

# In 'Moonlight,' Pinter stirs emotions both in the lines and between them

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NEWS ARTS WRITER

Pauses still matter in Harold Pinter's dramas, even in a word feast like "Moonlight."

The Brass Tacks Ensemble production of this 1993 play runs only 75 minutes, with perhaps a third of its playing time given over to those silences that make Pinter unique among playwrights. At any moment, shadows shroud this comedy-riffing tragedy. (You heard right). Small portions of the old Performance Network stage are intermittently illuminated, and then only dimly.

The approach fits this very dreamy play. Sixtyish, mortally ill Andy (played by Rob Sulewski) lies stage-right on what's bluntly called his deathbed, even though the patient seems spry enough. Sitting bedside is wife Bel (Anne S. Rhoades), calmly knitting while her husband pontificates on everything from his legacy as a civil servant to his estranged sons to his and Bel's mutually admitted adultery.

Stage left, sons Jake and Fred (Patrick Morgan and Joshua Thorin Messer) share a room, where they often behave like stand-up comedians. They rattle off names and *alternate* names of people with no apparent connection to

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their lives or those of their parents, but who seem crucial all the same.

The feeling is like listening to a more elegant, complex version of Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First." Morgan and Messer are masters of the sometimes avid, sometimes cynical verbosity of it all. Residing in a different world, Sulewski's windy Andy thinks furiously as he talks, his face knotted and whole body quivering with concentration. It's a marvelous performance running the gamut from humorous vitriol to sad delusion, when Andy speaks proudly of his non-existent grandchildren. It's the only subject that breaks Bel's stoic mask.

"Moonlight" seems obsessed with things that should have been. The prime object of Bel and Andy's sorrow is teen-age daughter Bridget (Michelle Mirkin), who wanders about the stage and through the play as a ghost, speaking of her parents while searching for something Pinter never quite reveals.

All Pinter plays are conundrums to varying degrees, and once again those famous pauses work their magic. Andy muses on a memory of a long-ago party: "A woman walked

toward me..." Pause. "That was me," says Bel. Pause. "You?" replies Andy. Long, haunting pause as the scene dims into blackout.

It's hardly surprising that the most powerful moment in "Moonlight" occurs in near-silence. As though in a dream, Andy and Bel search for their lost Bridget, who stands center-stage. The three form a triptych, as Andy and Bel each stare outward — *away* from their unseen daughter.

Playing a ghost isn't the easiest acting job, and Mirkin doesn't quite capture Bridget's ethereality nor her healing presence. Mirkin fares better as a slightly younger real-life Bridget in a telling scene with her brothers that suggests she was the odd-sibling-out in life.

Providing spicy support — and no comfort whatever — are adulterous couple Ralph (James Iganiola) and Maria (Amy Kullenberg), the former a bluff anti-intellectual, the latter a flirtatious snoop. Iganiola's direction reflects much more than a passing empathy for his playwright-hero. Pause here, please.

"Moonlight" runs tonight-Sunday and Feb. 8-11 at 403 W. Washington St. Curtain is 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays. Tickets are \$12 general, \$9 students/seniors. For details, call (734) 332-9000.