

Returning to Roots: Pinter as Alternative Theatre Playwright

Dr. Michael Devine
Associate Professor
Department of English and Theatre
Acadia University

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Abstract

The theatrical oeuvre of Harold Pinter has its origins in the alternative theatre movement in Britain in the late 1950s. This paper will examine two later, well-known plays, **The Caretaker** and **Betrayal**, as case studies for an examination of how the alternative theatre elements which informed Pinter's early work continue to be present in plays which are generally regarded as more theatrically conventional and mainstream. The theatrical context in which Pinter first developed has become obscured by his commercial success and political notoriety. It can be argued that the natural position for this playwright on the theatrical spectrum lies within the fringe and alternative theatre communities. This paper explores the idea that Brook, Brecht and Grotowskian techniques may be more effective, and more organic, to Pinter's work than the mainly realistic interpretations which became the norm as the playwright's celebrity increased.

If a playwright becomes canonical he or she suffers a second death. If then his or her work is regarded as untouchable a third death results. Playwrights should only need to die once; preferably before they are allowed to attend rehearsal. After that we may keep them alive by following the law of the theatre: everything changes, everything is open to examination, nothing is sacred. I will argue here that even a bowdlerisation or transmogrification of the playwright's work into an unrecognisable cartoon, while regrettable, is a necessary price to pay for the continuing viability of a playwright and his or her plays. In these misbegotten adventures there may lie the seeds of genius, a re-interpretation which matches its time and place and which reaches deep inside its audience. It is for this that the theatre must remain a subversive force, even towards its own secular saints.

In putting forth what might be regarded as a provocative approach to staging the work of one of the English-speaking world's most famous playwrights, I should first add some qualifications and caveats. The first is that Pinter never appeared to regard himself as an alternative or even experimental playwright, preferring to focus on creating a "direct experience" for his audience (Dukore 1982, 7). Neither have many of his practical interpreters, who have tended to agree upon the need for a "basically realistic approach to Pinter's drama" (Burkman 1971, 121). Yet Pinter himself has said that "what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism" (Dukore 5). The question that arises from the production history of Pinter's plays, particularly in England, where Pinter has understandably achieved deity-like, and therefore untouchable, status, is this: is realism a necessary reference point for theatregoers in Pinter's work, or is it a disincentive to understanding the greater scope his work explores?

Realistic theatre breeds realistic expectations. The work of John Osborne, whose play *Look Back in Anger* caused a sensation in Britain in 1956, marked the birth of an aggressive, youthful

naturalism in British theatre which treated social issues with greater directness and which featured working class characters as its principal interlocutors. Pinter, whose first work, *The Room*, appeared less than two years later, appears to have been largely uninfluenced by the surge in popularity of this form of stage realism. Pinter may have stated that he had never written “a play from any kind of abstract idea or theory” (Dukore, 7) but that in no way precludes the use of non-realistic, abstract staging methods from helping to create the “direct experience” he so evidently valued. German Expressionism, after all, provided one of the more viscerally direct experiences in the history of the theatre. The abstract or non-linear is no barrier to directness or the greater authenticity that is implied by such comments.

All playwrights are products of their time and their circumstances, and all plays reflect a moment in time, to greater or lesser degrees. It is possible, however, to consider that interpretations of Pinter may have suffered from the rigidity and predilections of the theatre around him. British theatre has always evinced a marked tendency, with notable exceptions, towards verbal exposition. One thinks of the erudite harangues of David Hare or the finger-wagging G.B. Shaw, whose prefaces often ran on longer than his plays, and whose stage directions, if explicitly followed, would have reduced his casting pool to a series of volunteers answering to physical descriptions of near-pathological specificity. The war period work of Terence Rattigan and the impact of Osborne’s early plays continued a tradition of emphasis on verbal exposition at the expense of imaginative staging. Producers, raised in the pre-war tradition of the repertory theatre and the proscenium stage, were comfortable with realism both philosophically and economically. A playwright who rocked this boat too much was at risk of being thrown overboard as British theatre steadily gained popularity and international notice in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The core themes in *The Caretaker* are solitude and the inchoate human longing for stability. There is nothing in these themes to imply or demand realism; rather they seem, in their magnitude, to cry out for a more expressive staging approach.

What the play truly seems to suggest—though the playwright would likely have resisted this characterisation—is that a non-realistic, or super-realistic, approach might prove more effective in illuminating the play’s central themes and motifs. Pinter’s work is marked by an emphasis on text and the power of absence in expression (chiefly through his trademark rhythmic pauses and silences). It is a mistake, however, to reverence the playwright’s implicit communicative tools of choice at the expense of a wider theatrical vocabulary. A lack of scenographic and imagistic imagination cannot be justified as Minimalism. Minimalism is an aesthetic with a carefully

developed set of principles based on essential reductivism; a minimalist approach to Pinter neatly matches the playwright's aesthetic choices. If Minimalism is not chosen for a conceptual approach to Pinter, then the responsibility falls on the director and designers to employ the wider vocabulary of the theatre, a vocabulary which comprises the gestic expressiveness of actor and scenography.

In the following paragraphs I will attempt to outline one or two ways in which two of Pinter's plays could potentially be produced with an emphasis on their wider thematic scope rather than on tying them to a lineage which appears to diminish, rather than augment, the playwright's work. All of these ideas, of course, are negotiable, in keeping with the art form itself.

The Caretaker

There are two ways to approach the naturalistic descriptions of the set, laid out by Pinter with the exacting didacticism of a Victorian schoolteacher. The first is to super-size the realism and produce a mountain of junk. A play about impermanence, and the meaninglessness of owned objects, would benefit from an artistic statement regarding the absurdity of an obsession with detail. The second approach is to reproduce only those set elements which have active roles in the play—the beds, the stove, the light socket—and to leave everything around the men a bleached wasteland with indeterminate boundaries. Suspend the objects from wires, so that they hang in the shop like pieces of old meat in an abandoned butcher's shop. This transforms the interior space of the apartment into an obstacle course, the first step in transforming it into an arena of contestation. All of Pinter's early plays feature intense competition between characters and often with their environment. Receptively speaking, this begs for an arena staging, with an audience on each side of the combatants.

The lighting would feature shards or shafts of light rather than realistic illusionism. Transitions should also be "unnatural"—sudden shifts from day to night, a use of expressionistic reds rather than the representational blue typically used for the night scenes. When Aston opens the window, lights should glare in, as if from a searchlight. There should be no causative explanation for the sources of the light.

Sound must be used carefully in Pinter so as not to obstruct the power of absence in his work. A soundscape should be created which suggests a vaguely threatening world outside the apartment; it merits a greater physical presence rather than simply a series of verbal references. The sound would include electrical hums, cracks, and distant booms—plausibly realistic sounds which occur

out of their normal context. The repetition of such sounds would produce a sense of claustrophobia, of being trapped beyond the frontier of an implacable foe, the outer world.

The physicality of the actors in Pinter's work needs to be specific and resonant. One could develop the movement of the characters utilising Laban terms and the reductionist theories of Eugenio Barba. The result would be to produce minimalist, non-realistic, heightened movement for the three characters which still fits plausibly into the psychological reality of the characters. Mick is ferret-like, all quickness and lightness—taking an instant to strike, an instant to evade, an instant to change directions, matching the action of his verbal utterances. Aston is slow, heavy, and smooth—no angles, all curves, like a great ship turning in circles on itself, caught in a vortex. Davies, like Mick, is quick, light and sharp, which physically explains his growing affinity for Mick later in the play. Mikhail Chekhov's work on *psychological gesture* would be used to differentiate the eroding physical vitality of Davies from the virile expressiveness of Mick. In lay terms, this means that a character such as Davies would begin from a different posture, both psychological and physical, and keep returning to it.

The imaginative director's approach to costuming the three men might eschew pictorial realism for an emblematic approach. Emblems of realism, recognisable across cultures, are surely all that is required. Theatre, after all, has never been committed to historical accuracy except in its most misguided manifestations, such as Social Realism and Naturalism. Therefore in costuming *The Caretaker* each character could wear something emblematic, as if they were warriors bearing embossed shields into battle. A leather jacket for Mick, a battered hat for Davies, a tool belt for Aston; underneath as a base costume, white for Aston (innocence), brown for Davies (soiled), blue for Mick (amorality).

Betrayal

Is this really a play about betrayal on the micro-scale of contemporary British society or is it about something larger—the failure of people to live up to hopes and dreams, the failure to believe in a dream? Isn't it truly about inconstancy of all types? If the human primal impulse of inconstancy—for the purposes of survival of the species—lies at the play's core, then the artist's obligation is to mirror or reflect this inconstancy in a way that pictorial realism buttressed by realistic dialogue simply cannot do.

The cue for this approach lies in the reverse narrative approach of the play. If the narrative structure can be said to imply that endings are not determinative, rather than simply providing a forensic explanation or causology of events, then the scenographic approach to producing the

play can find justification for a more kaleidoscopic multi-media staging. A kaleidoscope implies a shifting perspective, and surely a play called *Betrayal* is about choices, and the human inability to consistently choose wisely or well.

What does this mean in practical application? The play is a contest between Jerry and Robert with Emma as the willing (and inconstant) prize. Therefore it should be staged as a contest, with the kind of intimate arena staging favoured by Grotowski in *Akropolis*. Arguably one of the most common errors in staging Pinter in commercial spaces is the vast separation between performer and spectator: carnage of the kind the characters of *Betrayal* exact on each other should be staged close to the audience, amongst the audience, so that psychological distancing is minimised. The spectators should see the actors and watch the blood ooze from their souls. Like gazing through a microscope at a wound, a spectator will be able to see the damage but not the cause.

Inconstancy is a fact of the universe, not an explicable phenomenon.

Inside the arena may be found straw, mud or the sterile concrete of the hospital—all areas of contestation: the corral, the mud-ring, the death ward. The characters might be clad in nude body suits with no external markings to indicate the nakedness of their desire to be unique, to be special, to escape the numbing mundanity of their daily lives. Or they might wear the uniforms shared by the inmates of hospitals and prisons, the bourgeois preoccupations of the characters clashing with the plainness of their costume, yet being linked, in a more resonant way, with the conformity that both text and costume imply, the conformity all three characters seek to escape yet which they reify with their behaviour.

The early plays of Pinter provide evidence that the sets and props are of a piece, and almost random in their basic symbolism: chairs, a table, food on the table, a door to the outside, a door leading further inside, a newspaper as a talisman of the external world. All of these elements—or none—can be reproduced in the contested arena staging of *Betrayal*. They can function as detritus, the offal of human life; pieces bought, cherished and discarded by the avid consumers and aspirants of whom the play's three characters form a representative nucleus. These symbols of our desire to concretise our lives would be depicted lying adrift amidst the straw or the blasted landscape of the concrete floor, abandoned, turned over by time, in the outwash of our memories.

Harold Pinter himself was a “striver”, as the word applied to the British Jews of the post-war era in the coded vocabulary of the British class system. He wanted to be commercially as well as critically successful, and that meant favouring larger theatres, which ensured that poor or

experimental companies and their low copyright fees would be excluded from the Pinter *oeuvre*. Added to this is the salient fact that Pinter entered and trained in the traditional theatre as an actor. It is logical that an actor would write a character-based play rather than one that is narratively driven. Aston's lengthy monologue at the end of Act Two of *The Caretaker* exists at odds with both the structure and rhythm of the play, as Ronald Hayman notes (1973). Actors clamour to play Jerry, Robert and Emma. Few actors, save the initiates of companies such as La Mama and Odin Teatret, are excited by the prospect of playing characters subsumed by non-linear scenography and narrative. The fact that Pinter's plays feature elements cherished by actors, and adhere to a surface realism which represents the orthodoxy of the theatre of his time, in no way diminishes the power of his work. In spite of the limitations of his training and the theatre culture which surrounded him, he found a way, consciously or subconsciously, to subvert and transcend literal realism. Those who would interpret the spirit rather than the factual reality of Harold Pinter's work would be advised to consider the imaginative scope revealed by a close reading of his plays' universal themes, rather than the imposed traditions which often suffocate a great playwright's work.

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