

From Theo Spring 27<sup>th</sup> February 2020

The Hothouse  
Chipstead Players  
Courtyard Theatre  
Chipstead

Reviewed by Theo Spring

The Hothouse – a conundrum? An enigma? A paradox? As the playwright is Pinter, it is more likely that the play is a riddle to be solved – but which may well have different interpretations by different people. The programme denotes the period (a time in the 1960s) and explains the rooms. It does not tell you anything about the building these rooms are in. We do know it is Christmas Day.

The play opened with an often comic conversation between the head of the ‘enterprise’ and his subordinate Gibbs, who must never fail to address him as Sir. Mel Morgan, in charge as Roote, delivered the gamut of personality from being the boss, to anger, frustration, flirtation and a major reaction to the heat in his office – hence at least one reason for the play’s title. Undermining Roote, all the time, with an obsequious oiliness of which both Uriah Heep and Jeeves would have been proud, Nick Foster kept Gibbs’ secrets and knowledge just under the surface, with an evil, coated in politeness, sometimes slyly revealing itself.

Let’s agree that we are in some kind of an institution. There are references to patients, and sometimes their cries of anguish are heard. On the staff with the sole responsibility of locking all doors and letting no-one in, the hapless Lamb was subjected to what amounts to psychological as well as white noise anguish and he, it transpired, was eventually the scapegoat father of an inmate’s new baby boy. My mind raced over the possibility of pairing the, initially, unknown father with the birth of a boy on Christmas Day, but that was really outpintering Pinter!

Scott Latham’s jolly, gung ho, slightly puzzled Lamb kept him buoyant even through what amounted to torture. Pinter aptly naming the character to be a lamb to the slaughter. With the same idea, Neil Black brought Lush to life. Subordinate to Roote, his body language and conversation spoke otherwise, revealing a knowledge and disdain for his superior whilst also achieving a knowing conspiracy with Gibbs. Add to the scene a Mistress for Roote – Laura Worley as the fickle femme fatale Miss Cutts, who bestowed her favours where they could be to her best advantage. Contrasts are underlined by the menacing institutionalisation inferred, against the

handyman Tubb – played for normality by Nick Gane- who appeared in the office with a Christmas cake gift for Roote together with a request for him to broadcast a Christmas message to the patients, the staff and the understaff. A request which sent Roote into a self-doubting spin.

Waiting patiently for his brief appearance at the end of the play, John Shepherd as Lobb had what, at first, is a reasonably normal conversation with Gibbs, who finds it hard to hide his glee in reporting many deaths which have occurred, the cause of which has, strangely, not included him.

As the curtain went up, Alan Croft's multi-roomed set offered a reassurance of ordinariness, with its office and adjacent sitting room, yet boded ill with its electrically kitted-out sound proof room with its disturbing lighting by designer and operator James Willis. Props Manager was Mags Alexander who helped to create an air of the era. Just a small thought though – the whisky heavily consumed during Act II had no resemblance to whisky at all, being colourless. A difficult problem to solve when Roote, making a point, kept throwing the liquid in Lush's face. A hint of a cake icing colourant in the obvious water perhaps?

So just what did go on within these walls? Who were the patients? We are told they were unable to leave and that one had died. We know they were known by numbers instead of by their names. What we don't know and never find out, is why they were there, what they had done wrong and, as a further puzzle, why were those in charge forced to work all the time – including Christmas Day?

Chris Hearn directed this quite disturbing play, fortunately enhancing the lighter moments. The music he chose added an apt eeriness and his excellent cast certainly got to grips with the varied characters they portrayed.