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The Hothouse Review – Trouble is Brewing

🕒 February 1, 2018 👤 Elaine Mura 📁 Entertainment



**Peter Van Norden and Jocelyn Towne in THE HOTHOUSE - Photo by
Geoffrey Wade Photography**

Black comedy and absurd plotting run rampant in playwright Harold Pinter's THE HOTHOUSE. Although the play was written in 1958, it did not premiere until 1982 – with Pinter himself as director in the British production. In the late 1970's, Pinter had remarked, "It was a fantasy when I wrote it, but now it has become, I think, far more relevant...reality has overtaken it." He was undoubtedly thinking of the Soviet Union's practice of sending political dissidents to asylums.



Peter Van Norden and Graham Hamilton – Photo by Geoffrey Wade Photography

But is THE HOTHOUSE, a sinister “government institution,” in fact a mental hospital? It’s hard to tell, since “the hothouse” is sometimes referred to as “a rest home” and “a sanitorium;” and residents are variously called “patients” and “citizens” known by numbers rather than names. In 1954 – a few years before the struggling writer even wrote THE HOTHOUSE – Pinter signed up as a research subject for “ten bob or something” at London’s Maudsley Hospital. He was given headphones through which piercingly loud sounds unexpectedly emerged – an experience which eventually found its way into THE HOTHOUSE. Beware where past memories may later be resurrected.



J.D. Cullum, Paul Eiding, Jocelyn Towne, Rob Nagle, Peter Van Norden, John Apicella, and Graham Hamilton – Photo by Geoffrey Wade Photography

Pinter described one of his key characters, Roote, as “a minor dictator in a microcosm of society, and yet he’s clearly in a lot of pain.” Pinter goes on to describe Roote as a man who follows orders regardless of the consequences: “What’s interesting is that we’re all capable of this.” Pinter himself played Roote, in a 1995 revival of *THE HOTHOUSE* – suggesting his emotional connection to the story. Roote (Peter Van Norden) is the administrator of the mysterious government-run facility. His assistant is Gibbs (Graham Hamilton), a yes-man with higher aspirations. The kittenish Ms. Cutts (Jocelyn Towne) is secretary to Roote and lover to both. The aptly-named Lush (Rob Nagle) occasionally works between drinks and flattering the boss.



Jocelyn Towne and Peter Van Norden - Photo by Geoffrey Wade Photography

But trouble is brewing. One of the male residents recently died under what might be considered suspicious circumstances. Around the same time, one of the female residents delivered a baby whose paternity is in question. While this all sounds pretty heavy duty, Pinter manages to dig out the humor with surgical precision. In his hands, this is really funny stuff, a comic but scathing indictment of bureaucracy and the people it spawns.



Paul Eiding, J.D. Cullum, Graham Hamilton, Jocelyn Towne, John Apicella, Rob Nagle, and Peter Van Norden - Photo by Geoffrey Wade Photography

Is THE HOTHOUSE a comic tragedy or a tragic comedy? Director Nike Doukas delivers the answer with skill, pulling no punches when defining the weaknesses of “the system,” but also eking out every chuckle inherent in the piece. Doukas walks the fine line between laughter and tears with the able assistance of a talented cast. Each actor makes the role his own, exuding an intriguing sincerity while navigating these absurd waters. These are unbelievable people who become all too real. As always in Antaeus productions, THE HOTHOUSE is partner cast (Ducks and Pelicans). This reviewer observed the “Ducks,” one of the two alternating groups.

Se Hyun Oh’s scenic design makes good use of the space, while Julie Keen’s costumes, Jeff Gardner’s sound, and especially Ginevra Lombardo’s lighting keep the audience focused and intrigued. As might be expected from Pinter’s approach to the world, the ending is a bit ambiguous but nonetheless involving.

SPLASH SELECTION

THE HOTHOUSE runs through March 11, 2018, with performances at 8 p.m. on Thursdays and Fridays, at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. on Saturdays, and at 2 p.m. on Sundays. The Antaeus Theatre Company performs at the Kiki and David Gindler Performing Arts Center, located at 110 East Broadway, Glendale, CA 91205. Tickets range from \$30 to \$34. For information and reservations, call 818-506-1983 or go [online](#).