Harold Pinter

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Harold Pinter

By Arnold P. Hinchliffe

University of Manchester

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To
MY MOTHER

Preface

In the preface to *Experimental Drama*, a symposium published in 1963, W. A. Armstrong explained the vitality of contemporary British drama as the meeting between imagination and complacency: "Beckett's enigmatic Godot has sent a religious tremor through a predominantly secular age: Pinter's haunted heroes have been a salutary reminder of what we still have to face when the Welfare State has done its best (or worst) for us: the tirades of Osborne's Jimmy Porter and the snide patter of his Archie Rice have emboldened the young and goaded their elders: Behan's Quare Fellow looms insistently over the issue of capital punishment: Bolt's Sir Thomas More, O'Casey's Father Ned, and Wesker's Beatie Bryant have likewise spoken to the conscience through the medium of the play."

Since 1956, it has been habitual to think of the British theater as once more vital and promising; whether or not the habit stemmed from an enthusiasm assumed by English critics as a relief from boredom and to assuage national pride (as George E. Wellwarth suggests in *The Theater of Protest and Paradox*), it is a habit that had so grown upon readers and critics alike that Bamber Gascoigne's 1964 New Year's article in *The Observer*, "Keeping Up with the Crisis," came as something of a shock. In it he reminded us that 1963 had produced not one new striking play: "The present score of dramatists seems to read: Osborne lost to films, Delaney silent, Behan indisposed, no full-length work from Pinter for over three years. Was it all a flash in a pan, the great new British drama?"¹

In fact, Kenneth Tynan in *Tynan on Theater* (reprinted, 1963) had anticipated this view, and John Russell Taylor echoed it in *Plays and Players* (August, 1964) in an article entitled, "What's Happened to the New Dramatists?" A hiatus of this kind is certainly disturbing, but then, as Gascoigne pointed out, 1594 was also a bad year: Thomas Kyd was dead without living up to his promise; Christopher Marlowe had been killed in somewhat unsavory circumstances; and Robert Greene was dead of over-

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indulgence. Only William Shakespeare was left, a dramatist who had shown signs of promise but had then gone commercial by writing a huge star part for Richard Burbage in *Richard III*. It was encouraging to remember in the quatercentenary year of 1964 that 1594 had also seemed a black year for the British theater.

Of all the British dramatists who have emerged to produce this sense of a new, vital British theater, Harold Pinter seems to me the most interesting and significant. I hope the following pages will illustrate why I believe this to be so and will justify writing about a dramatist who is, I hope, only at the beginning of his career and who will continue to produce plays for the stage. It seems to me that the business of criticism is to dive in as soon as possible, especially when simple plays prove so apparently puzzling. Wellwarth has suggested that the very complexity of contemporary drama obliges critics to work at it while it is still alive—indeed, before it even comes to life—rather than wait to chart it as a movement in history. Such an obligation may exist, but my feeling is that the complexity as such is after the event, that an audience can enjoy Pinter immensely (if its reaction during performance is anything to go by) and only on leaving the charmed atmosphere of the auditorium does it qualify that enjoyment with the awful question: “But what did it mean?” As if, in fact, one or two hours of enjoyment do not themselves constitute a kind of meaning.

Terence Rattigan’s reported exchange with Pinter is an example of this secondary response: “When I saw *The Caretaker* I told Pinter that I knew what it meant. ‘It’s about the God of the Old Testament, the God of the New, and Humanity, isn’t it?’ Pinter said blankly, ‘No, Terry, it’s about a caretaker and two brothers.’” Similarly, when rehearsing the recent production of *The Lover*, Pinter is reported to have said: “We’re not quite sure of the author’s intention here.” Neither of these cases rings untrue, nor, I am sure, are they examples of authorial perversity, either conscious or unconscious. In a radio interview with Laurence Kitchin, Pinter described his own running commentary on the plays as a complete waste of time. He has to come to his own plays objectively like anyone else: “I don’t want to sound a mystificator, if there’s a word, but I really do not know what . . . is in the script from A to Z by any means. I think it would

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be an impertinence of me to say that I did . . . as a director my function is really to look at the text quite independently and objectively really and truly and the only thing is I do of course . . . happen to have something of the certain inner word. I mean someone. I know a little more. I've got something out of the horse's mouth. I've got a hot tip you know. . . ."

Pinter has always insisted that his plays are simple and straightforward, and so they are until confronted with the question of specific meaning, by which people generally mean allegory. This book is partly the history of that particular question, partly a history of very recent British drama as Pinter has contributed to it, and partly a history of his personal development as a dramatist. It is also in many ways a history of a developing tolerance of his method. One of the remarkable things about his short career is the fact that within the space of five years or so, a dramatist who had been almost universally dismissed by drama critics is now accepted as one of the leading dramatists of the day. Laurence Kitchen sees him as the most accomplished dramatist of the 1960's so far, a view supported by John Russell Taylor. For Joseph Chiari, Pinter is more versatile and more gifted and is a better craftsman than any of his contemporaries and, with the possible exception of John Arden, is likely to outdistance all of them.

In 1964, John Russell Brown took another look at Shakespeare in the light of Pinter's plays. But not all critics are converted, of course. Allardyce Nicoll, in his revised *British Drama* (1962), included the Theater of the Absurd for the first time; he devoted six lines to N. F. Simpson, merely mentioned Pinter, and described *Waiting for Godot* as "the much-discussed and somewhat repetitively boring" play. Each critic is subject to personal taste, naturally; but when Nicoll described R. C. Sherrif's play *The Long Sunset* (1955) as thoughtful, it is clear that taste can restrict judgment too excessively.²

In short, Pinter has already produced enough that is interesting, significant, and well done to deserve some sort of critical attention, albeit of an elementary kind. This little history intends to be nothing more than an elementary introduction.

Harold Pinter is quintessentially the English (I am tempted to say "London") representative of Absurd Theater. He has incorporated the genre so successfully that it is almost parochial

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in flavor and looks decidedly home-grown. This ability to fuse European Absurdity with the English way of life, the foreign with the native, the timeless and universal with the immediate and local, gives Pinter's plays a lasting quality. He will remain one of Britain's most important twentieth-century dramatists—in my opinion, the most important.

ARNOLD P. HINCHLIFFE

Manchester, 1966

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Chronology

- 1930 Harold Pinter born in Hackney, London; only child of Jewish parents. Educated at Hackney Downs Grammar School. Entered Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, but finally faked nervous breakdown and left. Two trials as conscientious objector.
- 1949–1957 Repertory actor under the name of David Baron; spent eighteen months with McMaster's company in Ireland.
- 1956 Married Vivien Merchant.
- 1957 *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, and *The Dumb Waiter* written.
- 1957–1958 Bristol University productions of *The Room*. Cambridge Arts Theatre production of *The Birthday Party*, which later ran for less than a week at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith.
- 1959 *A Slight Ache*, British Broadcasting Corporation, "Third Program," July 29th. "The Examination," published in *Prospect* (Summer, 1959). *Pieces of Eight*, Apollo Theatre, London, September 3rd, contained: "Getting Acquainted," "Request Stop," "Special Offer," and "Last to Go." *One to Another*, Lyric Opera House, Hammersmith, transferred to the Apollo Theatre, contained: "The Black and White" and "Trouble in the Works."
- 1960 *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter* (first performed at Frankfurt Municipal Theatre) produced at Hampstead Theatre Club, January 21st, and later in March at the Royal Court Theatre. *A Night Out*, British Broadcasting Corporation, "Third Program," March 1st, and Independent Television Authority, April 24th. *The Caretaker*, Arts Theatre, London, April 27th, and the Duchess Theatre on May 30th. *Night School*, Independent Television Authority, July 21st. *The Dwarfs*, British Broadcasting Corporation, "Third Program," December 2nd.
- 1961 *A Slight Ache*, Arts Theatre, January 18th. *The Collection*, Independent Television Authority, May 11th.

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- 1962 *The Collection*, Aldwych Theater, June 18th.
- 1963 *The Caretaker*, filmed in Hackney. *The Lover*, Independent Television Authority, March 28th. *The Lover* and *The Dwarfs*, Arts Theatre, London, September 16th. "The Examination," republished with *The Lover* and *The Collection*. "Dialogue for Three," *Stand*, Vol. VI, No. 3 (n.d.). Script for the film *The Servant* directed by Joseph Losey. Script for *The Pumpkin Eater* directed by Jack Clayton. Script for film not yet produced, *The Compartment*. Short story "Tea Party" broadcast British Broadcasting Corporation in 1964.
- 1964 New sketches broadcast, British Broadcasting Corporation, "Third Program."
- 1965 *Tea Party*, March 25th, British Broadcasting Corporation Television (and throughout Europe). *The Homecoming*, Cardiff, March 26th, presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company.
- 1966 Awarded C.B.E. Birthday Honours List. Script for *The Quiller Memorandum*, directed by Michael Anderson; script for *Accident*, directed by Joseph Losey.
- 1967 *The Basement* (originally film-script entitled *The Compartment*) February 20th. British Broadcasting Corporation Television Channel 2. Received Antoinette Perry Award for *The Homecoming*, the best Broadway Drama of 1966.

Harold Pinter