

ON STAGE & SCREEN

Theater Review: Antaeus Theatre Company's *The Hothouse*

Posted on January 26, 2018 by Erin Conley



Photo Credit: Geoffrey Wade Photography

It's Christmas Day at a psychiatric hospital, and its director is having a stressful morning. Patient 6457 has unexpectedly died and patient 6457 has given birth, and neither event looks very good for the institution. As the day progresses, things only get more and more out of control as it becomes increasingly apparent that the staff is perhaps more volatile and dangerous than the patients.

Harold Pinter wrote *The Hothouse* in 1958 but set it aside until 1980, when he decided it should finally be produced. One of Pinter's lesser-known and rarely produced plays, *The Hothouse* opens in Los Angeles this weekend at Antaeus Theatre Company in Glendale, directed by Nike Doukas. A dark comedy that provides too-timely commentary on the threats of authoritarianism and absolute power, it's a bit of a perplexing work. Promising moments are undercut by



repetitive scenes that drone on, and the unlikely combination of broad humor and the macabre creates an odd tone that is difficult to embrace. In keeping with Antaeus tradition the production is partner-cast, and the “Pelicans” cast was seen for the purpose of this review.

The underlying themes are, sadly, absolutely relevant to the current situation in our country. Roote (Josh Clark), an ex-colonel and the director of the hospital, is a moody and unpredictable leader. He lies, he’s forgetful, and he’s easily confused, which his staff manipulates to their advantage. As a leader, he is at once power-hungry and inept—sound familiar? The bureaucratic elements of the institution, such as the strict policy of only referring to the patients by numbers rather than names, are unproductive and relentlessly mocked by Pinter’s text.



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Unfortunately, with the exception of the thematic timeliness, the play feels otherwise stale and dated. The production design, costuming, and story suggest a time around when the play was written, and yet modern Apple-style earbuds are incongruously used as a prop. Perhaps this was an attempt to bring the story into the modern era, but if so it was distracting. Generally, act one starts slow but builds nicely to a place that is compelling. It turns out to be the most interesting the play ever gets. Act two is a tedious and repetitive slog, meandering away from the plot elements in motion to focus on vaudevillian humor. Throughout, there are missed opportunities in the set and props. Many

references are made to the fact that it’s snowing outside and yet nothing, not even a hint of whiteness, can be seen out the windows, even in a moment where one is opened. A set of wires in the same scene as the aforementioned earbuds, a scene that happens to be the most dynamic of the play, is unconvincing and sloppy, undermining an important moment.

The cast, despite having fairly shallow, stereotypical characters to work with, is excellent, mining laughs even from moments that overstay their welcome. Clark

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plays the progression of Roote's madness convincingly, building to a boiling point that ties in to the character's frequent complaints that the building is too warm—see what they did there? As Gibbs, Roote's sly and ambitious administrative underling, Leo Marks maintains an eerie smirk that hints at the diabolical tendencies lurking underneath the character's overly polite outward demeanor. Cutts is the sole female in a story with eye-roll inducing old-fashioned depictions of gender roles, but Melanie Lora plays her willingness to use her feminine wiles to gain favor at work with charm. Lush, a gossip staff member who unsurprisingly loves alcohol, is played by Adrian LaTourelle, who must be having loads of fun with a character who only exists for comic relief. Rounding out the cast are Steve Hofvendahl as Lamb, a hapless, well-meaning guard, John Bobek as Tubb, an eager member of the "understaff," and Gregory Itzin as Lobb in the play's final scene, which I will not spoil.



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It is a shame that the more interesting aspects of the piece are glossed over and left to simmer under the surface while great emphasis is put on heavy-handed humor and metaphors. Even the title, *The Hothouse*, is cheekily and repeatedly referenced by Roote, sweating as he drinks copiously, despite it being the middle of winter. It suffers from referencing more compelling storylines that are happening offstage, while going in circles in uneventful, overwritten scenes onstage. Unless this very specific style of humor happens to suit your sensibilities, you may find yourself wondering if Pinter's initial instinct to leave this one in the drawer was correct.

The Hothouse runs at Antaeus's Kiki & David Gindler Performing Arts Center in Glendale through March 11th. Performances are Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays at 8pm and Saturdays and Sundays at 2pm. The running time is two hours, including one intermission. Tickets start at \$30 and can be purchased at [www.Antaeus.org](http://www.antaeus.org) (<http://www.antaeus.org/>). For a schedule of performances, including which actors will perform on which dates, click [here](http://antaeus.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Hothouse-Master-Schedule-V.3.pdf) (<http://antaeus.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Hothouse-Master-Schedule-V.3.pdf>).