

An Aging Ache

Real-life couple revive their roles 17 years later

By Bridgette M. Redman
Argonaut Contributing Writer

Seventeen years ago, Susan Priver and Henry Olek were two years into their marriage when they played a couple in Harold Pinter's "A Slight Ache."

Now, the longstanding couple is returning to the classic work in a visiting production at the Odyssey Theatre that runs from Saturday, Aug. 26, through Sunday, Oct. 1. The play is produced by Dance On Productions in association with Linda Toliver and Gary Guidinger.

Shelly Kurtz also reprises his role as a matchseller, a silent, haunting figure who hovers outside their garden gate.

Described as a "tragicomedy of manners," "A Slight Ache" features the married couple breakfasting in their garden, their meal unsettled by a wasp that keeps circling them and Edward feeling an ache in his eyes.

Jack Heller, who recently directed Priver in "A Streetcar Named Desire," directs this 72-minute show.

Priver said she and Olek were looking for something to do together to mark his return to the stage after a near-nine-year absence. Both enjoyed doing this show the first time and wanted to return to it.

"He finished writing a book not too long ago and he felt like getting back in the arena," Priver said. "This rang true for him, and we wanted to work together so we decided to do it again."

This time their approach has been different, and they've revisited the couple with new life experiences to inform their acting.

"It's an interesting experience doing it again after being a long-term couple and being older," Priver said. "It is written for an older couple anyway. It wouldn't have been a young couple."

She said she also sees many more levels to the character because she has grown as a human and an actress in the intervening 17 years. She describes her instrument as being better tuned, and she is now closer in age to the woman in the story.

Priver appeared in five films over the past 18 months, with the most recent being "Night Caller." She has frequently performed on stage, often taking on the great Tennessee Williams roles. The work, she said, makes her instrument more finely tuned and open.

"There's more complexity to this role as I've gotten older, because we have more layers as we get older," Priver said.

"There is just more depth to your being and within our relationship — there



Henry Olek's Edward watches as Shelly Kurtz's matchseller has an intimate conversation with Susan Priver's Flora, Edward's wife in "A Slight Ache."

are more layers to our relationship. It's not all fun, we're way past the honeymoon phase."

Priver said they have been to take a deep dive into the play because it's meaty. The director and all three actors have spent time teasing out who each character is and what Pinter's sometimes strange, but often brilliant lines, mean.

"There's a lot of psychological play in it about growing older and it is existential about why are we here and who are we within the context of a marriage and within the context of living this sheltered life," Priver said. "Pinter had a thing with class struggle. The third character that Shelly's playing is basically a homeless person."

While Pinter and his writing are very British, Priver said there is a lot of humanity in the characters, something all three of them are working to bring out.

"(Pinter) doesn't write cardboard characters, but he keeps the characters to some extent open," Priver said. "You have to bring in your own quirks, sensibilities and peculiarities to make it a full character."

Priver described her character, Flora, as being a people pleaser, something that she can connect with. The character

is also somewhat ethereal with a love for beauty and gardening.

"She has this side to her that is very appreciative of beauty and is sensitive to nature, and when the wasp comes along, she's scared to death that it is something that could hurt her," Priver said.

"And, even though she's been with this man for so long, she's still very sensitive to his comments. As he's getting more grumpy as he's aged, she wants to make him happier, make him enjoy the things that they do have."

She's also a character who strongly thinks her husband, Edward, should listen to her more and trust her judgment because she's going to take care of things and be the one to solve the problem that bothers him.

"I sort of take over," Priver said. "Pinter writes that in a lot of his plays. If there are women in them, they end up taking over."

She said Edward struggles with aging and his inability to do the things he used to do when he was younger. It's something that leads him to fall apart. Meanwhile, the matchseller becomes a mirror to both of them. For Edward, the itinerant interloper reflects what he cannot do and for Flora, the matchseller reflects how she can become strong.

"The matchseller is really interesting," Priver said. "It's a silent character, but it's a very important character and Shelly did a great job then and he'll do a great job now."

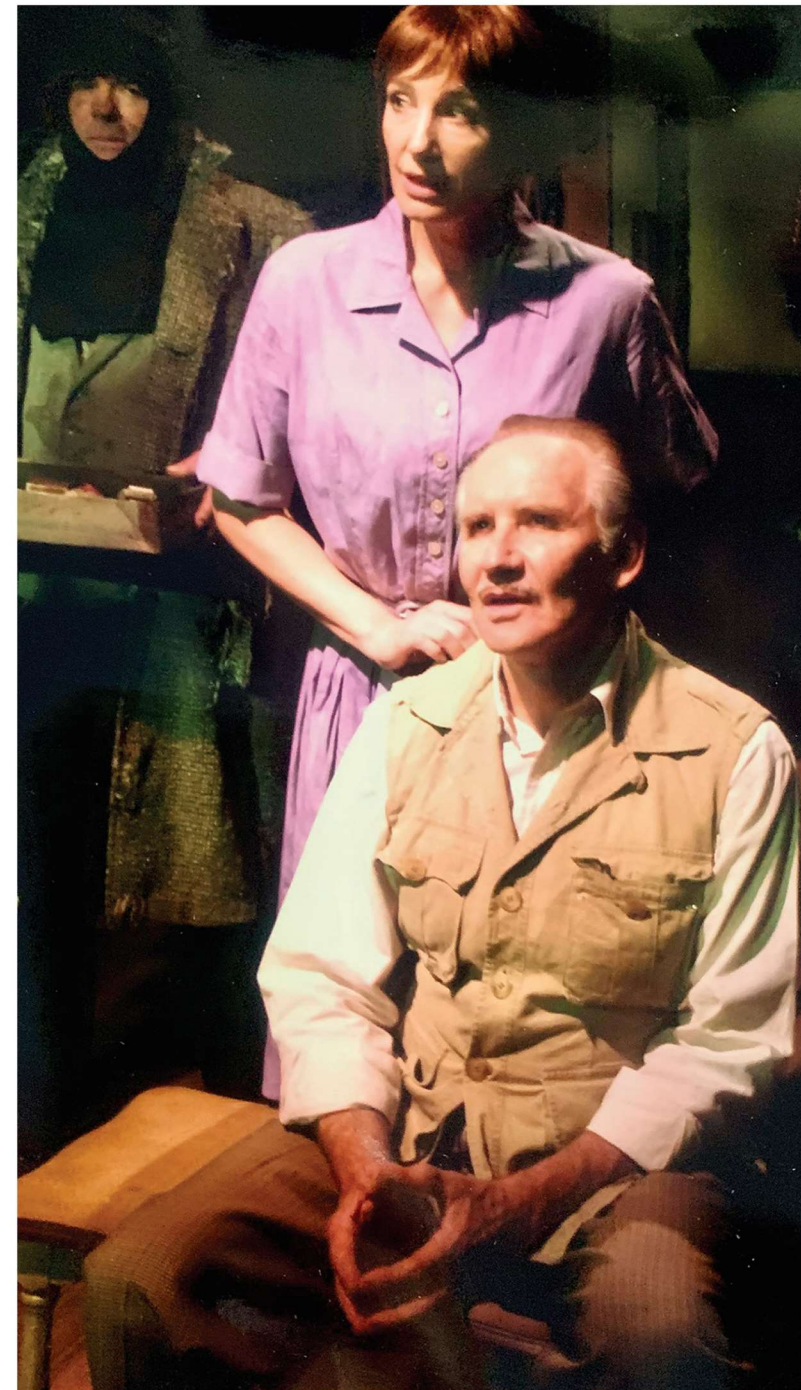
She also praises Heller's direction and the way he has helped all of them find new aspects to their characters.

The play is set in the '60s as it was originally written and some things, she said, don't age the best, but for the most part, the play is timeless because it deals with the human psyche and the fragility of the human spirit.

"It never goes out of fashion because it's truly about human beings," Priver said. "It deals with how people are able to express what they really need to say without being melodramatic. There's no melodrama in Pinter. He's a very deep writer. Within it, there's humor because people are funny."

The play, she said, explores deeply how people deal with loneliness, with aging and with not being able to communicate well with your partner anymore.

Originally conceived for radio, "A Slight Ache" works with a sparse set, something that will be apparent in this



Shelly Kurtz's matchseller shows his wares as husband and wife Flora and Edward (played by real-life partners Susan Priver and Henry Olek) converse.

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production. The costumes are pulled from the upper middle-class closets of the early '60s, though the matchseller will be dressed in many layers of smelly rags. The set, meanwhile, will take on a modern, Dali-inspired look that speaks to the absurdist nature of Pinter's work.

Priver noted people are anxious for community and the feeling of communal joy it brings, especially in these days following the pandemic. It's why people go to the theater, to concerts and to church. It's what she hopes people will find when they come out to the Odyssey Theater.

"There's a communal spirit to theater," Priver said. "It's the community and it's the entertainment. You feel the

energy of the performers and the performers feel the energy of the audience. You don't get that feeling on film." ■

"A Slight Ache" by Harold Pinter; Dance On Productions in association with Linda Toliver and Gary Guidinger

WHEN: Previews Thursday, Aug. 24, and Friday, Aug. 25; performances Saturday, Aug. 26, to Sunday, Oct. 1; 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays

WHERE: Odyssey Theatre, 2055 S. Sepulveda Boulevard, Los Angeles

COST: Tickets start at \$20

INFO: 310-477-2055; odysseytheatre.com

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