



Rush Rehm and Kay Kostopoulos play a couple testing the limits of their marriage.

Savoring Pinter's language

'The Lover' challenges, satisfies

by Rebecca Wallace

Like an English trifle, Stanford Summer Theater's production of "The Lover" is a many-layered treat.

There's the delicious chemistry between Rush Rehm and Kay Kostopoulos as Richard and Sarah, a proper couple testing the limits of their 10-year marriage. There's the joy of watching two practiced actors reveling in meaty roles. And there are the heady words of renowned playwright Harold Pinter.

Pinter's language, of course, is the reason the pieces have been put together. The production of his 1963 play is part of a festival celebrating his 75th birthday with plays and films for which he wrote the screenplays. It runs through Aug. 8 on the Stanford University campus.

The curtain came up July 14 with a Pinter double feature. "The Lover" was preceded by a 10-minute starter: Pinter's 1969 piece "Night," in which Rehm and Kostopoulos play another married couple, this time trying to remember pieces of their past.

Jeffrey Bihr, director of both works, has described Richard and Sarah in "The Lover" as "two mating panthers circling each other," and the comparison is apt. The balance of power constantly shifts as the actors revel in the intricacies and intimacies of the relationship,

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which sparks with secrets, role-playing, sexy shoes and lots of whispering.

Pinter puts it all together with a complex storytelling style, filled with dramatic pauses and purposeful ambiguity. It's seen by some as an acquired taste.

My companion felt the ambiguity was unnecessary and a little tedious. He also thought "Night" blurred into "The Lover"; he didn't see many differences between the plays' two couples.

As for me, these were the first Pinter plays I'd seen, and I was immediately taken with the way the writer peels the layers off a story, revealing just a little bit here, a little bit there. As in Richard and Sarah's relationship, there's something compelling about not knowing exactly where we stand. This is no simple tale of a businessman heading off to work and his wife cavorting all afternoon with a lover. Or maybe it is.

"The Lover" is made even more enticing by the knowledge that we're in capable acting hands.

Rehm is remarkable as Richard, at turns touching, frightening and inviting. He can transform himself so completely with facial expressions, accents and ways of movement that at times he is unrecognizable.

In one moment, Rehm visibly savors Pinter's language as he says, with a faint smile, "But I haven't got a mistress; I'm very well acquainted with a whore."

Kostopoulos leaves herself less room for metamorphosis, giving her Sarah so much sensuality early on that she doesn't have as far to go when the bedroom games begin. Even the words "It's a cold supper" are breathy sweet nothings.

Still, there are moments when she erupts with passion. And overall it's a well-nuanced performance, flavored with the right amount of pathos. At one point in the middle, Sarah's sudden vulnerability is touching as she says softly, "But it's you I love."

Chad Bonaker's set is the perfect backdrop for the love play, with a chaise lounge, a dark wood bar dripping with wealth, and an elegant window. Kostopoulos doesn't let any of it go to waste, draping herself over the chaise and pouncing on top of a table.

Before "The Lover," the long table serves as the centerpiece for "Night," in which the two sit at its ends and recount their first amorous evening together. They are separated by more than furniture, though. Both have real pain in their eyes as they realize they're remembering things differently.

Pinter uses his famed pauses to excellent effect here. There are many moving, quiet moments as the two stare at each other or sip their coffee in unison, lost in the silences of a long marriage. ■

What: Stanford Summer Theater festival honoring playwright Harold Pinter, including plays, films, discussions and readings.

Where: Stanford University. "The Lover" and "Night" will be presented in the Pigott Theater; "The Applicant" and "The Collection" will take place in the Eleanor Prosser Studio Theater. The community symposium will be held in the Pigott Theater. Films will be in Building 200, Room 200.

When: "The Lover" and "Night" run together through Aug. 7, Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 7 p.m. "The Collection" and "The Applicant" will be staged together through Aug. 6, Fridays and Saturdays at 10 p.m. Films will be shown Tuesdays at 7:30 p.m.: "The French Lieutenant's Woman" (July 25), "Turtle Diary" (Aug. 5), and "The Handmaid's Tale" (Aug. 8).

Cost: Tickets to the plays range from \$5 to \$12, while the films are free.

Info: Call (650) 725-ARTS or go to www.stanford.edu.