

THEATER REVIEW | 'The Collection,' 'The Lover' and 'Night'

The twists of love, sex and Pinter

Kansas City Actors Theatre pours on the talent in three one-acts.

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Kansas City Actors Theatre's production of three one-act plays by Harold Pinter doesn't offer the same level of excitement as its remarkable production of Pinter's "The Birthday Party." But it does showcase some exceptional performances and consistently captures Pinter's unpredictable sense of humor.

Pinter's plays long ago were dubbed "comedies of menace," which remains an apt description. In "The Birthday Party" the sense of impending doom is palpable, but in this ambitious staging of "The Collection," "The Lover" and "Night," the plays collectively convey a more elliptical sense of unease. In the first two, the longer pieces, the action is driven by sex and betrayal. Or, at the very least, the idea of betrayal.

'The Collection'

Director John Rensenhous illuminates Pinter's oblique plotting with admirable clarity in "The Collection," in which the central question — did two



PHOTOS BY JEFFREY RUMANS

Robert Gibby Brand turns in another strong performance as Harry in "The Collection."

dress designers on a business trip share a one-night stand in a hotel — carries deep implications for two couples.

The play opens when Harry (Robert Gibby Brand in another pitch-perfect performance) comes home from a party at 4 a.m. and receives an anonymous phone call from a man looking for Harry's much younger housemate, Bill (TJ Chasteen, who balances precariously on the brink of archetypal gay caricature).

In another flat, James (crisply played by Brian Paulette) tells his wife and business partner, Stella (a cool and



"The Lover" stars Mark Robbins and Melinda McCrary as a British couple trying to keep their marriage spicy. "Night," below, stars John Rensenhous and Carla Noack as another couple taking a walk down memory lane.



statuesque Carla Noack), that he won't be accompanying her to their dress shop that day.

As it turns out, Stella has told James she did indeed have a hotel-room fling with Bill, and now James is obsessed with meeting the man who cuckolded him. The results permanently alter the emotional landscape for both couples.

Whether Bill and Stella had a sexual encounter remains an open question, and over the play's 60 minutes we hear various versions of what may have happened: They had sex in Stella's room. They talked in

the lounge and talked about going to Stella's room.

The truth, Pinter suggests, matters less than how the perception of the truth is exploited in the personal politics of each relationship. The nice thing is the insistent narrative drive, which Pinter unfolds like a mystery — which, indeed, it is. And which it remains.

'The Lover'

No director is credited for "The Lover," a clever piece about a wife and husband who keep their sex lives interesting through elaborate role-playing, and it's my understanding that

PINTER PROJECT

The one-acts "The Collection," "The Lover" and "Night" run in repertory with "The Birthday Party" through Sept. 11 at the H&R Block City Stage at Union Station. Call 816-235-6222 or go to www.kcactors.org.

The quality of comedy in this piece is of a high order — complex, witty and unpredictable. Ultimately it lacks the philosophical weight we've come to expect from Pinter, but the dialogue and careful construction yield an impressive demonstration of theatrical imagination.

'Night'

The evening of one-acts is capped with a coda — "Night," a short piece in which a married couple, seated comfortably in Adirondack chairs, think back on experiences early in their relationship and discover that their memories are quite different. Rensenhous and Noack deliver relaxed, precise performances that get the most out of this atmospheric vignette. After the crazed emotional highs of the first two plays, this one eases the audience home with a slow fade out. By Pinter's standards, "Night" is almost sentimental.

These plays, being performed in an alternating schedule with "The Birthday Party," are no small accomplishment. They represent one of the principal goals of Kansas City Actors Theatre when it was founded — to showcase underproduced but vital playwrights. Anyone who takes in these productions can be assured of seeing some fine acting and dramatic images they won't be able to get out of their heads.

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MORE SUMMER GARDENING PHOTOS, FROM D1



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

▲ PRESTO, CHANGE-O! MUFFINS!

When the Steffens family of Kansas City harvested this impressive zucchini, mom Christina gave son **Jeremy**, 2 1/2, some options: fried, grilled or muffins? He's had zucchini bread before, so he picked minimuffins.

Jeremy helped water the garden — the Steffenses also planted watermelon, cantaloupe, green beans and carrots, although the carrots flopped. He even helped weed, although he sometimes had a hard time distinguishing "between weeds and the good stuff," Christina says. A lot of us have that problem, Jeremy.

► FOR THE BIRDS

Pauline Cooper, who lives outside Liberty, doesn't have a lot of room for gardening but makes good use of the space along the sides of her house. She's growing two varieties each of cantaloupe (right) and watermelon, along with bell peppers, tomatoes and gourds.

Cooper transforms the gourds into brightly painted wren houses. Some she sells, some she gives away and some she keeps. This year she put four houses out — one on the front porch, the others in trees — and they were immediately occupied. It's fun watching the little birds outfit their new homes with sticks. Plus "wrens are great singers," Cooper says.



◀ GARLIC GIRL

You can't expect to grow something without getting a little dirty. **Paloma Amador**, 3 1/2, helped plant garlic cloves last December. Then when the plants started coming up this spring, she and twin brother Ezekiel IV helped water and weed. And by late June, they had some good-looking hardneck garlic bulbs.

Their dad, Ezekiel, says the family also grew cabbage, broccoli, spinach, lettuce and bush beans in their community garden plot on Kansas City's West Side. Do the kids like veggies? "Well, I didn't give 'em a choice," he says. They're such big fans of broccoli, they'd munch on it right there in the garden.

▼ THREE DELICIOUS FEET

Your "yard-long" cucumbers may not grow to 3 feet, but they're a tasty alternative to regular cukes. **Micky Grover** of Lenexa raised these slim jims in her backyard. "They don't taste exactly like cucumbers," she says. "They're a little crunchier, and you don't have to peel them." She says they're common in India, where she's from. She found the seeds at an Ace Hardware.

Even Grover's two kids love yard-longs. Just sprinkle them with lemon juice and salt, or throw 'em in a salad.

