

FESTIVAL ANTIGONISH

'escalates into terrifying absurdity'

The Dumb Waiter: very, very funny

By Elissa Barnard • Halifax Herald • July 26, 2005

People forget how funny Harold Pinter is. "A lot of his writing is **very, very funny**," says Nigel Bennett, an actor, Pinter fan and director of *The Dumb Waiter*, an Exodus Theatre production opening tonight at Festival Antigonish's Late Night Series.

Pinter's 45-minute, 1960 play is about two men employed by an unnamed organization to carry out an unspecified job. They are waiting in the shabby basement of a disused restaurant. Their comic small talk masks a growing anxiety and **escalates into terrifying absurdity** when the ancient dumb-waiter jerks to life.

"Pinter was a big fan of Beckett and there are similarities between these two and Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*," says Bennett, who also compares the two men to Laurel and Hardy and Abbott and Costello. "At times it's like a comic duo, the repartee that's going on there."

Bennett, who is Exodus Theatre's artistic director, starred in Neptune's production of Pinter's *Betrayal* in 2004. "I was surprised by the success of *Betrayal* and the reception. Clearly there's an interest in Pinter.

"I love the detail of the writing and the absurdity of it. There is not a word too many and there is not a word too few. As an actor all you have to do on stage in a way is get up and say the words. **It's so well-written.**"

While Pinter's plays may be almost "actor proof," Bennett has got **two fine actors** for the roles, Jerry Etienne, former artistic director of the Atlantic Theatre Festival, and Dalhousie theatre school graduate David Flemming, with whom Bennett acted in *The Parrsboro Boxing Club* last summer at Ship's Company Theatre.

Bennett was originally going to play the part that Etienne is but he got offered a role in a sci-fi film, which was supposed to start shooting in the U.S. on Aug. 1 and is now postponed until the end of August. "Jerry and I talked about doing the play together when we were in *The Goat* at Neptune and then he couldn't and I could and then I couldn't and he decided he could do it.

"He's a very good actor. It's a real loss that he's not running the Atlantic Theatre Festival but it's a real gain for the acting community. We forget he spent four years at Stratford.

"His take on the character fits what I want and he takes all my notes," says Bennett, with a smile. "And David is an up-and-coming young actor. I think he's going to go far."

Exodus selected *The Dumb Waiter* to perform at this year's Atlantic Fringe Festival. Then Ed Thomason, the new artistic director at Festival Antigonish, overheard Bennett say Exodus was doing the Pinter piece. "It's a play he loves and he said, 'Why don't you do it as a Late Night?'"

Exodus is also taking *The Dumb Waiter* to Wolfville as a fundraiser for the Atlantic Theatre Festival. Working with other companies is "a way we can manage to do more," said Bennett. "Money is very tight at the moment. This is a good way to get work done. We don't have to rent a theatre; that's the big saving."

Exodus still plans to do Ibsen's *Ghosts* at the Neptune Studio Theatre in October if it can raise enough money.



Jerry Etienne, left, and David Flemming (Photo: Peter Parsons)

Exodus was turned down for funding for a planned production of *Edward II*. "Stratford is doing it this year; we would have been doing it before Stratford."

The company is now looking at a production of Brecht's anti-fascist satire, *The Resistable Rise of Arturo Ui*, about the rise of Hitler.

He says Exodus is not the only small company in Halifax not getting Canada Council funding. "I think it's the system at the Canada Council. I don't believe the money is earmarked for the region and I think it should be. It's the same at Telefilm; most of the money goes to the big producers."

The Dumb Waiter is part of Festival Antigonish's Late Night Series tonight through Friday. Call 1-800-563-PLAY.

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