


The Hothouse

 Michael Van Duzer [Reviews - Theater](#)



Van Norden, Hamilton. Photo credit Geoffrey Wade.

Harold Pinter's *The Hothouse* is not one of his oft-produced masterworks like *The Homecoming*, *The Caretaker*, *Old Times*, or *Betrayal*. The play was written in the late 50's – Pinter's youthful experimental period. But it remained unproduced until he dusted it off and made some revisions for a 1980 premiere.

The setting is a bureaucratic nightmare of a mental institution where the inmates have been relegated to numbers, and the feckless staff drink heavily, file endless papers, and play futile power games. Roote (Peter Van Norden) is the titular head of the government-run organization, but he's completely ineffectual and seems well past any real interest in leadership. But he reflexively battles every threat to his position, particularly those coming from his alarmingly efficient assistant, Gibbs (Graham Hamilton), who seems to be truly running the institution.

Gibbs has a chilling shadow side to his character. He makes clandestine use of the asylum's empty rooms for savage torture sessions. This practice also involves the enthusiastic participation

of Miss Cutts (Jocelyn Towne), the secretary/mistress he shares with Roote.

Pinter became a more political writer as he matured, and, in *Hothouse*, his satire of casually brutal fascism is particularly pointed. The “lunatics are running the asylum” trope was popular from the late 50’s through the early 70’s in books, stage, film, and anthology TV series. The 1980 appearance of *Hothouse* somewhat undercuts the play’s effectiveness as the nightmarish elements feel slightly familiar.

The shock in the early Pinter masterpieces is his introduction of a subtle menace creeping into suburban living rooms and bedrooms. The absurdist elements and hotly pitched verbal battlegrounds Pinter revels in are jarring in a conventional setting. In a madhouse, they feel almost expected. Pinter has always used a uniquely sly humor. In *Hothouse*, one sees him exercising a more overtly comic style. He goes so far as to employ his own variant on a “spit take.”

But, if *Hothouse* is lesser Pinter, it is still smarter, edgier and more compelling than the work of most other playwrights. Director Nike Doukas has a keen understanding of all the technical elements necessary for making the words sing. But, even more importantly, she urges her talented cast to create wonderfully diverse characters within a consistent style.

Van Norden’s Roote is all bluster and impotence, while Hamilton’s unctuous Gibbs is quick to dispense with the servile act to reveal the fiend beneath the surface. Towne ably portrays one of Pinter’s glacial temptresses, while Rob Nagle wins some of the best laughs in the show as the not-quite-exemplary employee, Lush. JD Cullum’s beautifully open simplicity touches our hearts as the hapless (sacrificial) Lamb.

As always with Antaeus productions, the roles are partner cast. I saw The Ducks, but you may experience The Pelicans or a mixture of the two casts. Whichever actors you see, this exceptional production of a little-seen Pinter play should be on the watch list for every passionate playgoer.

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