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THEATER REVIEW

Pinter's 1958 gem still holds meaning

by Charlotte Stoudt

In 1958, almost 50 years before America became the Colbert Nation, before Steve Carell ran "The Office" and W. was leader, Harold Pinter wrote a dark little play about pain and power called "The Hothouse" and put it in a drawer. He later directed it, in 1980, but his second full-length play remains one of this modern master's least known works.

Now the fledgling Unknown Theater company has staged a stunning, spooky, hilarious production of the 2005 Nobel Prize winner's savage farce about psyches running amok at a British mental institution on Christmas Eve. In a grim-looking office, designed with industrial gloom by Chris Covics, deadpan assistant Gibbs (a sublime Art Oden) informs his blustering boss, Roote (a titanicly oblivious Abner Genece), that one of the patients has just given birth. Roote is astonished. How could this happen? After all, male staff members are required to use protection during all sexual encounters with patients.

Meanwhile, Gibbs and the lascivious Cutts (Kirsten Beyer) begin a series of rather appalling experiments on the institute's lock-keeper, the hapless Lamb (Dam Kempen), and the disgruntled Lush (Jason Guess) tries repeatedly to turn off those infernal, overheating radiators. The revolving set turns faster and faster from one scene to the next, a kind of demonic narrative carousel, as the secrets and lies and electric shocks begin to bubble and stew into quite a nasty Christmas pudding.

"Hothouse" is a bureaucratic ghost story about the revenge of the repressed and the dizzying gulf between what is spoken and what is not. Director Christopher Cappiello, a strong design team and a pitch-perfect cast bring this piece to ferocious theatrical life, mining Pinter's notoriously difficult language-landscape of absurdity and menace to strike theatrical gold.

But it's the play's uncanny relevance that endows it with creepy prophetic power. Now we all live in a global hothouse, in a climate that feels both meteorologically and politically unsustainable.

Which is all to say that "The Hothouse" does what only theater can do best: bring you closer to home by taking you on a ride, punch you in the gut by making you laugh, tell the truth with a pack of lies.

Unmissable.

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'The Hothouse'

Where: Unknown Theater, 1110 Seward St., Hollywood

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays; 6 p.m. Sundays

Ends: July 1

Price: \$18 to \$24

Contact: (323) 466-7781

Running time: 2 hours