

## Michael Devine

Acadia University, NS, Canada

# Returning to Roots: Pinter as Alternative Theatre Playwright

## Summary

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.

**Key words:** theatre, Pinter, *Betrayal*, *The Caretaker*

## Nazaj h koreninam: Pinter kot dramatik alternativnega gledališča

### Povzetek

Začetki gledališkega opusa Harolda Pinterja segajo v alternativno gledališko gibanje iz 50-ih let 20. stoletja v Veliki Britaniji. Prispevek na primeru dveh znanih dram iz poznejšega obdobja, *Hišnika* (*The Caretaker*) in *Prevara* (*Betrayal*), skuša ugotoviti, v kolikšni meri se elementi alternativnega gledališča iz Pinterjevih zgodnejših del pojavljajo tudi v dramah, ki večinoma veljajo za konvencionalno gledališko produkcijo in *mainstream*. Gledališki kontekst, v katerem se je Pinter prvotno razvijal, sta zasenčila njegov komercialni uspeh in politična razvpitost. Lahko rečemo, da je njegovo naravno mesto v gledališkem spektru nekje med *fringe* in alternativnimi gledališkimi skupinami. Prispevek se ukvarja s tezo, da so tehnike Brooka, Brechta in Grotowskega morda učinkovitejše in pomembnejše za Pinterjevo delo kot realistične interpretacije, ki so se z naraščanjem njegove priljubljenosti uveljavile kot norma.

**Ključne besede:** gledališče, Pinter, *Prevara*, *Hišnik*

# Returning to Roots: Pinter as Alternative Theatre Playwright

## 1. Introduction

If a dead 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 that 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 1982, 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 quasi-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, could not fail to have been influenced by its success. But there is no repression in Osborne's early work, only seething anger expressed in the most direct of ways by his male principal characters. Pinter's men (and women), in contrast, explode infrequently, and then only after we have been conditioned to expect that they will not. So the initial surge in popularity of the angry young men cannot be linked to Pinter's work any more closely than those writers, such as Ionesco, who had written absurdist plays in response to the cataclysm of the Second World War. Like Ionesco's, Pinter's language tends to the oblique, but its non-sequiturs are always more apparent than real, and there is a cause and effect in both text and action in Pinter's work which is notably absent from most absurdist work. The exception, of course, can be found in the plays of Samuel Beckett, with whom Pinter appears to share the most, in terms of poetic style, understatement, dark comedy and the piercing loneliness that permeates the lives of their characters. Beckett was always more psychologically realistic than he was given credit for

in the writings of Martin Esslin, who coined the term “Theatre of the Absurd”; Pinter, who also appears in that volume, was always out of place amongst such abstract musers, but clearly shares a common aesthetic with the equally out-of-place Irish Francophile. Pinter’s early work makes use of tramp characters and competing duos (as in *Waiting For Godot* and other Beckett plays). *The Caretaker*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Room*, and *The Birthday Party* all feature variations on this theme. Esslin notes of *The Caretaker*:

The final scene, with one of the characters about to leave, certain to leave, yet not seen to be leaving, is strongly reminiscent of the concluding image in Beckett’s *Endgame*. There Clov’s leaving would mean the end of the room’s owner, here it is the one who is driven away whose life is thereby forfeited. There are echoes here, too, of *Waiting for Godot*: The tramp, the two complementary brothers, the shoes that will not fit. In Beckett’s play the two main characters are waiting for salvation to come, in Pinter’s one of the characters is within sights of salvation and then is driven out of Paradise by his own original sin. Yet *The Caretaker* is, at least on the surface, far more naturalistic.” (1970, 102)

Esslin, like other commentators, feels compelled to add this last note underlining the stylistic difference between *The Caretaker* and the more experimental plays of the 1950s and early 1960s. Yet he misses the central distinction separating Pinter from the Absurdists; above all, Pinter and his work bespeak an emphasis on *action*, spoken or unspoken, manifested or not, which is ever-present and which is valorised above thought and reflection.

Pinter may have stated that he had never written “a play from any kind of abstract idea or theory” (Dukore 1982, 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. The danger lies in over-cooking. Sir Peter Hall notes that any over-elaboration in scenography or staging (and by this he means mainly the use of formal conventions) unbalances a Pinter work:

Since Pinter’s world deals with a precision that is masked in understatement, the set must do the same. ‘Making a bit of a statement’ is once more the danger. A set which is too colourful, which has too much character, or is too naturalistic in detail, will stop the play reverberating ... on the other hand, Pinter is *not* abstract. A room in North London is a room in North London. But it is a surreal room – realer than real. And that which is not necessary should not be there. (Hall in Raby 2001, 149).

So, not realistic, but not abstract. Where does a director and her designers go in determining the most expressive way of staging Pinter’s plays? Perhaps one answer, paradoxically, begins with suggesting stagings by directors who are not steeped in British theatrical traditions. 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. Pinter's work similarly depends on the word as its principal agent of action, but the advent of his work marked a departure from the British realist tradition, not a continuance of it. Subsequent producers of his work, raised in the pre-war tradition of the repertory theatre and the proscenium stage, were comfortable with realism both philosophically and economically, and preferred to place Pinter within this paradigmatic framework, rather than consider what alternatives might be suggested by the surreal quality of his situations. There is an argument to be made that the famed Pinter silences and pauses, and his reproduction of the stuttering quality of quotidian conversation, are not so much realistic but rather elements of a *heightened* realism, one which sounds but does not resonate when surrounded by realistic sets and properties.

The key lies in Hall's statement of a hallowed Stanislavskian theatrical precept: "that which is not necessary should not be there<sup>1</sup>". His own highly successful stagings of works such as *The Homecoming* utilised emblematic elements to create a look that was only apparently realistic. Hall uses the set of *The Homecoming* as an example of a setting where Pinter has clearly created a metaphorical underpinning through the description of a living room where a wall is missing, having been knocked down, leaving only an arch and creating the arena for the contests of masculinity which centre the play. The accompanying photograph from Hall's production of 1991 (Raby 150) at the Comedy Theatre creates a clear sense of the surreal quality to which he alludes. The carpet forms a square much like a boxing ring in the middle of an expanse of checkered floor, where the other furniture pieces have been pushed to the edges, as if to open up the area for the contests that take place within the carpeted space. Only that which is used is there. "Decoration", notes Hall, "is misleading" (151).

The core themes in *The Caretaker* are solitude and the inchoate human longing for stability. Its motifs, according to Esslin, include the fear of women (105) evinced by Aston when he tells Davies of a strange woman touching his hand in a café and asking him an intimate question. This motif should be expanded to a more generalised inability to trust and a consistent suspicion of strangers. There is nothing in these themes to imply or demand realism; rather, they seem, in their magnitude, to cry out for a more expansive and subtly 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

<sup>1</sup> And it should be noted that Stanislavski, perhaps more than any great theatre practitioner and theorist, is consistently associated with both realism and naturalism when the truth is that he abandoned rigid adherence to realistic forms early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, experimenting with Symbolism, working with Gordon Craig on an avant-garde *Hamlet*, and allowing Meyerhold's experiments in Constructivism and biomechanics. He consistently advocated the use of the imagination beyond pictorial representation in both acting and scenography.

of choice at the expense of a wider theatrical vocabulary. A lack of scenographic and imagistic imagination cannot be justified. The responsibility falls on the director and designers to select approaches from the full vocabulary of the theatre, a vocabulary that comprises the gestic expressiveness of actor and scenography. For Sir Peter Hall, this means “a play that achieves metaphorical strength by using all the vocabulary of the theatre” (Raby 154).

Hall notes that there is “something quite elemental and quite precise” about the staging of a Pinter play. The great director speaks with the assurance of a life spent opening difficult and complex works to audiences through a wide variety of theatrical techniques. He does not mention that a danger of this deliberately reductive physicalisation, in less talented hands, is a gestically-empty posturing that formalises the physical life of the play and renders it awkward, even pretentious. So what can be done, in alternative theatrical terms, to avoid the curse of stilted physicalisation while simultaneously avoiding the numbing mundanity of naturalistic movement? Here we return to the precepts of Stanislavski. The director extends selected beats to the very edge of their limits<sup>2</sup>. Such beats might involve the absence, as Hall states, of movement (or speech). In extending a moment of stillness past the point of comfort while retaining its psychological basis—a stare, for example—one heightens and augments the reality, taking it to the limits of the real, in accordance with Pinter’s writing, while remaining vigilant that any given beat will not stray beyond the limit of its effectiveness.

In the following paragraphs one or two ways will be given as examples of how Pinter’s plays can potentially be produced with an emphasis on their wider thematic scope rather than on tying them to a lineage that 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.

## 1.1 *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. But this risks the over-elaboration and presence of distracting, non-essential elements of which Hall speaks. The second approach is to reproduce only those set elements that have active roles in the play – the beds, the stove, the light socket – and to leave everything around the men a bleached wasteland that represents a liminal space. Suspend the objects from invisible wires, so that they hang, indeterminate, in the space, 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 creating an arena of contestation. Perhaps the metaphor is of a museum where the characters wander amongst the exhibits, looking for meaning. 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 – again, deliberately avoiding a “statement” through subtle gradations and use of the colour spectrum to

<sup>2</sup> A “beat” in Stanislavskian terms is the length of time possessed by an action (whether physical or emotional).

depart from conventional pictorial realism (yellow for sunlight, blue for evening, etc.). Transitions should also be “unnatural” – sudden or elongated shifts from day to night, for instance, to mimic the fluid quality of temporality in the play. When Aston opens the window, lights might glare in, as if from a searchlight; it is plausibly realistic but also powerfully poetic, a beam from a hostile outside world that intrudes on the sanctity of the inner space carved out by Aston and Mick. There should be no visible, 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 that 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. Hall notes that there is “something quite elemental and quite precise” about the staging of a Pinter play and that the staging, like the design, must never stoop to excess. “Too much movement blurs the text” (153). One could develop the movement of the characters utilising the principles of Laban and the Eastern-influenced reductionist theories of Eugenio Barba<sup>3</sup>. Both these approaches are grounded in a deep spiritual truthfulness and are minimalist, rather than elaborative, in expression. The result would be to produce super-realistic, heightened movement for the three characters which still fits plausibly into their psychological reality. 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*<sup>4</sup> 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 cannot escape the expectations of pictorial realism, yet it can transcend them. In costuming *The Caretaker*, each character could wear emblematic colours, in the way that medieval knights wore the colours of their sponsors. They are warriors bearing embossed shields into battle: Aston stands for What is Lost, Mick for What May Be Gained, Davies for What is Not. With such grounding concepts, even realistic elements take on augmented significance. A battered leather jacket worn by Mick contrasts with the bright new patent leather boots he sports. Rather than put him in the expected black – which turns him into the figure of evil in the play, which he manifestly is not – colour these realistic

<sup>3</sup> Rudolf von Laban founded a systematic notation for physical movement on the stage which was grounded in the spiritual concepts of Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Theosophy. Eurhythmics, founded by Jacques Dalcroze, also are underpinned by this particular avenue of spiritual thought. Both produce expressive manifestations of emotion in the body on stage which are non-naturalistic, yet recognisably psychological in their basis. Barba’s work with Odin Teatret follows many threads of Theatre Anthropology; his movement theories are heavily influenced by the 15<sup>th</sup> century Nō theatre practitioner and theorist Zeami Motokiyo.

<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Chekhov’s theories are elaborated in his book *To the Actor: On the Technique of Stage Acting* (1953). New York: Harper.

costume elements. His jacket is brown, the shoes bright red or blue suede, making him the Elvis of his own world, an understated paean to aspiration. Davies wears a coat that hides everything – his belongings, his very physique. But there must be beauty there, somewhere, too, for Davies retains hope. His coat is well-brushed; perhaps he wears a tie that has seen better days; he must yet bear marks of respectability, the social acceptance he still craves. Aston, the most amorphous and dispossessed of characters, should look real and somehow formless. His clothes lack shape and are perhaps deliberately too large. In them he can look menacing or like a cloud that floats through the life of Davies and Mick. His white shirt is very white, because he carries the purity of wonder in the play, the capacity for innocence.

## 1.2 *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 primal human impulse to inconstancy – for the purposes of survival of the species, or perhaps simply because we aren't able to transcend our desire for gratification for very long – 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*<sup>5</sup>. If Grotowski had staged *Akropolis* in our time, he'd surely have used live video feeds and on-stage screens to augment the physical power of the staging – and to mediate it, so that the audience would be able to assess their experience. 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 upon 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.

As with all of Pinter's great plays, overt expression is furiously suppressed in *Betrayal*, and the scenography should not contradict this. Rather, it should subtly augment it, creating a clinical

<sup>5</sup> Jerzy Grotowski was the founder of the Theatre Laboratory and a theatre theorist who wrote the seminal text *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968) New York: Simon and Shuster. His production of *Akropolis*, based on a text of the same name by the Polish poet Stanisław Wyspiański, is considered one of the landmark theatre productions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and a forerunner of the Theatre Anthropology movement led by Eugenio Barba and Richard Schechner.

feel through bleached lighting and spaces marked by emptiness, as if the characters unknowingly are taking part in a laboratory experiment. Jerry and Robert reference the squash matches they once played and engage in subtle man-to-man combat. Metaphorically they are lab rats on a treadmill, desperately fleeing their inevitable fate: dissolution of body and mind, the expiration of innocence, through the repetitive and Pavlovian pursuit of stimulus. They are beached whales in a sea of sand that will eventually suffocate them. The beige of a carpet can effectively aid in suggesting this, as can the lack of vivid (or vivifying) colour. In fact, there is a lack of, well, anything, beyond their pretensions to civility, faintly ridiculous to the watching observers behind the one-way glass.

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 blasted landscape of the beige carpet, abandoned, turned over by time, in the outwash of our memories.

## 2. Conclusion

Harold 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 Irving Wardle noted (Marowitz, Hale, Owen 1965, 131). Actors clamour to play Jerry, Robert and Emma in *Betrayal*. Few actors 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 appear to adhere to a surface realism that represents the orthodoxy of the theatre of his time, in no way diminishes the stylistic potential of his work. In spite of the limitations of his training and the theatre culture that surrounded him, he found a way, consciously or subconsciously, to subvert and transcend literal realism. Hall notes that "no play is worth our attention unless we can describe it in the widest terms as a poetic play" (154). This is the ultimate argument against overly realistic depictions of Pinter: the poetic scope of his work is submerged in excess detail and explanation, and the magnitude of his vision of humanity is obscured when the poetic rhythm of his work is lost, either in performance or in the design of the spectacle. Those who would interpret the spirit rather than the factual reality of Harold Pinter's work would be advised to consider the imaginative possibilities revealed by a close reading of his plays' universal themes, rather than the imposed traditions that often suffocate his work.



## Bibliography

- Burkman, K.H. 1971 *The Dramatic World of Harold Pinter: Its Basis in Ritual*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Chekhov, M. 1953. *To the Actor: On the Technique of Acting*. New York: Harper.
- Dukore, B.F. 1982. *Harold Pinter*. London: Macmillan.
- Esslin, M. 1970. *The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter*. NY: Doubleday.
- Hall, P. 2001. Directing the Plays of Pinter. In *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, ed. P. Raby, 145–54. Cambridge, New York: CUP.
- Pinter, H. 1962. *The Caretaker*. London: Eyre Methuen.
- – –. 1978. *Betrayal*. London: Eyre Methuen.
- Wardle, I. 1965. There's Music in That Room. In *The Encore Reader*, eds. C. Marowitz, T. Milne and O. Hale, 129–32. London: Methuen.