



BACKGROUND RESOURCE MATERIAL
THE ROGUE THEATRE
2010-2011 SEASON

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OLD TIMES

by Harold Pinter

Sometimes, walking, in the park, I'd say
to her, you're dreaming, you're
dreaming, wake up, what are you
dreaming? and she'd look round at me,
flicking her hair, and look at me as if I
were part of her dream.

~Old Times



Including information about:

- ❖ The Playwright & the Play
- ❖ Silence and the Pinter Pause
- ❖ A “Pinteresque” Menace
- ❖ Politics and Plays
- ❖ Further Resources



HAROLD PINTER (1930-2008)

Harold Pinter was a prolific dramatist who between 1957 and 2000 wrote over thirty plays, most notably *The Birthday Party*, *The Homecoming*, *Betrayal* and *Old Times*. *Old Times*, first produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1971, epitomizes the dramatic tension and fraught pauses for which Pinter was famous.

Pinter began to write for the stage after first entering the theatre as an actor; his first play, *The Room* (1957), was written in just four days. He followed this with *A Slight Ache*, a radio drama broadcast on BBC radio in 1959. His first full-length play, *The Birthday Party*, premiered at Bristol University in 1957 before its West End premiere the following year. The play closed with disastrous reviews after one week; however, Pinter continued to write and have his plays produced with startling frequency for the next two decades.

This early portion of his career helped shape much of the post-war British theatre world, critics developed new terminology to describe his work, as they sought a vocabulary to explain Pinter's restrained and threatening structures. Many critics divide Pinter's works into three distinct phases: psychological realism, a lyrical phase, and a more overtly political phase. *Old Times* bears the markings of both psychological realism and the lyricism of the intermediary phase of his work.

Pinter's dramatic work was not limited to the stage; he also wrote for radio, television, and film. His most notable screenplay was his 1981 adaptation of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, for which he received Oscar and Golden Globe nominations.

Since the 1970s, Pinter has been equally known for his political stance as for his work in the theatre, particularly in the realm of human rights. In his 2005 speech accepting the Nobel Prize in Literature, Pinter devoted equal time to these two great passions.

The Plot of *Old Times*

As the play opens, Kate and Deeley discuss Kate's recollections of Anna, whom Kate has not seen in twenty years, and Deeley asks many questions about Anna that Kate cannot answer.

The scene shifts to after-dinner conversation, and Anna's recollections of her past with Kate. Deeley, shut out of their shared past, responds by first suggesting that Anna has not aged well, and then by treating her as a sexual object. The verbal sparring between the two is marked by short, terse sentences and tense, fraught pauses as each attempts to capitalize on the other's insecurities.

Anna and Deeley continue their duel of wits using song lyrics that allude to their different relationships with Kate, and then return to reminiscences about her as if she is no longer in the room. Kate protests their objectification of her, but they ignore her. Kate then inserts herself into the conversation by talking to Anna as if they are still young and living together. As the first act ends, Kate leaves Anna and Deeley together as she goes to take a bath.

In the second act, the threads of the characters' pasts become more entangled, as Deeley recalls meeting Anna years before at a tavern. Anna and Deeley subtly continue to subtly reinvent their pasts with Kate in order to assert their importance in her life. Upon Kate's return from her bath, the past and the present again intermingle, as Kate and Anna relives moments from twenty years past. As Deeley tries to circumvent this shift, the conversation grows more contentious until Kate dismisses her husband: "If you don't like it, go."

The three characters end the play isolated and silent, with connections broken down through their power struggle and Kate's final assertion of individuality.

SILENCE AND “THE PINTER PAUSE”

The silence in Pinter’s plays has left an indelible mark on the theatre of the second half of the twentieth century—and has often been misconstrued by critics, audiences, and theatre practitioners. While most modern theatre practitioners attempt to fill every moment on stage with some verbal or physical business, Pinter’s work resists this practice. Pinter himself referred to two kinds of silences, “one when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed.” His writing challenges the actors and audience to listen more closely to the latter, to discover “a language locked beneath” the silence. To Pinter, “the speech we hear is an indication of that which we don’t hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness.”

Indeed, Pinter’s silences, the ubiquitous and often misused “Pinter Pause,” are in many ways the ultimate laying-bare of our cultures attempts to communicate despite language’s failures. The pauses, the silences, are packed with tension and intention, with the characters overwhelming need to protect themselves from *communicating too well*.

Pinter was well aware that the structure and syntax of his work often led actors and directors to misuse both the words he chose and the unstated language of his silences, and both in his writing and his interviews,

sought to clarify what he saw as the depth of communication: “I am not suggesting that no character in a play can never say what he in fact means. Not at all. I have found that there invariably does come a moment when this happens, when he says something, perhaps, which he has never said before. And where this happens, what he says is irrevocable, and can never be taken back.”



“I find critics on the whole a pretty unnecessary bunch of people. We don't need critics to tell the audiences what to think.”
~Pinter

For Pinter, “words are weapons that the characters use to discomfort or destroy each other.”
~Peter Hall

“I think the terms ‘silence’ and ‘pause’ have been taken much too far. In fact, when I act myself in my own plays (which I have occasionally), I’ve cut half of them actually.”
~Pinter

*“When Michael Attenborough directed us all in *The Homecoming*, he mounted a picture of the cast and we all wrote things on the back. Danny Dyer wrote: “Harold, you're the bollocks.” Harold said it was the best thing anyone ever said about him.”*
~Kenneth Graham

One thing plays had in common: you were supposed to believe what people said up there. If somebody comes in and says, ‘Tea or coffee?’ and the answer is ‘Tea,’ you are entitled to assume that somebody is offered a choice of two drinks, and the second person has stated a preference.

With Mr. Pinter there are alternatives, such as the man preferred coffee but the other person wished him to have tea, or that he preferred the stuff you make from coffee beans under the impression that it was called tea.
~Tom Stoppard

A “PINTERESQUE” MENACE

The concept of the “Pinter Pause” is not the only terminology that critics and historians have created or transformed in order to more aptly discuss and deconstruct Harold Pinter’s work. While Pinter’s plays were only first staged professionally in 1958, by 1960, critics were already using the term “Pinteresque” to describe the work of other playwrights. In the etymology of the term, the Oxford English Dictionary alludes to a review of a piece in which “Mr Adrian writes with a cruel mastery of our slipshod, contemporary idioms, and the long drunken coda to his play is a comic achievement none the less impressive for its Pinteresque overtones.”

However, a precise definition of Pinteresque eludes the OED, which simply states “of or relating to Harold Pinter; resembling or characteristic of his plays.” In the online version of the dictionary, the clarification that “Pinter’s plays are typically characterized by implications of threat and strong feeling produced through colloquial language, apparent triviality, and long pauses” is added—but offers little substance on which to hang this description.

This definition does point to another critical term that developed to describe Pinter’s work: “Comedy of Menace.” The contradictory terms deployed in this description capture the dissonance implied in so many of Pinter’s plays. The term was in fact co-opted by critics from the subtitle of David Campton’s 1958 play *The Lunatic View: A Comedy of Menace*. While Campton’s allusion to a marriage between dark humor and comedy of manners may have been tongue-in-cheek, the term was used by drama critic Irving Wardle to describe the works of Campton and Pinter. Wardle states that “comedy enables the committed agents and victims of destruction to come on and off duty; to joke about the situation while oiling a revolver; to display absurd or endearing features behind their masks of implacable resolution....” And that menace in Pinter’s plays “stands for something more substantial: destiny” which in this context is no longer conceptualized classically but rather “as an incurable disease which one forgets about most of the time and whose lethal reminders may take the form of a joke.” (Wardle, “Comedy of Menace” 33; rpt. in *The Encore Reader* 91).

“The dynamic in his work is rooted in battles for control, turf wars waged in locations that range from working-class boarding houses (in his first produced play, “The Room,” from 1957) to upscale restaurants (the setting for “Celebration,” staged in 2000). His plays often take place in a single, increasingly claustrophobic room, where conversation is a minefield and even innocuous-seeming words can wound.”

~New York Times



“Pinter’s characters, usually enclosed in a room, organize their lives with the games people play. But in their games, or role-playing—in which each has agreed to a specific scenario with implicit limits and taboos—they often say one thing while they actually feel and communicate another. During their exchanges, in fact, the verbal is only the most superficial level of communication. The connotations of their words and their accompanying gestures, pauses, and double entendres—as well as their hesitations and silences—actually communicate a second level of meaning that is often opposed to the first.”

~Contemporary Dramatists

POLITICS AND PLAYS

Many critics label Pinter's late plays as belonging to his "political phase" of playwriting. However, social and cultural politics run through all of his work, whether he is overtly commenting on the global political context or not.

While his battle with esophageal cancer kept Pinter from attending the presentation of his Nobel Prize in Literature in person, his videotaped lecture accepting the award clearly shows the inherent intermingling of politics with his dramatic work. He titled his speech "Art, Truth, and Politics," clearly delineating the three concepts and concerns that drove so much of his work. What follows are excerpts from that speech....

"What has happened to our moral sensibility? Did we ever have any? What do these words mean? Do they refer to a term rarely employed these days—conscience?"

"So language in art remains a highly ambiguous transaction, a trampoline, a frozen pool which might give way under you, the author, at any time."

"A writer's life is a highly vulnerable, almost naked activity. We don't have to weep about that. The writer makes his choice and is stuck with it. But it is true to say that you are open to all the winds, some of them icy indeed."

"...the search for the truth can never stop. It cannot be adjourned, it cannot be postponed. It has to be faced, right there, on the spot."

"Language is actually employed to keep thought at bay."

"Truth in drama is forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive. The search is clearly what drives the endeavour. The search is your task. More often than not you stumble upon the truth in the dark, colliding with it or just glimpsing an image or a shape which seems to correspond to the truth, often without realizing that you have done so. But real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other."

"It never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening it wasn't happening. It didn't matter. It was of no interest."

"A gauntlet has been thrown down. Battle is engaged. The battleground is Kate: which of the two, Deeley or Anna, has possessed more of her? The weapons, as usual, are sex and language: the language of innuendo, cultural discomfiture, the slight verbal excess staking an emotional claim. Truth has nothing to do with it....The winner will be the one who can impose his or her version of the past."
~Richard Bryden (1971)



First production of *The Room* (1957)



2008 West End production of *No Man's Land*, starring Michael Gambon, David Bradley and Nick Dunning.



Belarus Free Theatre's *Being Harold Pinter*, which fuses extracts Pinter's plays with his Nobel lecture to comment on artistic and political repression.

FURTHER RESOURCES

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