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Bridge to the unknown: *Happy Ending*

God's Sabbatical

John Sinner's *Happy Ending* . . .

By **Steven Leigh Morris** Thursday, Sep 16 2010

I can't tell yet if it's an aberration or a trend, but theological drama appears to be making a comeback. These are plays grappling not so much with the morality of the clergy but with the larger sweep of questions concerning clashes of faith, and whether or not we're alone down here.

These were the very questions raised after World War II — the "good" war that became the ill-fitting template for later wars, which were far

more confusing, morally. If you read [Thomas Pynchon](#) or [Kurt Vonnegut](#), you'll get a picture of a far less righteous and morally lucid World War II, culminating in the morally dubious motive for detonating two nuclear bombs over [Japan](#) in 1945 — just to show 'em who's boss.

Fears of global annihilation triggered by that display of destructive technology led to theological dramas in Britain by the likes of [Christopher Fry](#) (*The Lady's Not for Burning*), and by absurdist across Europe, from [Samuel Beckett](#) and [Harold Pinter](#) to [Eugene Ionesco](#), [Luigi Pirandello](#) and [Dario Fo](#), whose comedies were about facing the end of everything, and how we carve our own meaning from that realization.

It was a trend that withered with postwar prosperity, yielding (in the serious–new–play category) largely to the comparatively petty concerns of family dysfunction and ethnic identity. That economic prosperity is now under siege, worldwide, along with the assumption that our physical environment can remain habitable. The resulting dull ache in the zeitgeist may explain the return of Big Themes.

Local examples include yet another revival of *Waiting for Godot*, currently at the [Stella Adler](#); [Joseph Fisher](#)'s scintillating new play, *A Wolf Inside the Fence*, about teaching high school history in an amnesiac culture, at Open Fist Theatre; and the two productions reviewed here: [John Sinner](#)'s *Happy Ending* and [Marios Stilianakis](#)' *Water*.

Theatre Revelation is an L.A.-based company that has spent the last decade or so performing at national and international festivals. It took

the [Santa Monica](#) presenter of gay-themed works, Highways Performance Space, to host Theatre Revelation's first Southern California appearance in some time. There were only two performances, last weekend, but the work by writer-director Sinner, *Happy Ending*, is worth reporting on.

The audience entered through the cavernous venue's sliding garage door, crossing past a stage floor strewn with pages from printed literature and passing by a woman in a torn hoopskirt and a billowy blond wig, who appeared very much absorbed in her own world. On the other side of the stage was a kind of Gothic throne on which another woman in a blond wig sat, looming and glaring, from an altitude close to the rafters. (Creative design by [James Goodkind](#).) A baroque gown draped below her some 10 to 15 feet. A hospital bed hung upside down, suspended in the sky. The photographic image of actor [Alan Mandell](#)'s face was projected onto the pillow. That actor also provided lugubrious voice-overs, when the "dying man" had a few words to say. Beneath the bed was some kind of ancient hospital equipment and Nurse Matilda ([Ilana Gustafson Turner](#)) costumed in a blue-and-white blouse and apron, and the kind of cap that signaled she might have been at some European outpost during World War I (costumes by Sinner).

It soon became evident that the aforementioned women in the blond wigs were sisters, Etheline (Keirin Brown) and Agatha ([Betsy Moore](#)), agoraphobics maintaining a deathwatch over their father (Mandell). In case this sounds in any way grim, the production was actually a clown show, a kind of fusing of Beckett and Ionesco, as the sisters awaited guests who never appeared.

Among the first sounds were that of a telephone ringing and Agatha blurting out, "Don't answer it!" And so we understood that this house was populated by a pair of paranoid isolationists, responding to a world fraught with mortality and danger. Against the back wall were beamed videos of [Hitler](#), nuclear detonations and other depictions of catastrophe. From their own company, and their own fantasies, the sisters carved their own meaning and purpose. Sartre would have approved. Sometimes they lip-synched to [Judy Garland](#) clips. Not sure how Sartre would feel about that.

By the time she descended from her perch, Agatha's every poetical line was delivered by Moore in a hoarse voice laced with comedic innuendos that recalled [Phyllis Diller](#), around which dainty Etheline performed a series of verbal and physical pirouettes. Both women's faux-Victorian costumes were punctured by holes, from wear, or bullets — or something.

The plot, if that's the word, concerned the unsolicited visit of a Young Man ([Paul Tucci](#)), who burst in through that same garage door, insisting that Nurse Matilda was his long-lost mother — an allegation she emphatically denied, insisting that she had no children by anyone due to reproductive issues. But the Young Man would hear none of it, and resorted to pleading and weeping on his hands and knees. The sisters, meanwhile, were just annoyed by the intrusion.

Eventually the man left, the wigs came off, and there was an homage to the possibilities of love, which, I think, Sinner was intending seriously, in a [John Lennon](#) sort of way. I found it to be beside the point, which was really a theatrical examination of the dubious physical and

memory essences of "home."

(rest of article, about Marios Stilianakis' Water, not reprinted here)

To contact, or for more information about:

THEATRE REVELATION

GO TO: **www.TheatreRevelation.com**

OR EMAIL: **THEATREREVELATION@HOTMAIL.COM**

OR MAIL: **Theatre Revelation
6404 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 1639,
Los Angeles CA 9004**