



Peter Van Norden, left, and Graham Hamilton star in Harold Pinter's savage *The Hothouse*. Geoffrey Wade Photography

Revival of Pinter's Rarely Produced Government Satire Fails to Find Its Political Teeth

BILL RADEN | JANUARY 30, 2018 | 6:34AM

If the world is a vastly different place since Harold Pinter wrote *The Hothouse*, his savage Orwellian satire of corrupt state power only gets more prescient with age. Penned in 1958 but famously shelved until 1980, its pitch-black lampoon of a daftly incompetent head of a secret government torture facility and his backbiting, Machiavellian staff uncannily anticipates both the euphemistic “enhanced interrogations” of Abu Ghraib as well as some of the more surreally sociopathic posturings of the current commander in chief.

While that might be reason enough to cheer any *Hothouse* revival in the age of Trump, the production being mounted by Antaeus Theatre Company in Glendale seems to have misplaced some of the play’s more pointed political incisors. Which is not to say that director Nike Doukas’ otherwise glossy staging doesn’t deliver its share of charms.

Take Peter Van Norden’s letter-perfect comic portrayal of Roote, the aging British ex-colonel who oversees the “rest home” for patients “specially recommended by the ministry” from the institutional-drab confines of designer Se Hyun Oh’s photorealist office set. (Josh Clark alternates in the role in the double-cast production.) In Van Norden’s hands, Roote is a study in doddering impotence – an aging bureaucrat who has risen far above his ability, stayed far too long in his decline, and whose sheer ineptitude is held in barely concealed contempt by his scheming, condescending subordinates, the adderlike Gibbs (played to icy, Pinterseque precision by Graham Hamilton) and the insubordinately louche Lush (Rob Nagle).

In Act 1, whose morbid black comedy is triggered by Roote’s confusion over the identities of patient 6457, who has died of “heart failure,” and of patient 6459, who has given birth on Christmas Day after being raped by one of the staff, Van Norden’s ineffectual fluster is the stuff of farce, a caricature of

feebleness and harmlessness cut from the broad cloth of the old Britcom *Fawlty Towers*. The problem comes later, in Act 2, when the deepening horror of the play's political undertow is supposed to emerge in Roote's psychic unraveling. Though Van Norden's rendering of a comic drunk descending into his cups is meticulous, its toothlessness is too geared at familiar laughs to muster the requisite edge of danger.

To some degree, that innoxiousness is offset by the lethal toxicity Hamilton brings to the ambitious henchman Gibbs, particularly in his scenes with the fine Jocelyn Towne as the hospital's silky but psychopathic staff nymphomaniac, Miss Cutts. The pair are perhaps at their most chillingly effective in the play's most explicit set piece, in which they don lab coats and treat Lamb (a florid JD Cullum), the hospital's hapless, asexual milquetoast of a warder, to an "examination" (i.e., gleefully sadistic electrocution) aimed at extracting his unlikely confession as the impregnator of patient 6459.

Unfortunately, such moments are rare in a production plagued by the director's penchant for soft choices, under-imagined execution and a reflexive grasp for the easy laugh. Ironically, even the music-hall slapsticks and language-game routines that Pinter includes mostly fall flat and sometimes lack any sense at all. Missed opportunities abound. Typical is a repeated non sequitur in which Doukas has the actors casually look out of what appear to be Roote's opaquely frosted windows but comment on what they see outside as if the view is crystal clear. ("The snow has turned to slush," Nagle parrots in one of the evening's more emblematic lines.) Why not deal with the blinding reality of the obscured glass? It may seem a minor quibble, but it's enough to repeatedly take the audience out of the scene.

As in any underweight Pinter production, especially with an ensemble at Antaeus' enviable level of craft, the flaws ultimately can be traced to a fundamental lack of faith by the director in the playwright's language. Pinter's comedy of menace is located between the words, in the legendary pregnant pauses where its characters' search for the polite euphemism always bristles with the darkest connotations. His language, Pinter reminded in his 2005 Nobel Prize acceptance (in which he also cited Abu Ghraib), is "a highly ambiguous transaction, a quicksand, a trampoline, a frozen pool which might give way under you." In this Antaeus *Hothouse*, regrettably, the ice remains firm and the slush is only occasionally felt.

*Antaeus Theatre Company, 110 E.
Broadway, Glendale; through March 11.
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