

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Posting Letters to the Moon

The Dukes, Lancaster

1 March 2017

The wartime correspondence between actress Celia Johnson and her husband Peter Fleming—stationed in India, or “as far away as the moon” if you asked her—frames this intimate and simply spellbinding performance.

Her daughter Lucy, along with her own husband Simon Williams, recites extracts from the letters revealing family news, a little backstage gossip, bags of humour and—above all—an abundance of love and affection between two ordinary people caught in extraordinary times.

Celia Johnson's growing fame, which was to reach its peak in one of cinema's all-time great romances, *Brief Encounter* (filmed partly “up the road” at Carnforth Station), counted for little as she struggled with rationing and deprivation on the Home Front, and even feelings of guilt at contributing little to the war effort. Her husband Peter meanwhile was an intelligence officer whose candid portrayal of his superiors was often less than respectful. His brother, Ian Fleming, enjoyed some post-war success creating a maverick spy character...

Nowadays of course such celebrity status might earn them all tabloid attention, but these were different times, a fact underlined so often in these letters. Not least by use of language that has almost become Old English. Words like fondness, gaiety or wretched shine out, while the very worst that might be said of anyone was that they were a “frightfully rotten chap”.

Twitter or e-mail exchanges are unlikely to provide us with quite such a restrained or revealing slice of social history in the future.

Lucy Fleming and Simon Williams come steeped in their own theatrical fame, either from stage, film or TV appearances, or on radio in *The Archers*. This very week they both also appear in new cinema release *The Viceroy's House*, which just happens to be set in New Delhi where her father was stationed.

So she can be excused if her voice just occasionally falters as she reads her mother's adoring words of love to her father. Some people may think it was just acting, but a sold-out auditorium knew otherwise—and promptly stifled its own sniffles when her husband joked: “Pull yourself together!”

It was that kind of evening, one of sharing in another family's heartfelt love.

This was the first night of a short Lakeland tour that included a performance at Carnforth Station. You'll have to hope this will be more than a brief encounter with such a theatrical gem.

Reviewer: [David Upton](#)