‘Birthday Party’: cathartic presentation of reality

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In 1956, in a staid suburban English theater, Harold Pinter’s iconoclastic drama, “The Birthday Party,” was presented for the first time—engaging five hostile audiences before it closed amid a storm of public and critical abuse.

Revived in 1964 by the progressive Royal Shakespeare Company, it became an instant success. In the course of six years, bourgeois sensibilities had either changed or found better defense mechanisms than outright hostility.

For “The Birthday Party” is no mean work; Pinter occupies an artistic position somewhere between Eugene Ionesco and Edward Albee. He incorporates absurdist non-sequiturs from the former and he presages the surreal game structures of the latter. But Pinter is more horrifyingly real than either of these dramatic kin—and more explicit.

Players’ Production

The Rice Players, in their current production of “The Birthday Party,” evoke Pinter adequately, if not excitingly. A combination of creditable acting and knowledgeable interpretation emotes a frightening image of reality, one that is alternately comic and horrifying. Rarely has a Houston dramatic production been so potentially cathartic.

“The Birthday Party” concerns a celebration held in honor of one Stanley Weber—a loner, an eccentric musician with delusions of grandeur, a helpless paranoid who is so defensive that the act of awakening him in the morning is of major concern. Today is his birthday, though he does not realize it or even care.

In the course of this birthday, he is dragged from his womb-like room in a boardinghouse, given life, and then, in a nightmarish scene, methodically deprived of it. Taken on this level, the play becomes a statement of man’s position in a hostile cosmos.

Social Context

But the second act of the play, which includes the crucifying scene in which Stanley is grilled about the sins of his past by two agents of the “Organization” who have thrown the party, suggests a social context at least as important as the cosmic.

At the top of the social structure of the play are Goldberg and McCann, the two agents. They are ordered to annihilate Stanley—not his body, but his sensitivity and intellect. They destroy his vision and reduce him to a polished, well-dressed heap of flesh that can, at best, gurgle and squeak.

These agents of the Organization are automatons: Goldberg is coldly efficient, trained like an animal to respond to any situation by calling on his store of socially-induced instincts. McCann responds to orders with an economy of consideration that suggests complete mechanical submission.

Just barely acceptable is Petey, a deck chair attendant who runs the boarding house and his life with a minimum of static and a similar paucity of words. When he tries to dissuade Goldberg and McCann from taking Stanley away at the end, he himself is nearly abducted. He sells out at the price of Stanley’s life.

His wife Meg is even less acceptable; she loves and cares for Stanley, provides his only link with social reality, treats him like a puppy, even pets him.

Stanley is, of course, totally unacceptable. He has no concept of location and even less of time—much of what he says in the play deals with these abstractions. His metamorphosis is from sight to blindness and back into broken sight: from birth to life to repression, which Pinter likens to death.

Glade in Lead

Roger Glade, cast as Stanley, inevitably dominates the Player’s production. He must maintain that crucial paranoid tension which makes the play so relentlessly electric.Eyeing everybody and every action sus-