

NEW REPERTORY THEATRE

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A PINTER DUET: THE LOVER & ASHES TO ASHES

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR AND ACTORS

The second season of Downstage @ New Rep started with a boom – *tick, tick...BOOM!* – the hip contemporary rock musical from the creator of *RENT*. It was the first-ever musical in this series, which is dedicated to presenting shows with an edge and varying the way theatre is experienced.

For the last two productions of the Downstage series, New Rep is offering two pairs of plays in two different ways. The first production, *A Pinter Duet*, presents two Harold Pinter one-acts: *The Lover* and *Ashes to Ashes*. Both plays are gritty examinations of the inner workings of adultery—first, how it can titillate and excite in *The Lover*, then, how it can hurt and destroy in *Ashes to Ashes*. Because they speak so well to each other, both of these plays will be performed in the same night, with an intermission between them.

To wrap up the season, we will be presenting two more one-act plays, this time in rotating repertory. *My Name is Rachel Corrie* is a one-woman biographical play about a 23-year-old activist who was killed by a bulldozer protesting the destruction of Palestinian homes. *Pieces* is a one-woman autobiography about Zohar Tirosh, a female soldier in the Israeli army. Written when she was 23 years-old, the play, performed by the author, documents the two turbulent years of her life in the Middle East. The production, called *Their Voices Will Be Heard*, offers two views about the current state of the Middle East and aims to inspire a conversation about our shared world. These plays will be performed on a rotating performance schedule. If you are an Enthusiast or Downstage Subscriber, you already have tickets to both shows! If not, be sure to check our website at www.newrep.org, or call the Box Office at 617-923-8487 for the complete performance schedule.

To get an inside look at what it's like performing such charged plays in an intimate setting, we asked Rick Lombardo, the director, and Rachel Harker and Stephen Russell, the two actors in *A Pinter Duet*, about their experiences working on this show at Wellfleet Harbor Actor's Theatre a few years ago and bringing it back now as part of the Downstage @ New Rep series in the Black Box Theater.

Rick, what gave you the idea to put these two one-act plays into one evening?

RIK LOMBARDO: The first time we worked on these two pieces was for a production for Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theatre, so it was really their idea. I think Jeff Zinn, their Artistic Director, was looking for a project that might be right for me and Rachel to do together. I loved both plays and saw how they could inform each other by being performed in the same evening. It was very important to me that both plays be done by the same pair, because I believed the overall experience would be heightened by the casting. I knew we needed a third (the male actor) who would fit right in to this world, and Stephen Russell instantly came to my mind. He had already worked with me at New Rep, and with Rachel previously at Wellfleet, so we would all be going into the short original rehearsal period with a good deal of shared history, which is crucial, I think, for this type of work.

What made you want to remount them?

RL: I think we all felt that the original run was too short, and that not enough people experienced these plays. They were planned at Wellfleet to just be an "off-night" production on Mondays and Tuesdays during the run of another show, and we were all surprised by both the

critical and audience response that the production received once we opened. The run sold out very quickly and we had the most remarkable audience discussions after performances. I also feel this type of theatre event, with the unusual format of two short plays in one evening, plays that pose complex and often perplexing questions, is a natural fit with the type of alternative programming I hope to see us continue to present in the Downstage Series.

What is the draw for you about working on the same plays again?

RACHEL HARKER: When you return to a play, especially after several years, you see things in it differently. The opportunity to dig further into these plays and find more “gems” is rare. And with Pinter, what you see is never what you get.

What do you enjoy about working with Rick and Stephen?

RH: They are both such wonderfully talented and collaborative artists. Stephen always inhabits his characters so fully, that most of my work is done for me. I just react to him. And Rick is the kind of director that challenges an actor to do more, go further... there is no safe acting with him in the room.

You have been on our Mainstage a number of times, most recently in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This past March you spent months on an Off-Broadway stage. What do you anticipate the challenges and rewards of working in a black box again will be?

RH: This is a challenge I am going to entrust the director with. He will let me know if things are too big for the space. When we did these plays at WHAT, the space was even smaller, and I expect that enough of the experience remains with me to be able to adapt to the smaller venue. I am really looking forward to being in the Black Box. I love the proximity of the audience in smaller theatres, I actually prefer it.

Stephen, what do you enjoy about working with Rick and Rachel?

STEPHEN RUSSELL: They're both dedicated artists, but both delightfully playful as well. I like creating theatre with people who take the work seriously but don't take themselves seriously, who understand that they're called “plays” for a reason. When the three of us got together to work on the first production it already felt like a very comfortable working relationship. I remember laughing quite a lot during rehearsals that first time around.

What was your favorite part about acting in these two plays at WHAT?

SR: That's a tough one because everything came together so beautifully for that production.

The peculiar blend of humor, menace and elliptical language was enormously appealing to me then, and my great discovery when I finally got to work on Pinter was that he's as much fun to play as he is to watch. There's a richness of thought and language that I don't find in many other contemporary writers.

What is the draw for you about working on the same plays again?

SR: There are some plays that continue to tantalize and tease, even after you've worked on them for weeks or months, and these two plays fall into that category. I suspect that when this run is over I still will not have explored every corner of these elusive and complex plays, and I like that challenge.

Stephen, you are our first returning actor to the Black Box Theater after performing in last season's *White People*. What are the challenges and rewards of working in such a small space?

SR: The space actually feels pretty comfortable for me, perhaps because it so closely resembles the Harbor Stage at WHAT - the size of the house, the wide, shallow stage - where I've worked so often over the last twenty years and where the first production was mounted. I guess I'm sort of a less-is-more kind of actor (as opposed to a Roger Moore kind of actor) and I like a space where I can work in detail, where a raised eyebrow may be all one needs to say.

Rick, This will be your first time directing a Downstage @ New Rep show. What are you most looking forward to about it?

RL: The intimacy of the space, of course. These plays, especially *Ashes to Ashes*, would be very uncomfortable in our larger house. In the tight confines of the Black Box it will be possible to create the sense of claustrophobia and intensity of feeling that the plays require. Also, I think a visit back to such a small space will make me feel like I'm back home again in our former home in Newton Highlands!