



When Words Were Enough: *Dear Jack, Dear Louise* at USF

Description

Cedar City, UT Ken Ludwig's *Dear Jack, Dear Louise* unfolds like the best kind of correspondence: intimate, vulnerable, and unexpectedly joyful. It's a love story shaped by distance, animated by imagination, and rooted in real family history. Based on the true story of the playwright's parents, the piece chronicles a three-year **World War II** era courtship through letters between Jack, a reserved **Army doctor** stationed in **Oregon**, and Louise, a spirited aspiring actress in **New York City**. Though the two characters spend the majority of the play unable to talk in person, their growing connection becomes the play's heartbeat.

Sometimes, connection grows deepest in waiting, not in presence, but in words.

Rhetorical Review

A Play of Separation, Told Together

Directed with nuance by **Michael Perlman**, the production wisely leans into the play's epistolary structure rather than working against it. Scenic designer **Ben Hohman** creates a world defined by separation—two distinct spaces, one for each character—while **Jeff Lieder**'s costume design helps trace the passage of time and the subtle shifts in character. **Melanie Chen Cole**'s original music and sound design, paired with **Scott Bolman**'s evocative lighting, reinforce the atmosphere of distance, longing, and hope that defines the wartime setting.



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Jack and Louise begin their story seated at desks on opposite sides of the stage, their words bridging the distance as their presence gradually overlaps—rising, listening, moving, and responding in tandem, even if never in person.

One of the production's most effective choices is its use of reactive staging. While one character reads a letter aloud, the other remains visible, reacting in real time. These silent responses add humor, tension, and depth. A standout moment occurs when Louise recounts an unexpected visit with both sets of parents in **Brooklyn**. Jack's expression of horror and confusion draws one of the play's biggest laughs. The charm of the piece lies in these subtle, revealing beats.

After last season's Shakespearean sparring in *The Taming of The Shrew*, real-life couple John DiAntonio and Caitlin Wise return with a gentler task: falling in love through letters.
â??Rhetorical Reviewâ??

A Historical Frame, a Personal Story

Set between **1942 and 1945**, *Dear Jack, Dear Louise* captures not just a romance, but an era defined by separation and uncertainty. Today's audiences accustomed to instant messaging and video calls may find something unexpectedly moving in this slow-burn connection built entirely through language. Ludwig doesn't simply honor his parents; he honors the emotional courage it takes to write honestly to someone you hope to know.

Louise, the more expressive of the two, drives much of the play's energy. She is funny, bold, and often impatient with Jack's formality. Jack, initially stiff and restrained, gradually reveals a sincere, boyish warmth. Their voices contrast sharply at first but become harmoniously interwoven—a testament to Ludwig's ear for dialogue and emotional rhythm.

As dramaturg **Cameron Williams** observes, this story unfolds during a time when people didn't yet know how the war would end. Letters like these weren't just romantic—they were lifelines. Ludwig's dramatization, while stylized, is grounded in real emotion and a deep respect for the past.

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Actor Highlights

Real-life couple **John DiAntonio** and **Caitlin Wise** bring an added layer of intimacy to their roles—but it’s their craft, not just their chemistry, that shapes the emotional core of the production. Last season, they sparred through *The Taming of the Shrew* as Petruchio and Kate; this year, they return in a softer register, portraying a couple who fall in love not face-to-face, but across thousands of miles and dozens of handwritten letters. The result is as understated as it is affecting—tender, thoughtful, and quietly resonant.

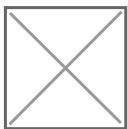
Much of the production’s success rests on the chemistry and craft of its two performers. DiAntonio brings quiet strength and subtle humor to the role of Jack, capturing the character’s transformation from stiff reserve to open-hearted sincerity. His timing is particularly sharp in the play’s comedic beats, delivering understated reactions that earn some of the performance’s most genuine laughs.

As Louise, Wise radiates charisma and emotional range. She balances the character’s theatrical flair with grounded vulnerability, moving effortlessly between confidence and longing. Her performance energizes the play’s pacing, providing momentum during even its most static moments. Wise makes Louise’s impatience endearing, her idealism magnetic, and her vulnerability deeply affecting.

Together, DiAntonio and Wise deliver a duet of deep emotional listening. Their real-life partnership never overshadows the performance—instead, it amplifies the intimacy, making their connection feel lived-in without ever slipping into sentimentality. It’s a pairing that turns letter-writing into an art form, and long-distance longing into something quietly extraordinary.

If the production has a flaw, it lies in pacing. Act I, while charming, occasionally drifts as the relationship slowly builds. The dramatic payoff arrives late, with Act II delivering higher emotional stakes—missed letters, military secrecy, and real fear of loss. Still, the story’s conclusion offers gentle, earned catharsis.

—Ludwig doesn’t just recount his parents’ story—he reimagines it as living memory, keeping forgotten stories alive with clarity and care. —
—Rhetorical Review—



Note: [Additional historical context drawn from the Alabama Shakespeare Festival’s DJDL Study Guide.](#)



Final Thoughts

At its core, *Dear Jack, Dear Louise* is about the human need to be known. It is a tribute to the way love can unfold through language, humor, and shared vulnerability; how sometimes love grows best when physicality is stripped away. In our digital age, defined by speed and curated connection, Ludwig's play reminds me how every sentence—every pause, every sign-off—can carry the full weight of longing and emotional courage. The intimacy of getting to know someone slowly—through thought, reflection, and genuine curiosity—feels increasingly rare but it doesn't have to be.

During the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic, many of us found ourselves once again relying on texts, voice notes, and letters. Physical closeness gave way to emotional proximity through language and words. In that sense, we may be circling back to something Jack and Louise knew well: that sometimes, connection grows deepest not in touch, but in waiting; not in presence, but in words.

Lastly, let's talk about the power of archival plays—the power of writing plays based on true stories, and why they matter. *Dear Jack, Dear Louise* is an archival play in the best sense: it revives personal history not with dusty reverence, but with theatrical immediacy.

While researching the play, I discovered that Ludwig's mother had destroyed all the original letters—believing they were too personal for anyone else to read—I wondered: what if he had let the story end there? What if he had said, "There's nothing left to work with"? Instead, he chose to imagine. He drew from family memory, historical research, and emotional truth to reconstruct something honest, intimate, and resonant. That creative decision—to write into the silence—is a form of archival labor.

In ["Bearing Witness to Transient Histories,"](#) scholar Pamela Takayoshi writes about the ethical and imaginative work required to recover marginalized narratives—particularly those omitted from traditional archives. She argues that critical imagination and contextual analysis can restore visibility and value to lives previously erased. Ludwig's play does exactly that. Even though parts of the story are invented, *Dear Jack, Dear Louise* still qualifies as an act of archival storytelling—especially considering that his parents were Jews living through World War II. He not only honors their love, but affirms their historical presence in a world that so often erased it.

—This isn't just a romance. It's an act of archival labor—writing into silence to recover what the record leaves out.—
—Rhetorical Review—

Ludwig doesn't just recount his parents' story—he reimagines it as living memory, keeping forgotten stories alive with clarity and care. In doing so, he offers something more provocative and timely—a challenge to our present: What does it mean to fall in love when all we have are words? What might we learn about ourselves—and each other—when we're asked to slow down, to wait, to imagine, to write? And perhaps most urgently: how do we continue to humanize one another, even in times as fractured, distant, and cruel as war?

Ken Ludwig's *Dear Jack, Dear Louise*

• Eileen and Allen Anes Studio Theatre | Utah Shakespeare Festival

July 11 – October 4, 2025

Tickets: \$55 – \$65: <https://www.bard.org/plays/dear-jack-dear-louise/>

Children under six (including infants) not admitted. Childcare available.

For accessible seating, call (866) 939-0926.

Performance Schedule

August

- Aug 20–23, 2:00 pm (Aug 21: *Open Captioning*)
- Aug 28, 2:00 pm (*Audio Description*)
- Aug 29, 2:00 pm
- Aug 30, 2:00 pm

September

- Sep 3–6, 2:00 pm
- Sep 11, 18 & 25, 8:00 pm
- Sep 12, 13, 19, 20, 26, 27, 2:00 pm

October

- Oct 2, 8:00 pm
- Oct 3, 2:00 pm
- Oct 4, 2:00 pm (*Closing*)

Creative Team

- **Director:** Michael Perlman
- **Stage Manager:** Caleb Thomas Cook*
- **Assistant Stage Manager:** Lauren Myers
- **Scenic Designer:** Ben Hohman
- **Costume Designer:** Jeff Lieder
- **Lighting Designer:** Scott Bolman
- **Sound Designer & Original Music Composer:** Melanie Chen Cole

Cast Highlights

- **John DiAntonio*** (he/him) as **Jack**
 - **Caitlin Wise*** (she/her) as **Louise**
 - Also appearing as **Octavia** in *Antony and Cleopatra* and **Hecate** in *Macbeth*
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• Content Advisory

This production contains descriptions of wartime experiences and military violence. These moments are thoughtfully handled and suitable for most audiences, offering historical realism without overwhelming intensity.

About the Playwright: Ken Ludwig

Ken Ludwig is one of the most widely produced playwrights of his generation, with 34 plays and musicals performed in over 30 countries and translated into more than 20 languages. His Broadway debut, *Lend Me a Tenor*, won two Tony Awards and was hailed by *The Washington Post* as “one of the classic comedies of the 20th century.” Other notable works include *Crazy for You* (Tony and Olivier Awards for Best Musical), *Moon Over Buffalo*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, and *Dear Jack, Dear Louise*, which won the 2020 Steinberg Award for Best New Play.

Ludwig’s writing spans genres from farce to adaptation to musical theatre. His work has starred actors such as **Carol Burnett**, **Alec Baldwin**, and **Kristin Bell**, and has been produced by major institutions including the **Royal Shakespeare Company**, **The Old Globe**, and **The Kennedy Center**. His book [How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare](#) won the Falstaff Award and continues to inspire educators and theatre lovers.

For more, visit www.kenludwig.com.

Citations

1. Williams, Cameron. *DJDL Study Guide: Season 53*. Montgomery, AL: Alabama Shakespeare Festival, 2024. PDF.
2. Takayoshi, Pamela. “Bearing Witness to Transient Histories.” In *Unsettling Archival Research: Engaging Critical, Communal, and Digital Archives*, edited by Alexandra N. Blair and Romeo Garc a, 213–225. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2022.

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