



Regional Reviews: Los Angeles

The Hothouse Antaeus Theatre Company Review by [Sharon Perlmutter](#)

Harold Pinter makes sure you don't miss what's going on in *The Hothouse*—it's right there in the characters' names. Lush frequently has a glass in his hand; Lamb is way too innocent to have a chance among the manipulative wolves he is surrounded by; and if you're looking for the cause of everyone's problems, well, you won't go too far afield if you start with Roote.

That said, I applaud the director's note for the production at Antaeus Theatre Company, in which Nike Doukas advises us to not read the note and just appreciate the play with no preconceived notions. Because, although the script sometimes lacks subtlety, there are still some surprises for the uninitiated, and it is an adventure to experience a Pinter play fresh.



Peter Van Norden and Graham Hamilton

Photo by Geoffrey Wade Photography

The play focuses on the dysfunctional staff of an insane asylum of some sort, and the power struggles amongst them. At the top of the pyramid is Roote, played at the performance reviewed by Peter Van Norden. (Like all productions at Antaeus, *The Hothouse* is double-cast.) Roote is nominally in charge, but it is clear that he is not the best man for the job. What is unclear, at least at first, is whether Roote is simply a moron or affirmatively malicious. But every so often, a comment comes out of his mouth which is so absurdly offensive—such as his idea that staff sex with patients is okay as long as you wear a condom and write up a report on its possible therapeutic effect—you realize you're dealing with incompetence which defies description with mere words.

His second in command is Gibbs, played by Graham Hamilton. There is no real question as to the level of Gibbs's malevolence—and if there were, it is quickly resolved a few scenes in (at the expense of the unfortunate Mr. Lamb). But the real heart of the play involves the interactions between Roote and Gibbs. The play opens on Gibbs informing Roote about some things about which Roote really ought to already know—such as the death of a patient a couple days previous, another patient giving birth (Roote didn't know she was pregnant), and even what day it was (Christmas). Van Norden's Roote is clueless, and Hamilton's Gibbs is triumphant in pointing out to the man how little he actually knows. Each man keeps

trying to make the other look bad (even if there is nobody watching except us). Gibbs feels superior in his knowledge of the facts, and taunts Roote with it; Roote, for his part, enjoys pointing out to Gibbs that Roote is in charge and Gibbs must do his bidding.

And *this* is what the play is really about—a power struggle between an idiot-in-chief who genuinely believes he is doing good for the people in his care, and his subordinate who is supposed to keep everything running smoothly, but has his own agenda.

Others also sense the vacuum in leadership at the top, and put their own machinations into play. Lush (Rob Nagle), a man who enjoys listening to himself speak almost as much as he enjoys his whiskey, uses amiable charm to wheedle his way into Roote's graces. And Jocelyn Towne plays Cutts, a woman who (as in many other scripts) has realized that sex is her biggest power, so she'll happily lie down with Roote or Gibbs in order to get what she wants. (She has a delightful early scene with the nerdy Lamb. Their dialogue has him reaching out to her in friendship; but he also reaches out to her in an awkward physical way. She silently rejects him and walks away—which makes sense; Lamb has no power so there is nothing for Cutts to gain by a sexual relationship with him. But it is also a moment which takes on added meaning in the #metoo era; the unwanted pass and its wordless rejection are all too familiar.)

The production is definitely effective, but at times I wished the performances went for more depth than the stereotypical character names might suggest. Gibbs, in particular, comes off as a snake from his first interactions with Roote; I would have preferred a bit more toadying before his true nature is revealed. As it is, Roote's distrust of him seems justifiable; it would be more interesting if Gibbs initially seemed to be helping Roote and Roote's distrust came off as paranoia. Here, we knew who we were dealing with from the start, and the only question left in the play is how far Gibbs is willing to go.

Also of note is particularly good work from sound designer Jeff Gardner, both in setting the stifling scene and in conveying some very key plot points by sound alone. Less effective is Bo Foxworth's fight choreography, although it might simply have been that this particular pairing of actors was under-rehearsed on the fight. In any event, it is unfortunate that what should be a revelatory insight into the capacity for violence of one of our characters is, instead, a moment when we are thrown out of the play thinking the timing of the fight is very badly off.

The Hothouse, through March 11, 2018, at 110 E Broadway, Glendale CA. For tickets and information, see www.Antaeus.org.

Antaeus Theatre Company presents *The Hothouse* by Harold Pinter. Directed by Nike Doukas. Scenic Designer: Se Hyun Oh; Costume Designer: Julie Keen; Lighting Designer: Ginerva Lombardo; Sound Designer: Jeff Gardner; Props Designer: Erin Walley; Dialect Coach: Lauren Lovett-Cohen; Fight Choreographer: Bo Foxworth; Production Stage Manager: Jeanne Valleroy.

Cast:

Roote: Josh Clark/Peter Van Norden
Gibbs: Graham Hamilton/Leo Marks
Cutts: Melanie Lora/Jocelyn Towne
Lamb: JD Cullum/Steve Hofvendahl
Lush: Adrian LaTourelle/Rob Nagle
Tubb: John Bobek/Paul Eiding
Lobb: John Apicella/Gregory Itzin