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Author of *I Want to Take You Higher: The Life and Times of Sly and the Family Stone*

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Here's what you can find in a black-box theater on Howard Street:

It's really more like an inoculation, the Performers Under Stress production of *Cancer Cells*. As defined by the Encyclopedia Britannica (an appropriate source, given that the short plays and shorter poems which make up this production were all concocted by Englishman Harold Pinter), inoculation is a "process of producing immunity. . . that consists of introduction of the infectious agent onto an abraded or absorptive skin surface". The "infectious agent" in this case could be Pinter himself, a past master of abrasive confrontation. Or, the agent could be the bifurcated subject matter: on the one hand, war and torture, which continue to plague collective humanity; on the other hand, the degenerative disease which is this plague's biological equivalent, providing the title of this production and the cause of the celebrated playwright's personal death.

PUS's offering, which starts with an empathetic and heart-rending rendition of the title poem by ensemble member Valerie Fachman, can't immunize you against cancer. Nothing can, yet. And it doesn't so much render you unsusceptible to the horrors of war and torture as it does deepen your understanding of their effects on the bodies and minds of the characters represented in these plays: military minions, victimized ordinary citizens, and politicians. Pinter, who was profoundly skeptical about agitprop theater per se, makes use of this material, more overtly political than was his norm, to illustrate how language and dialogue become tools of oppression, as well as windows into the souls of the oppressors. He created an unflinching look at torture in the mid-1980s, long before "extraordinary rendition" became common parlance.

Geoff Bangs and Scott Baker masterfully move a consistently strong ensemble cast through the emotional minefields of Pinter plays *The New World Order*, *Mountain Language*, *One for the Road*, and the sketch *Press Conference*, the last a particularly good exemplar of how the playwright occasionally infuses his acrid observations with spurts of humor. Along with the opening "Cancer Cells", there are dramatic solo interstices of prose poetry in "Death May Be Aging", "American Football", and the closing "Death", delivered with compelling soul by preteen actor Carter Hartsough.

With the metastasizing of conflicts around the globe, with and without direct involvement of our own government, PUS is providing a theatrical inoculation which, beyond its disturbing immediacy, may somehow make us stronger. Don't miss getting it!