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REVIEWS



Steve Hofvendahl, Melanie Lora, John Bobek, Leo Marks, Josh Clark, Gregory Itzin and Adrian LaTourelle in *The Hothouse* at the Kiki & David Gindler Performing Arts Center. (Photo by Geoffrey Wade Photography)

The Hothouse

Reviewed by Terry Morgan

Kiki & David Gindler Performing Arts Center

Through March 11

RECOMMENDED

Often when an artist dusts off a work that he or she put aside a long time ago and presents it to the public, one can see why it was shelved in the first place. But sometimes you can't. Harold Pinter wrote *The Hothouse* in 1958, during what was perhaps his most inspired period of writing (wherein he produced *The Birthday Party* and *The Homecoming*). However, he didn't stage this particular piece until 1980. One could be forgiven for wondering if there was a problem with it, but happily this is not the case. The writing is sharp, witty, and deftly satirical, with a lingering sinister undertone. The new production by Antaeus Theatre Company is a dark delight, and it's played to the hilt by a fantastic ensemble.

On Christmas Day in a government-run mental institution, officious underling Gibbs (Leo Marks) has come to inform the hospital administrator, Roote (Josh Clark), about a couple of important things. Namely, one patient has given birth and another has died. As all the patients are customarily locked in their rooms by low-level employee Lamb (Steve Hofvendahl), this situation implies rape and murder by a staff member or members. Seductive employee Cutts (Melanie Lora) turns a couple of the men to her own ends, and rival factotum Lush (Adrian LaTourelle) indulges his antipathy toward Gibbs. And all the while, something momentous bubbles beneath the surface, waiting to emerge.

Marks has been an excellent actor for a long time, and this has to be one of his very best performances. His Gibbs is a model of silky subservience: he never says much for fear of abuse from Roote, but makes his frustration and tamped-down rage quite clear in his physical reactions. Also, a scene where he snaps and intimidates Cutts is blunt and chilling. Clark is terrific as the dictatorial Roote, whose authority is undercut by his being wrong about almost everything. He has the lion's share of the dialogue in the play, and he makes the most of it, reveling both in the challenges of the role and the prickly poetry of Pinter's prose.

Hofvendahl brings the one instance of sympathetic humanity to the piece via the role of Lamb, and his humble conversations with Cutts and Gibbs, where he just wants to make a friendly connection, are heartbreaking. A combo of curt formality and sexy provocation, Lora excels as Cutts, although her British accent seems to come and go a bit. LaTourelle does great work as the importunate and competitive Lush, kissing up to Roote and baring his fangs at Gibbs, often almost simultaneously. Finally, Gregory Itzin gives an incisive performance in the smaller role of Lobb; one wishes he was in more of the show because he's so good.

Director Nike Doukas serves Pinter's play brilliantly, getting pitch-perfect work from her ensemble, and using the combination of Ginevra Lombardo's lighting and Jeff Gardner's sound to create a mood of continuing unease. One scene in particular, toward the play's end, employs these two designs in a powerful and memorable way.

In many respects, *The Hothouse* feels like traditional Pinter, with its acerbic humor and sense of opaque menace, but in others it's clearly an outlier. First, it's extremely funny, albeit in a dry manner: it plays, to some degree, like a two-hour Monty Python sketch — and that's meant as a compliment. Second, the story actually makes sense, unlike most Pinter where some questions are never answered definitively. In this case, such resolution makes for a satisfying play. These may be the reasons why Pinter shelved it for two decades, but it turns out they're actually strengths in the work.

Pinter aficionados especially should come to see *The Hothouse* at Antaeus because it is so infrequently produced — but all theatre lovers should buy tickets because it is an outstanding and entertaining production.

Note: As usual, Antaeus has partner-cast the show; this review is of "The Pelicans" cast.

Kiki & David Gindler Performing Arts Center, 110 East Broadway, Glendale; www.Antaeus.org;