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## Pinter's hit men, as viewed from above

### THEATER REVIEW: "The Dumb Waiter" by TUTA Theatre Chicago ★★★

Chris Jones

Theater critic

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In order to find your way to Harold Pinter's "The Dumb Waiter," as directed by Zeljko Djukic of the venerable TUTA Theatre Chicago, you must undergo a journey that's decidedly Pinteresque.

You have to find the warehouse, and then the right door, at 2010 W. Fulton Ave. You must ring the bell and receive a buzz (not that they know who you are). You climb some stairs, past an aromatic tea company (aptly enough, for this British play) and head into a little anteroom where you might imbibe a little red wine. At the appointed moment, you climb some tight stairs to what seems like a blank, two-sided corridor located nowhere in particular and with room only for one or two abreast. On Saturday, half the audience kept on going back down the other side, only for a TUTA representative to appear and gently shove everyone back up a second flight of stairs for the big reveal.

That moment, which is worth waiting for, involves the cranking back of a white canvas roof — which opens like a sardine can — revealing a room on the floor below, containing Pinter's famous 1957 hit men, Ben and Gus, chattering and waiting, as Pinter's characters invariably do, for their assignment. As are we all.

Just to be clear here, one watches this show, an early and highly influential classic of the so-called theater of the absurd, looking down on the actors from directly above, a most rare perspective and an experience akin to staring at a pair of rats from the top of their cage. If you know this play, wherein the hit men get their orders from the titular dumb waiter, you'll guess that Djukic (and his fine designer, Joey Wade) are playing with the idea of putting the audience in the role of the cruel masters of the universe, shooting silly, terrible instructions down to the hapless, pliant duo down below, even though they seem to have no chance of fulfilling them.

At one point, the two actors, Trey Maclin and Andy Hager, nervously notice the necks craning over the wall into their cheap boudoir and waiting room — much as a pair of Pinter characters might come to see

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that all they do is dictated from above and that all life offers is an endless chance to argue about semantics and worry about being rubbed out by your friend or lover.

This is a typically creative idea from the stalwart Djukic (who, alas, is now disappearing back to Belgrade, Serbia, for a year on a Fulbright), not least because it allows him to play with movement patterns that keep his characters lying on their backs, which is a mostly dull perspective in any theatrical arrangement other than this one. It's an hour chock-full of ideas and resonances.

In the right hands, "The Dumb Waiter" is a terrifying play, but Maclin and Hager don't exploit all of the tension, contrast and suspense in the drama. One wants to see more of the whites in their eyes when the machine really cranks up. That's the one downside of this fascinating spatial concept: You identify less with the poor saps following commands. Then again, the actors certainly do find the comedy in, and the inherently quizzical nature of, the piece and, more importantly, its savvy, concise exposure of the absurdity of our constant desire to please even malevolent masters.

At the end of an hour with Ben and Gus, the roof cranks back into place. The actors are seen bowing on tiny monitors and the audience climbs back down and out onto the barren block, egos stroked but aptly discombobulated.

[cjones5@tribune.com](mailto:cjones5@tribune.com)

*Twitter @ChrisJonesTrib*

**When:** Through Aug. 18

**Where:** TUTA Studio Theatre, 2010 W. Fulton Ave.

**Running time:** 1 hour

**Tickets:** \$25 at 800-838-3006 or [brownpapertickets.com](http://brownpapertickets.com)