

Harold Pinter's dark comedy "The Hothouse" menacingly amuses in L.A.

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From left, Steve Hofvendahl, Melanie Lora, John Bobek, Leo Marks, Josh Clark, Gregory Itzin, Adrian LaTourelle / Geoffrey Wade

GLENDALE, Calif. —This separate city, in Los Angeles County and L.A. City-adjacent, has a new resident theatre company, Antaeus (founded 1991), located right in the downtown commercial center. Its current offering is British playwright Harold Pinter's *The Hothouse*.

Not familiar with this title? It's a rarely produced item dating from 1958, when Pinter was 28 years old, although he put it aside until first allowing a production in 1980. Years later, in 1995, Pinter himself played the leading role of Roote, the director of a "rest home" for mental patients. "It was a fantasy when I wrote it," he said at that time, "but now it has become, I think, far more relevant. Reality has overtaken it."

In two acts, it's the story of a mental institution whose corrupt, bureaucratic managers are madder than the residents, a theme wide open to interpretation. There was a time when psychiatrists had the highest professional suicide rate in the country. But people would naturally read a broader metaphor into a play with a subject like this: The state of our nation? Of the world?

In 1958, the moment seemed germane for musings on mental stability, in a world where two superpowers were crippling each other with their MADness—that would be Mutually Assured Destruction, the theory that with enough nuclear weapons on both sides, neither would risk the fate of the world by initiating war. Revolts in East Germany and Hungary a few years before, not to mention the Khrushchev revelations about Stalin in 1956, must have prompted some questioning on Pinter's part about authority and its abuses. The Nuremberg trials of Nazi officials and collaborators still held a prominent place in people's memory. Plus which, the whole colonial world was in rebellion—the “inmates” overthrowing their European masters in one country after another. And needless to say, conditions in prisons and mental wards around the world were simply atrocious and out of control.

Absurdist playwrights had also been plowing this field, or would soon: In 1959 Eugene Ionesco's [Rhinoceros](#), the citizens of a quiet provincial town all of a sudden start turning into wild beasts, a symbolism widely accepted as that playwright's experience of fascism in his native Romania. The plays of Joe Orton would soon come along, his Satanically dark humor tinged with sadism. In 1964 the musical *Anyone Can Whistle* by Arthur Laurents and Stephen Sondheim also took madness as its theme.

In 1961, social psychologist Stanley Milgram's experiment at Yale University examined average people's willingness to obey authority figures: Participants were led to believe that they were assisting a study in which they had to administer electric shocks to a “learner,” and few of them recoiled even when watching the “learner” react ever more violently to each new level of shock. The “learner” was, of course, an actor, but the participants did not know that. What turned out to be “shocking” was how much pain participants seemed willing to inflict, even as the world had purportedly come to comprehend the horrors of Nazi concentration and death camps.

The writing of Pinter's play preceded the Milgram experiment: The playwright, who won the 2005 Nobel Prize for Literature three years before he died, apparently early on intuited something it would take professional academics several more years to understand, and in *The Hothouse* it goes way beyond satire.

Antaeus Theatre Company is adjusting to the new Actors' Equity Los Angeles Membership Company Rule, whereby actors may perform for less than minimum-wage pay (for performances and rehearsals) if they are

the *owners* of a company. So all the actors in *The Hothouse* are union members, and to provide more work, as well a ready-made crew of understudies, there are two different “partner” casts—“The Pelicans” and “The Ducks,” named for birds referred to in the script. I saw “The Pelicans” on January 25th. (For the record, “The Ducks” include John Apicella, JD Cullum, Paul Eiding, Graham Hamilton, Rob Nagle, Jocelyn Towne, and Peter Van Norden.)

Crisply directed by Nike Doukas, the cast enunciates the “Pinteresque” dialogue to chilling effect, a manner of speech that seems jagged and oddly ambivalent, repetition and hesitation deconstructing meaning as we go along. It sounds almost improvisational. Small talk and ironic understatement fill in with subservient politeness the menacing holes in the social compact.

We never see any of the patients of this institution, although from time to time we and the characters on stage do hear strange groans and moans—which may be sounds from the residents on the floors above (treatment? illness? nightmares?), or charitably may be the characters’ conscience calling to them. In any case, the patients are known to the staff only by number, and as we soon learn during the course of the action on one Christmas Day, a couple of them have just undergone major life transitions: Patient 6457 has mysteriously died, while Patient 6459 has given birth to a baby boy, an unmistakable echo of the outcast child born twenty centuries earlier and celebrated on this day.

As in any dysfunctional system, everyone is always blaming other people. The cast of characters resembles the Trump Cabinet and White House staff in the way they slough off personal responsibility and try to pin guilt on someone below them. No checks on illegitimate power exist. The fatality and the paternity are never convincingly resolved.

The title of the play indicates that the infectious spores of mistreatment, even torture, are allowed to fester and multiply in this closed environment where not even the staff have lives outside these walls. Looking out the industrial windows in the almost viewless office, the aptly named character Lush (Adrian LaTourelle) sees only snow turning to slush.

The other over-the-top characters, also with appropriate names, are facility chief Roote (Josh Clark)—the “root” of the problem?; the obsequious but also devilish Gibbs (Leo Marks); the scheming, two-timing Cutts (Melanie Lora); the lowly patsy Lamb (Steve Hofvendahl); and two minor roles, the “Understaff” representative Tubb (John Bobek) and the regional mental health minister Lobb (Gregory Itzin).

It’s no surprise that when the revolt comes, it’s only the senior staff, i.e., most of the cast we see on stage, and explicitly not the Understaff, who receive the brunt of the residents’ rage.

Doukas cites the relevance of producing this play now, writing in a Director's Note, "We watch as a despotic, increasingly addled, ineffectual leader gets through his day. One of his tactics is to divide and conquer, and in response, those around him scheme and scramble to maintain their footing or move up the ladder. Amazingly, Pinter accomplishes all of this with a relentless barrage of farcical, almost vaudevillian humor."

In the puffing up of mediocre persons to commanding status, I saw a lot of the Gilbert and Sullivan influence, which Pinter had to have been exposed to.

The team includes set designer Se Hyun Oh, lighting designer Ginevra Lombardo, costume designer Julie Keen, sound designer Jeff Gardner, props designer Erin Walley, dialect coach Lauren Lovett-Cohen and production stage manager Jeanne Valleroy.

The acting is ace, the material challenging, the production rare.

Antaeus Theatre Company plays at the 80-seat Kiki & David Gindler Performing Arts Center, 110 East Broadway, Glendale CA 91205 (between N. Brand Blvd. and Maryland Ave.). Parking is available in the Glendale Marketplace garage at 120 S. Maryland Ave. (between Broadway and Harvard)—First 90 minutes free, then \$2 per hour. The Hothouse is performed Thurs., Fri. and Sat. at 8 pm, and Sat. and Sun. at 2 pm, through March 11.

For tickets and further information go the Antaeus [website](#) or call (818) 506.1983.

CONTRIBUTOR



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Eric A. Gordon is the author of a biography of radical American composer Marc Blitzstein, co-author of composer Earl Robinson's autobiography, and the translator (from Portuguese) of a memoir by Brazilian author Hadasa Cytrynowicz.

He holds a doctorate in history from Tulane University. He chaired the Southern California chapter of the National Writers Union, Local 1981 UAW (AFL-CIO) for two terms and is director emeritus of The Workmen's Circle/Arbeter Ring Southern California District. In 2015 he produced "City of the Future," a CD of Soviet Yiddish songs by Samuel Polonski.