

Uncomfortable 'Hothouse' will make you sweat

By Evan Henerson, Theater Critic

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After "The Birthday Party" and "The Dumb Waiter" and just before "The Caretaker," Harold Pinter (he of the recent Nobel Prize victory) wrote a peculiar little play called "The Hothouse," which not too many people have seen. Pinter left the work deliberately unproduced for more than 20 years.

The 7-month-old Unknown Theater apparently takes its appellation seriously, giving "The Hothouse" a rare and creepily good revival. Pinter lovers who don't know the play may not recognize the playwright's hand in this tale of abuse, torture and gamesmanship — whee! — in a mental institution. Those who know the play will appreciate what a small theater has been able to do with it.

Grim and unsettling, Christopher Cappiello's production certainly is, from the play's already thorny premise to the special effects, most notably David Permenter's ghostly sound design. That the play is also quite funny demonstrates both that Pinter — even as a relative pup — had a voice like few others and that Cappiello's cast and staging are in sync with the play's demands.

On Christmas Day, the institution's director, one Col. Roote (played by Abner Genece), is informed by one of his orderlies, Gibbs (Art Oden), that there has been a death and a birth on the ward. It's a little tricky to figure out exactly who has died and who has given birth since the patients are identified by numbers instead of names. But Roote thinks he may know them both. Gibbs, dispatched to find the father, harbors suspicions of his own.

In another wing of the building, new employee Lamb (Daniel Kempen) flirts meekly with dramatics instructor Cutts (Kirsten Beyer), unaware that she is mistress both to Roote and Gibbs. Another fringe employee, Lush (Jason Guess), knows a few more secrets than either Roote or Gibbs wants him to know. The understaff sends Roote a cake and asks the director to give an uplifting Christmas Day address.

An impressive turntable set (Chris Covics is listed as the production's designer) spins scene locations into place — including the director's office, a recreation room and an interrogation room. Moans and grizzly laughs ring periodically through a scene as though the noise were filtering through the very plumbing. An "experiment" scene with Lamb being led distinctly to slaughter is stomach-churning.

Amid all this, Cappiello and the cast never forget to tap the play's humor. Genece's Roote, a big balloon of a man, is all officiousness and bluster upholding rules and morals that he appears to be making up on the spot. It's a great role, and Pinter himself enacted it when "The Hothouse" was revived in 1995.

Oden is terrific, as well. Playing a character whose upper lip never unstiffens, the actor never acknowledges that his character is employed in a place of chaos. Beyer and Guess are jauntily offbeat as the institution's vamp and schemer, respectively.

It should come as no surprise that Pinter had an effort like this within him. Good to know that small, adventurous companies like Unknown Theater are out scouring the dramatic archives for hidden or neglected treasures.

THE HOTHOUSE

Our rating: ★★☆☆

Where: Unknown Theater, 1110 N. Seward St., L.A.

When: 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 6 p.m. Sunday; through July 1.

Tickets: \$18 to \$24. (323) 466-7781 or visit www.unknowntheater.com.

In a nutshell: In this rarely produced Pinter work, the inmates should indeed be running the asylum.