

Three men and a stage



Simplicity can be powerful. As a case in point, I offer up the Roundtable Theatre's production of "The Caretaker." The cast of three is small. The set design - a single room filled with clutter - is anything but elaborate. But what develops on the modest stage over two acts is a play that is a rich and evocative treat for the mind and soul.

"The Caretaker," written by Harold Pinter, is a story about three men struggling to cope with poverty, mental illness and loneliness. Mack Davies, played by Jack Johnson, is a freeloading wanderer who is taken in by the quiet and kind Aston (Bruce Dickinson). Mick (Shane Woodson), Aston's younger brother, is a frenzied counterpart to his quiet sibling.

The play begins with a hysterically funny, drunken conversation between Aston and Davies. Davies does most of the talking while Aston punctuates the conversation with frequent grunts and nods of the head. Aston invites the homeless Davies to stay with him. Davies, a hopeless freeloader, quickly agrees. Enter Mick, Aston's manic brother, who starts to casually stir up underlying tension between Davies, who will do anything to survive, and Aston,

who will do anything to keep from being alone. The interaction among the three men starts off friendly, but greed on the part of Davies and Mick starts to take its toll. Davies takes full advantage of his arrangement with Aston.

When he realizes that his freeloading days are numbered, he tries to turn Mick against Aston. What ultimately happens offers a sad glimpse into the nature of humanity and the pain of being alone. Pinter's dialogue is

funny, touching and stunningly real. The dialogue is never trite, and finds a balance between punchy and tender moments. One minute the banter of the characters creates laughter, an instant later you find yourself on the verge of tears. There is no question that this is a well-written script, but it is the acting that makes this play a must-see.

The chemistry among the characters is flawless. This play obviously requires a lot of timing, and this cast did not miss a beat. Jack Johnson (who ironically played Mack Davies 30 years ago at Actors Theatre of Louisville) is an absolute wonder. From the slurred rhythm of his dialogue to the spittle that seems to perpetually run down his

chin, Johnson has the "stinking old man" role down pat. He plays Davies with an honesty that elicits loathing and pity equally from the audience.

Bruce Dickinson as Aston delivers some of the most powerful and haunting moments in the play. His character does not

speaking very often, so Dickinson must let his body movements convey most of the message. Many actors might unintentionally overact, but Aston delivers here with a subtlety that is effective, so that when he does speak, you want to

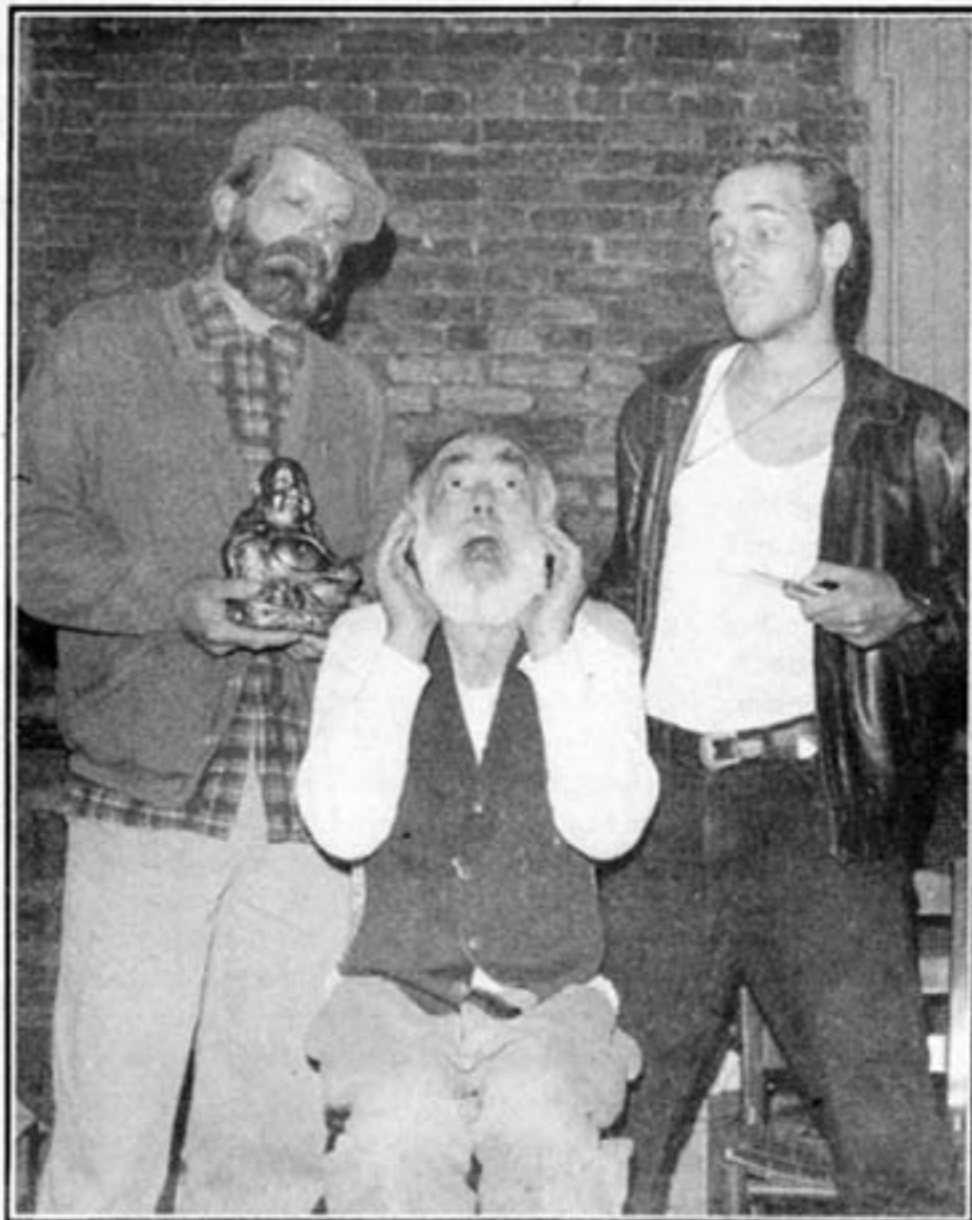
listen. Without a doubt, one of the best scenes of the play is when Aston pours out his heart to a sleeping Davies about his struggle with mental illness. His delivery cuts through all the social clutter and goes straight to the heart.

And where did Shane Woodson get the energy to play the frenzied Mick? Wow! Mick's quick dialogue couldn't possibly be easy to deliver, but Woodson manages a rapid-fire pace of questions and answers that is something like Speedy Gonzalez on amphetamines. It is an effective delivery that offers some of the lighter moments of the play.

"The Caretaker," which was directed by the three actors, is a collaboration among people who work well together. For a theater of this size, this is a first-rate production; a play that gives a real and touching glimpse into the grittier side of humanity.

Elizabeth Vega

THE CARETAKER
 Bruce Dickinson Jack Johnson
 and Shane Woodson
 Written by Harold Pinter
 Directed by the actors
 At the Rudyard Kipling
 through August 24
 "A humorous and touching
 production that shows the
 gutter side of humanity"



The cast of "The Caretaker"
 photo by Jerry Cantrell Jr., Chimera Noir Photography