and his wife Jane live in Kenilworth and have four children.

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Writers' Theatre sincerely thanks the Elizabeth F. Cheney Foundation for its continued and steadfast support.
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For the fourth season, Writers’ Theatre has partnered with local shops and restaurants to offer our [Donor Rewards Program](#). Individuals who support Writers’ Theatre with a gift of $200 or more during the 2012/13 Season will receive a special Donor Rewards card, which entitles them to exclusive offers throughout the year. Present your Rewards card at these businesses to receive the following discounts:

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**ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE**

For more than two decades, Writers’ Theatre has been captivating audiences throughout Chicagoland, the North Shore and the nation. Our distinct interpretations of classic work, bold approach to contemporary theatre and commitment to the artist and the written word have established Writers’ Theatre as a nationally-recognized theatre company.

In order for Writers’ Theatre:
- To produce high quality work,
- To nurture new playwrights, and
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Your contributions make all of this possible. Only 50% of our annual budget is derived from ticket sales, so please join our family of supporters.

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SAVE THE DATE!
Writers’ Theatre WordPlay Gala 2013
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For information about purchasing a table to the event please contact Carly Magill at 847-242-6012 or cmagill@writerstheatre.org.

THE DIRECTOR’S SOCIETY
JOIN US FOR A BEHIND-THE-SCENES BRUNCH WITH THE DIRECTOR’S SOCIETY

On February 10, 2013, Director’s Society members will have the opportunity to go behind-the-scenes of one of Writers’ exciting productions with an exclusive in-depth conversion with the artists.

Events such as these are among the many benefits offered to members of the Director’s Society, a group of Writers’ Theatre’s most generous supporters. Director’s Society members provide a secure financial foundation for the theatre through annual contributions of $1,000 or more.

For information on becoming a Director’s Society member, please contact Carly Magill, Manager of Individual Giving and Special Events at 847-242-6012 or cmagill@writerstheatre.org.

IN CONVERSATION WITH PLAYWRIGHT JOHN LOWELL

February 10, 2013

Bobby Kennedy, Producing and Literary Associate: How did you first develop an interest in theatre?

John Lowell: I was born and raised on Long Island so I lived close to New York City. My parents were both theatre-goers and they started taking my sisters and me to theatre when I was very young. The first show I ever saw in New York was the original production of You’re a Good Man Charlie Brown. I very clearly remember enjoying the show, but as I was a very strange little boy, instead of concentrating exclusively on the cast, I spent a good deal of my time watching the audience react. As much as I liked the show, I was equally fascinated by the effect the material and the performers had on the audience.

John Lowell: When I was in junior high I started employing my modest musical gifts to write musicals, one of which was produced at my high school. I was sufficiently emboldened and encouraged by my adolescent success to conclude by the time I went off to college that I was destined to be a composer/lyricist for Broadway. Broadway had better judgment than I had, and by my late 20s, after having my work greeted by magnificent indifference, I realized I could write un-produced plays with twice the speed I could write un-produced musicals, and I started dedicating myself exclusively to playwriting. My first play, Leo Tolstoy
Is In The Next Room Dying, came to the attention of actor/director David Ogden Stiers (by which I mean I handed it to him when I was a clerk at Tower Records, and he was a genial, kind customer). To our mutual delight, he loved the play, and immediately said, “I want to get a production of this going.” And he did. And it went so well that I decided that maybe this playwriting enterprise was the one to pursue.

BK: What prompted you to write The Letters?

John Lowell: Two things came together for me in the late 1990s: the Monica Lewinsky scandal was unfolding just as I was reading a biography of Tchaikovsky in which the author asserted that the Soviets had employed editors to remove any hint of Tchaikovsky’s homosexuality from the man’s letters and private papers. Both things represented a scary, insidious reality: the state felt it had a right to intrude into the most private of private matters. I did not want to write of Henry Hyde and Bob Barr and Lindsay Graham, but I did wonder about the people who had tried to re-write history to hide Tchaikovsky’s sexual orientation. And as I wrote, the play came to be about the interests of The State vs. the interests of those who wanted to keep the record straight, so to speak. And all through the writing, I tried to keep the great quote from Napoleon in my mind: “History is a set of lies agreed upon.”

BK: And how did the play come to Writers’ Theatre?

John Lowell: About the time I finished the first draft of The Letters in 1998, my friend Marilyn Shaw, who ran the Eureka Theatre in San Francisco, was starting something called PlayBrokers which was to encourage San Francisco playwrights. Though I was not an SFr, Marilyn, a huge supporter of my work, chose to start the PlayBrokers off with The Letters. One of the PlayBrokers got the script to a former San Franciscan, actor/adaptor Dakin Matthews, who liked it and wanted to help get it around. Happily, Dakin had just had his translation of Agustin Moreto’s Spite for Spite produced at Writers’ Theatre, and he said, “You must get the play to them! They do great work!” Which is when I first learned about you guys. After Dakin produced the world premiere of The Letters at his theatre company in Los Angeles in 2009, I came back to New York and brought it to Austin Pendleton’s attention. Austin had just finished working on A Minister’s Wife in Glencoe. So I submitted the play in 2008 and mentioned the Dakin and Austin connection and here we are.

BK: Why do you think a play about 1930’s Russia is still relevant to today?

John Lowell: For one simple, disturbing reason: they did stuff like that; we still do stuff like that. The young sailor who’s in prison, Bradley Manning, is going to become an unperson because he provided the material for Julian Assange and Wikileaks. For the rest of his life he will be behind bars because he shared information that may or may not have been “classified.” But what I find incredibly troubling is that he has no recourse. There will be no public trial; there will be no chance to have his day in court. And then there is Guantanamo Bay, filled with unpeople. In short, though The Letters takes place in the Soviet Union, it is not about the Soviet Union. It is about what happened this morning and what may happen tomorrow.
Writers’ recent critically acclaimed productions of Hamlet and A Little Night Music set box office records, and tickets were increasingly hard to come by.

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THE LETTERS
Writers' Theatre has come together with three of the North Shore's most acclaimed cultural attractions—Chicago Botanic Garden, Kohl Children's Museum and Ravinia Festival—to bring awareness of the rich artistic, cultural, community and family activities available in the area.

As a Subscriber or Member of Writers' Theatre, you are eligible for discounts and perks at our partner Do North organizations.

- **Chicago Botanic Garden**: half-price parking (admission is already free) to members of its partner organizations.

- **Kohl Children's Museum**: two-for-one admissions after 1pm daily to members of other Do North institutions.

- **Ravinia Festival**: two-for-one pavilion tickets on selected Chicago Symphony Orchestra concerts. Members of any Do North organization will also receive a 10 percent discount on their Ravinia Gifts purchases at the park.

For a complete list of discounts and more information go to [donorth.org](http://donorth.org).

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**Writers' Wednesdays - Post-show Discussion following evening performances**

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### THE LETTERS

#### NOVEMBER

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**Writers' Wednesdays - Post-show Discussion following evening performances**

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**THE LETTERS**