

REVIEW ARTS & CULTURE ENTERTAINMENT

Can government overreach be funny? Antaeus looks for laughs in 'The Hothouse'



By F. KATHLEEN FOLEY FEB 02, 2018 | 6:00 AM



Peter Van Norden and Jocelyn Towne in Antaeus' "The Hothouse." (Geoffrey Wade Photography)

Harold Pinter wrote "The Hothouse" in the 1950s, then buried it in a drawer before resurrecting it in 1980 for a production that he himself directed. During the interim, what Pinter initially intended as a fantasy became oddly timely. "Reality has overtaken it," he commented at the time.

What a difference a few decades make. One can only conjecture how Pinter, that angry old gadfly of the British theater, would have reacted to today's political climate, where torture is being debated as a legitimate governmental policy.

"The Hothouse," set in a government-run mental asylum, touches upon themes of torture, as well as bureaucratic incompetence, governmental overreach and endemic institutional corruption.

Yet Pinter's first instinct to bury the play in a drawer may not have been entirely inappropriate. Yes, it is certainly one of his funniest plays. But "The Hothouse," being presented by Antaeus Theatre Company at the Kiki & David Gindler Performing Arts Center, shows signs of youthful indiscipline, especially in the messy second act, which collapses into a cursory ending at odds with Pinter's signature inaccessibility.

That said, the play is an actors' showcase, and when it comes to gifted performers, Antaeus has an embarrassment of riches.



J. D. Cullum, with Towne, in Antaeus' double-cast production. (Geoffrey Wade Photography)

As with all Antaeus productions, this one is double cast, with director Nike Doukas the sure hand at the helm for both sets of actors, unearthing plentiful humor in the text. Subtext is crucial in Pinter, but while Doukas allows her actors to explore those subterranean undercurrents, she stops them short of overplaying — a fine line frequently crossed in Pinter interpretations, in which lesser actors overthink and overfeel their lines, searching for hidden meanings.

Among the designers, Jeff Gardner deserves special mention for his echoing, disorienting sound, while Julie Keen's witty costumes, which stop just this side of parody, earn a chuckle or two.

The cast I saw featured the typical Antaeus aggregate of seasoned stage veterans. They're superb as the poisonous staff of this ministry-run establishment, whose Christmas festivities have been disrupted by one inmate's mysterious death and by news that another has just given birth.

As Lamb (to the slaughter, get it?) J.D. Cullum is particularly fine as a friendless functionary whose longing to advance in the organization allows him to brook agonizing indignities.

Peter Van Norden plays Roote ("of all evil" need hardly be spoken), the incompetent head of the asylum. He's a hoot and a horror who vacillates between the needy and the domineering. The big fish that rots from the head downward, Roote is a particularly apt symbol in Pinter's parable.