

Feeling the loverage

By Nan Lincoln

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ELLSWORTH (March 4): Anyone who enjoys witty, thought-provoking dialogue, intriguing conversations about complex relationships, art, history, modern architecture and ancient executions presented by one of the most flamboyant characters since Auntie Mame, will find all of this rolled into two hours of great theatrical entertainment when the New Surry Theatre brings its production of the comedy "Lettice and Lovage" to the Grand Auditorium for the next two weekends.



Once again Bill Raiten, who co-directed this show with Cindy Robbins, who also plays the title character Lettice, has picked a real winner of a show. Written for British actress Maggie Smith, it is the tale of a woman whose passion for all things historic is matched and often overwhelmed by her love of drama.



Dindy Royster and Cindy Robbins as Lotte and Lettice in "Lettice and Lovage" opening at the Grand in Ellsworth, March 6. (Photo by Nan Lincoln)

Hired as a tour guide for Fustian Manor, a noble house turned museum where absolutely nothing of particular note ever occurred in its 600 year history, Lettice Douffet decides to embellish the historical record. At first its just little additions to a true story about when Queen Elizabeth I tripped on her gown on the manor staircase and was steadied by the Lord Fustian; a little added description of the gown, a little lengthening of the heroic leap the lord made to save his queen. But eventually Lettice truly "jumps the shark" and this basically boring stairway is transformed into a cursed passageway where all manner of horrors occur, culminating in the terrible fall of a princess who's poor body is twisted into a pretzel by the accident and demands that thereafter all her attendants be equally disfigured. In the midst of describing these misshapen attendants clawing their way up the staircase to serve their mistress, Lettice is caught and fired by the museum's director, the straitlaced, historical purist Lotte Schoen.

But what seems like an ending is actually a beginning. Lotte and Lettice form an odd friendship based on their mutual love of history — especially historic executions, which they start to re-enact in Lettice's flat. The practice ends up

getting them into all sorts of trouble, but once again what seems like an ending for these women, is actually a beginning for their true lives.

As Lettice, Cindy Robbins is simply magnificent, revealing her character through Peter Schaffer's clever dialogue and her own expansive body language making her character way larger than life but still believable. Dindy Royster's performance is more hesitant and restricted, which is just right for her character, although at certain points Royster crosses the line from being a halting, sputtering sort of person to an actress who maybe has forgotten her lines.

As always in the NST productions, the sets, costumes, make-up and props are near perfect, right down to Annie Pool's scowling portraits on the museum walls to Lettice's funky flat filled with artifacts from her theatrical background.

Raiten and Robbins make a great directorial team and there isn't a static moment – well maybe a few slow places in the second act – but the pace picks up again ferociously in the third, so one could consider it a breather.

Best of all though is the play itself, which is not only hugely entertaining but educational. I now really have sense of the effect Oliver Cromwell's puritan regime had on the English culture (sort of like a 17th century Taliban) and how marmalade got its name.

"Lettice and Lovage" moves to the Grand in Ellsworth, March 6, 7, 8, 13 and 14. Evening shows Friday and Saturdays are at 7 p.m., curtain for the Sunday matinee is at 3 p.m. Tickets are \$15 for adults, \$12 for students, seniors, or group members (10 or more). Tickets can be purchased in advance at Blue Hill Public Library. Call 374-5556 or go to www.newsurrytheatre.org for more information.