

Paul Myrvold's Theatre Notes
January 29, 2018
"The Hothouse" at Antaeus Theatre Company



(l. to r.) Paul Eiding, JD Cullum, Graham Hamilton, Jocelyn Towne, John Apicella, Rob Nagle, Peter Van Norden in Harold Pinter's *The Hothouse*, directed by Nike Doukas, runs through March 11 at the Kiki & David Gindler Performing Arts Center, 110 East Broadway in Glendale. Photos by Geoffrey Wade Photography.

That Harold Pinter deserves to be counted among the greatest playwrights of the Twentieth Century was affirmed by the Swedish Academy, which bestowed upon him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005. His style of writing is unique. His dramatic use of silence evoked the term "Pinter pause," which goes far to heighten the perceived tension in the characters onstage and in the viewers in the audience. The playwright himself eschewed the term "Pinteresque," claiming to have no idea what it meant. The Swedish Academy was very precise in defining the term:

“Pinter restored theatre to its basic elements: an enclosed space and unpredictable dialogue, where people are at the mercy of each other and pretense crumbles. With a minimum of plot, drama emerges from the power struggle and hide-and-seek of interlocution. Pinter’s drama...has been characterized as “comedy of menace,” a genre where the writer allows us to eavesdrop on the play of domination and submission hidden in the most mundane of conversations. In a typical Pinter play, we meet people defending themselves against intrusion or their own impulses by entrenching themselves in a reduced and controlled existence. Another principal theme is the volatility and elusiveness of the past.”



(l. to r.) Peter Van Norden and Graham Hamilton in Harold Pinter’s *The Hothouse*, directed by Nike Doukas, runs through March 11 at the Kiki & David Gindler Performing Arts Center, 110 East Broadway in Glendale. Photo by Geoffrey Wade Photography.

Pinter’s play, *The Hothouse*, now in production at Antaeus Theatre Company, presents characters fraught with bottled up emotions that are barely contained in some, that are suppressed through extraordinary will in others, and that leak out in interesting ways for the rest. The scenario takes place in an English governmental institution of some kind, a sanatorium or rest home, where “patients” are under lock and key. It is Christmas Day, and the snow outside is melting into slush. In the office the managing executive, a fiftyish ex-colonel named Roote (**Peter Van Norden**), a distracted, harried sort, meets with a subordinate, the thirtyish Gibbs (**Graham Hamilton**), a superbly contained individual who is precisely submissive and responds to the abuse heaped upon him with posture erect and a

face of mask-like stoicism. The issues that Gibbs brings to his superior are the death of patient 6457, and the unexpected birth of a child by patient 6459. These issues are only compounded when the heat from the steam radiators cannot be turned down.



Peter Van Norden and Jocelyn Towne in Harold Pinter's *The Hothouse*, directed by Nike Doukas, runs through March 11 at the Kiki & David Gindler Performing Arts Center, 110 East Broadway in Glendale. Photo by Geoffrey Wade Photography.

The employee, Miss Cutts (**Jocelyn Towne**), is a svelte well-dressed woman who exudes a meticulous, tightly controlled sexuality as she roams in and out of the scenes. She sparks with both Roote and Gibbs. Lamb (**JD Cullum**) is an earnest, talkative guy who would like to know Gibbs better. He was assigned by the higher-ups to a position in this institution for reasons unknown. He doesn't know why he is there and his duties are to check the locks on the doors of the patients multiple times during the day.

The aptly named Lush (**Rob Nagle**), celebrates the holiday early and often, taking full advantage of the bottles at Roote's drinks station. He is a climber who knows things he shouldn't. Tubb (**Paul Eid- ing**), a sincere member of the lowly support staff, brings the boss a holiday cake, and Lobb (**John Apicella**), an outside executive, shows up in the last moments of the play as a sort of *deus ex machina*.



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Antaeus has a tradition of "partner casting," two teams of actors that play in alternate performances. I saw "The Ducks" (the other cast is "The Pelicans"), the name being derived by tradition from a reference in the script. This ensemble is polished to perfection. Mr. Van Norden dominates as he should, glorying in his position while hectoring subordinates. Mr. Hamilton is the ultimate Machiavel, erect in bearing and precise in speech, taking abuse without flinching and orders without question. Ms. Towne, in her excellent, chastely revealing dress, is sultry and seductive without a hint of lewdness. The insinuating Lush, as played to perfection by Mr. Nagle, stands in contrast to the others with a louche sloppiness as he liquors himself up. And JD Cullum is a wonder as the pathetic boob, Lamb, who has a destiny marked "road kill." Mr. Eiding as Tubb is a credit to the lower classes, and Mr. Apicello is a sober contrast to the outrageous conduct of the others.



JD Cullum (seated) and Graham Hamilton in Harold Pinter's *The Hothouse*, directed by Nike Doukas, runs through March 11 at the Kiki & David Gindler Performing Arts Center, 110 East Broadway in Glendale. Photo by Geoffrey Wade Photography.

The performances, under the inspired direction of **Nike Doukas**, are marvelous, crisp and tight, finding laughs where they are to be had, and pathos, what little there is, when it can be shown. The play is British and the dialect work, coached by **Lauren Lovett-Cohen**, is to my ear, flawless. The scenic design by **Se Hyun Oh**, with lighting by **Ginevra Lombardo**, is appropriately institutional, as are props by **Erin Walley**. Costumes by designer **Julie Keen** are ideal. The sound design by **Jeff Gardner** is terrific. **Jeanne Valleroy** manages the stage with professional efficiency.

Pinter can sometimes try the patience of an audience. In *The Hothouse*, the action slows down somewhat in the scenes leading up to the climax. If that is a minor flaw, I emphasize "if," for who am I to judge a Nobel laureate, it is in the writing, not the performance. See it through; it is worth it.

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