Harold Pinter, 1930–2008

The death of Harold Pinter on 24 December 2008, at the age of seventy-eight, has prompted an inevitable slew of respectful obituaries, and the facts about his life and opinions are available in plenty. Here, we print two personal recollections of Pinter's early years – from Charles Marowitz, who, as an editor of *Encore* magazine, saw *The Birthday Party* into print in 1959 while the play was still enduring critical scorn, and Simon Trussler, co-editor of NTQ, who published one of the first studies of Pinter's plays, and, with Marowitz, edited *Theatre at Work* (Methuen, 1967), which included the earliest lengthy interview with the playwright.

Like a Death in the Family

IN 1958, after the West End premiere of *The Birthday Party*, it seemed to Harold Pinter, and most everyone else, that his future as a playwright was stone dead. The reviews were largely disastrous, but the play resonated with a small number of Londoners who recognized a new and alluring tone of voice and a sense of unspoken dread that was very different from the plasticity of most English drama. At a meeting of the staff of *Encore*, a magazine that was eventually to emerge as one of the most influential theatrical periodicals of the next two decades, we decided that not only were the critics wrong, but that the play should be published so that it would not simply fall into the oblivion that awaited most dramatic works that riled the largely antediluvian London critics. (It flew right past Ken Tynan's radar, and curiously, its staunchest champion was Harold Hobson, then considered the most sedate and conservative of all the British drama critics.)

Pinter was contacted and agreed to allow us to publish the play in a limited edition. Two years after its demise, and after the production of *The Caretaker*, the playwright emerged as an astounding theatrical figure, and by the mid-sixties 'Pinteresque' had become a common adjective with which to describe his work while the Pinter-clones had already begun to flood the theatrical scene. By 1965 and the opening of *The Homecoming*, it was clear that if there was a regalvanized British drama, its front-runner was unquestionably Harold Pinter.

During the fallow period, before he found national recognition, I met with Harold on several occasions. I had wangled the rights to stage *A Slight Ache*, a play originally commissioned for BBC Radio that the playwright allowed me to adapt for the stage. Casting problems sank that effort, but it gave me an opportunity to discover the unique personality of the playwright, whose work was already causing a small stir.

During one of those early strolls through Hackney before the premiere of *The Caretaker*, I asked him what he was working on at the moment. He described a tangled series of incidents and character types that left me none the wiser. 'What precisely,' I asked firmly, 'is it actually about?' In my callow state, I hadn't realized that an explicit description of the nature and purpose of a Pinter play was something that the playwright could never provide; that he shrank from the idea of positing in finite language the plan and purpose of what he was creating. It offended some guardianship he felt towards the play itself and the complexity that gave it its special charge.

'What do you mean, what is it about?' He repeated my words scoffingly as if I had asked him to give me a precise word count and interpretive breakdown of plot and purpose. 'It's about love,' he said – as if that was so self-evident only a moron would not see it. I must admit that after I saw the play on the boards, it was hard to reconcile his explanation with the dramatic events. Pinter, like his mentor Beckett and his literary forefather Franz Kafka, was asserting the artist's right to ambiguity and the playgoers' right to interpret dramatic material in whatever subjective way they saw fit. This protectiveness against pat interpretation became more

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apparent as his oeuvre developed and as we all came to understand the curious aesthetic that both propelled and protected his writing. It is not for nothing that the shade of Franz Kafka, like an ectoplasmic phantom, hovers over all his work.

Harold Pinter did more than create a unique dramatic style in the thirty or so plays he wrote. He established a new dimension for drama that was nourished by the metaphysical aura that his carefully wrought, perfectly reproduced dialogue and constant sense of foreboding brought to life. In Pinter's world, people are always vying for territory – asserting their right to invade another's boundary and slyly threatening to subordinate them to their will. Casual exchanges of clichéd dialogue reek of palpable dangers. Affections are always subverted by nameless threats. The mundane is always in danger of becoming mortal.

Pinter was regularly in touch with David Mamet, and allegedly influenced the composition of *Oleanna*. Simon Gray was yet another Pinter-assisted British playwright, and there is a whole slew of Pinteresque clones who probably never realized they were appropriating territory originally opened up by the tailor's son from Hackney. What made Pinter special was that his works delved beneath psychological sub-text, prodding deeply layered fears and hungers that we all experience but which very rarely fill out the interstices of drama. In Pinter's world, evil festers and conceals itself beneath airy badinage; clichés cloak aggressive and colonizing impulses that turn ordinary people into predatory beasts.

Pinter never quite lost his East End smirkiness, the ability to see through bullshit and sham using a larky but telling phrase. Of course, after his marriage to Lady Antonia Fraser, his 'wide boy' mockery was more subtle and less overt, but it was always there. He could spot a phoney a mile off and wither him or her with a cutting phrase – although the diction was now more vocally refined. I remember him once describing a charlatan producer as being nothing more than 'a hole in the air', which I thought was a spot-on observation . . . until I learned he had swiped the phrase from George Orwell. Once Lady Antonia entered the picture his viewfinder widened to include the mores of the upper middle class but his East End percipience, although camouflaged, never forsook him.

His film work was mainly a demonstration of his superb technical ability as a playwright. Although screenplays like *The Servant*, *The Go-Between*, *The Last Tycoon*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* are terse, professional adaptations, there is very little that is Pinteresque in the film oeuvre – even when, as in *Betrayal* and *The Trial*, he was working with personally charged material. The smouldering, pause-filled subtext that made a Pinter play unique could only happen on stage. The stage was his natural element and it follows naturally that anyone who mastered it as well as he did would be besieged with offers to reproduce that magic on celluloid.

Since the early seventies, Pinter, who had previously disdained any interest in international issues, became visibly active in politics. It began shortly after the overthrow of President Allende of Chile and became more strident during the Kosovo crisis, in which he defended Slobodan Milosevic. He was vocally outspoken about Bush's incursion into Iraq and after 2002 became aggressively more active and anti-American. To many, these political stances seemed out of character, even embarrassing. But if one looks back over his oeuvre, there is a humanistic undertow in his finest works in which vulnerable characters are being subverted and colonized by scheming and predatory enemies. It was a short step from Kafkaesque horrors in ominous institutions to his publicly proclaimed positions on political issues – not entirely a departure from the Pinteresque, but a recognition of social injustices that had their roots in the personal invasions traceable in plays such as *Betrayal* and *The Homecoming*.

As an artist, Harold Pinter was a towering force and, as always when forces like that disappear, one takes solace in the ongoing life of their work. But for some, like those who knew him well, appreciated his dry wit and his unostentatious sense of morality, it is like a death in the family.

CHARLES MAROWITZ

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Letters from Pinter

FORTY YEARS AGO Charles Marowitz and I were putting together for Methuen a book of interviews with the playwrights of the day. Harold Pinter was the only one who refused to help. He'd said all he wanted to say in a recent interview in *The Paris Review*, and we could reprint that if we wished. When we got hold of the original transcript, we found it far more revealing than the interview as published. But when we sent proofs to Pinter, who was in New York at the time, there came an instant telegraphic response: 'Unless you publish precise final text of interview as used in *Paris Review* permission to print absolutely withheld.' Pinter did not wish to be revealed.

A few years later, when I wrote one of the first books about Pinter, my editor at Gollancz, the late Giles Gordon, advised against sending a typescript to the author, and knowing of Pinter's disinterest in the critical response I took the advice. But those were the days before Pinter criticism became a heavy academic industry, and he complained when the publishers failed even to send him a copy of the book. At once they did so.

In response to the very bristly letter of comment this provoked, I pointed out that since I would achieve no academic advancement from the book, and precious little money, I could only have been writing from 'sincere (though not necessarily unqualified) admiration for a man's work, and the belief that one has something helpful to say about it. I don't mean helpful to the author, but helpful to his audience and readers. I believe that much of your own work has been overlaid by quasi-philosophical obfuscation and that it might be helpful to clear away some of this undergrowth.'

He replied: 'Your letter made sense and I appreciated it. We must meet for a drink' – and, oh, he liked what I'd had to say about *Landscape* and *Silence*. When he was awarded the Shakespeare Prize for those same plays, he gave the original *Theatre Quarterly* the first rights to his acceptance speech, a kindly gesture to a then-fledgling journal.

In my more recent role as compositor-in-ordinary to the theatre, I found myself putting into digital type a rather slim volume of interviews with Harold Pinter. I noticed how, as proof succeeded proof, more and more of the interesting personal details got struck out. Pinter still did not wish to be revealed.

The Birthday Party and *The Caretaker* gave a voice to the underclass years before Thatcher institutionalized its submergence, and I never believed that the author of such plays could be unconcerned with politics. Yet in the days when one measured 'commitment' by the head-count of dramatists at a Whitehall sit-down, Pinter scorned the fashion: later, when we had all been brainwashed to equate 'freedom' with the free market, he spoke to the 'free' world about the suffering and oppression it endorsed. For a very private person, such self-revelation could not have been easy, and was all the braver for that. I think the easily parodied spattering of four-letter words in his invectives served in some way as a protective shield for his privacy.

A few years ago, an old friend of mine took pleasure in putting together a student guide to Pinter's plays, with Harold's generous support (they both loved cricket). A little later my friend was found unconscious on his hotel-room floor in Stratford, where he had been getting his annual fix of Shakespeare. A stroke was complicated by a viral infection which was attacking the valves of the heart. Within a week, he was recovering from open-heart surgery.

Harold Pinter sent a kind letter of greeting and sympthy, for which my friend, still heavily sedated, was woozily grateful. His wife, fearful that the letter might be tidied into the trash, took it away with her. My friend's first words to her the next morning were: 'I had the most vivid dream last night. I'd had this letter from Harold Pinter . . . '

The last time I spoke with Harold he was correcting proofs of a new edition of *The Hothouse*, published to coincide with the National Theatre revival in 2007. Though not well, he was chirpily delighted to have spotted a tiny error missed in earlier editions, for he was as scrupulous about the look of his work on the page as on the stage. Those were the ways in which he wanted to be revealed.

SIMON TRUSSLER

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