

## Directing the plays of Harold Pinter

A distinguished dramatist once surprised me by lamenting the plight of Harold Pinter. 'All other dramatists', he announced, 'can go off and write any type of play they please – farce or history, polemic or romance. But Harold Pinter has to write a Harold Pinter play. It must be hell for him.'

This was an affectionate joke, but a joke which expressed a truth. Pinter's plays are instantly recognisable and particular. 'Pinteresque' is a word that has entered the language. His voice – whether it be combative cockney, or expressing the unexpected associations and leaps of memory – is very much his own. His content – the unknown threat, the confrontation in the confined space, whether it be territorial, or the personal tensions of the subconscious – has hardly changed in forty-five years. The threats have always been political, metaphors of power. Pinter is the champion of tolerance and compassion in the brutal jungle of life, the seeker after clarity in the confusions of memory.

The presence of imminent violence, of a breakdown bound to happen, haunts all his plays. Speech is at cross-purposes and combative; charm is possessive; concern contains a hidden mockery; even love is often a violation.

But all these threats are subtle – never palpable. Above all, they are ambiguous. Tension may finally explode when a man's head is split open by a blow from a walking-stick. But before this, the demands of social conduct have been observed in their full contradictions. To mock someone, to take them on, only scores points if the hatred is disguised with charm, and the hostility with wit. The victim must never be sure that the antagonist is his enemy.

In his early years, Pinter was often categorised as part of the theatre of the absurd. Nothing could be more misleading. The absurdists (and Ionesco remains their leading exponent) sought to illuminate by incongruous juxtapositions or improbable shocks – which were usually justified by a grain of truth. But Pinter in comparison has always been truth itself. Underneath his confrontations, hidden in the enigmas of the back stories of his plays, there is always a perfectly credible and recognisable pattern of human behaviour. It

may be disguised (it usually is), but beneath all the ambiguities is something utterly coherent and lifelike. Yet it is never obvious; audiences delight in unravelling puzzles.

A Pinter play confronts us as dispassionately as the mask of Greek drama. The enigmatic expression is neither sad nor cheerful, because it is both. Once the text is heard against it, it becomes tragic or comic by turns. Play and mask have an apparent calm that hides a turbulent and passionate emotional life which may erupt at any moment. What is hidden is felt by the audience, even though it may never be revealed. It remains one of the particular miracles of live theatre that this instinctive communication is always present. An audience can therefore sense what an actor is feeling, without the actor having to show that feeling. But the inner feeling must be specific and true. He must experience it, even though it does not need to be stated or revealed. Paradoxically, the mask does not hide, it exposes. So does the play.

So while directing Pinter is always about preserving ambiguity – in performance, set, costume, action – and only rarely showing emotion, directors and actors must always know very clearly *what* they are hiding. Ambiguity can never mean not knowing.

All dramatists are vulnerable to their directors; but since the text remains for other directors to interpret later, the written word is finally preserved. But Pinter's plays, like Beckett's (because both contain such rich under-texts, and what is said is rarely what is meant), are particularly susceptible to vagueness and generalisation. On the stage this leads easily to pretension, and sometimes to absurdity. If an actor observes a Pinter pause without deciding why it is there and what hidden process is going on inside him, then the result can be a pretentious moment that leads to the wrong kind of laughter.

Similarly, the director must be even-handed with his audience and take care that the enigmas that are at the heart of every Pinter play are clearly presented. The audiences must be able to construct their own view of the past. Once the audience have pieced the story together, they can judge it. They may come to slightly different conclusions as they consider, for instance, what happened in Leeds in *The Collection*. There is often no certainty about memory, and even no absolutes concerning truth. So a director who tells the back story, so that there is no room for interpretation or for ambiguity, may have simplified the play and betrayed his author. He must present all the evidence dispassionately. But above all, he must avoid making a statement.

This is frequently a difficult task. One of my chief memories of directing Pinter is weighing the dramatist's frequent, anxious question: 'Isn't that a bit of a statement that you are making?' The revelations in the plays come slowly and must be handled delicately. This is a world of secrets, where past actions are constantly reconsidered and revalued. Above all, in the plays of the great

middle period (*The Homecoming* and *Old Times* through to *Betrayal*) the principal metaphor of life is presented by the enigma of woman. A man can never, it seems, quite understand the mystery of femininity.

The process of work on a Pinter play must therefore preserve the ambiguity, while developing a clear understanding of *what* is to be hidden. I believe that Pinter is essentially a poetic dramatist. He and Beckett have brought metaphor back to the theatre, where Eliot and Auden failed. Although he revels in the vernacular rhythms of the London cockney, he is equally at home with the antithetical understatements of the English upper classes. The precision of his texts, and the form and rhythm of his lines, hold the audience in a formal grip as strong as Shakespeare or Beckett.

Pinter is a great screenwriter: this is his craft. He constructs with precision. But as a dramatist he also works like a poet, because his text is as considered as a poet's. This the director must understand. To direct Pinter requires a rigorous respect for the form and an insistence that the actors understand and respect it. They cannot be sloppy, inaccurate or approximate in the use of his words. Above all, they must listen to his rhythms. There are, of course, finally as many ways of saying a line as there are human beings. But within that infinite freedom, there is only one shape, one rhythm to a Pinter line – and that is Pinter's. The task of the actor is therefore formal and a little like a musician's. Instead of deciding what the character is feeling and then inflecting what he says accordingly, the actor must first consider the line that is to be said and the shape and rhythm of it. The line is a given – rather like the notes of a musical phrase. What must the actor feel in order to make this shape the expression of truth?

Pinter has to write a Pinter play because his form and style are so personal, and the actor has to subdue his idiosyncrasies in order to serve this style. Pinter works as a poet. In fact, having on occasion been very close to him, I have been aware how many of his plays have been genuine inspirations, seizing him completely until they are finished. Yet he is a consummate craftsman and never hands a play to a director that is not considered down to the last comma and pause.

Pinter's pauses have become, journalistically, his trademark, and it is easy to denigrate them, even to think that they are meaningless – to think that the characters have nothing to say because they say nothing. This is never true. Pinter can be read quickly, jumping over the pauses. Actors can do the same. But the unsaid in Pinter is as important as the said; and is frequently as eloquent. He once rang me up and announced a rewrite: 'Page thirty-seven', he said (I found page thirty-seven). 'Cut the pause.' There was a smile in his voice as he spoke, but he was nevertheless dead serious. It was like cutting a speech. The placing of the pauses, and their emotional significance, have

always been meticulously considered. His imitators do not understand this. He often uses nearly colloquial speech patterns. But by the use of silence and of pauses, he gives a precise form to the seemingly ordinary, and an emotional power to the mundane. It is a very expressive form of dramatic speech.

There are three very different kinds of pauses in Pinter: Three Dots is a sign of a pressure point, a search for a word, a momentary incoherence. A Pause is a longer interruption to the action, where the lack of speech becomes a form of speech itself. The Pause is a threat, a moment of non-verbal tension. A Silence – the third category – is longer still. It is an extreme crisis point. Often the character emerges from the Silence with his attitude completely changed. As members of the audience, we should *feel* what happens in a Pause; but we can and should be frequently surprised by the change in a character as he emerges from a Silence. The change in him is often unexpected and highly dramatic.

These three signs in the text all indicate moments of turbulence and crisis – the Three Dots, the Pause and the Silence. By their use, the unsaid becomes sometimes more terrifying and more eloquent than the said. Pinter actually writes silence, and he appropriates it as a part of his dialogue. The actor who has not decided what is going on in this gap will find that his emotional life is disrupted. The pause is as eloquent as speech and must be truthfully filled with intention if the audience is to understand. Otherwise the actor produces a *non sequitur*, which is absurd and makes the character ridiculous. I have always supposed that Pinter gained confidence in this technique because of Beckett's use of pauses. Certainly Beckett is the first dramatist to use silence as a written form of communication. Shakespeare's: 'Holds her by the hand silent', in *Coriolanus*, is the only other moment of complex drama that I know where words are deemed inadequate.

The Pinter actor must understand that the silences, whether short or long, are moments of intense emotion. And although the characters are hiding what they are feeling, they must feel it nonetheless. The same goes for the reader. He should join the actor in deciding what emotions are being contained.

The basis of much of Pinter is the cockney 'piss-take', much beloved of London taxi drivers. To take the piss out of someone is to mock them, to make them insecure. It is a primary weapon in the jungle of life. But the successful piss-taker must not let those from whom he is taking the piss, know that he is taking it. If this happens, he loses face. His mockery should be masked by grace and concern. The hostility is deeply hidden, the malice carefully concealed. Lenny, in *The Homecoming*, consistently makes his father uneasy by staring pleasantly at him. Or by simply ignoring him. He insults him with infinite charm and care. He converses with great concern. This is a master taker-of-piss.

Furthermore, there is underneath Pinter's dialogues a constant seething melodrama, filled with strong hates and forbidden lusts. Beneath the mask of speech, there are high passions, which the actors must know, and yet almost never reveal. To show your feelings in Pinter's world puts you at a fundamental disadvantage. You are weakened once your antagonist knows your motives.

Very occasionally, these feelings come to the surface. They either become too hot to hide, or they are suddenly goaded into revelation. Then the violence – which has been hidden, though evident – suddenly erupts and a catatonic fit seizes the violator.

This underlying violence has to be confronted in rehearsal. It is therefore necessary, as part of the work, to go through each scene exposing the crude emotions as if the actors were playing in a melodrama. They expose their passions completely and are encouraged to show their hatreds and their loves in extreme terms. They find out what the character *wants*. The selfish desire to exist, to be gratified, is the beginning of all acting – just as it is the beginning of existence.

Having found these strong emotions, the next task is to hide them completely – contain them, bottle them up. But now the actors know what they are hiding. Once again, if this process is not followed, the pauses are empty and the dialogue abstract. The words and the pauses govern the passions and hide them. But both the words and the pauses must be earned. Unless the audience can follow the hidden emotions through the pause and under the verbal choices, they cannot understand the journey that the character is making. The vacillations will seem unmotivated, even ridiculous. There is a danger then that the audience will laugh *at* the play, rather than with it.

For me, directing Pinter breaks down into a pattern of rehearsals with clear objectives. They are all designed to preserve the ambiguity. This means knowing clearly what is meant and then not overstating it – mostly, indeed, hiding it. It begins with the design.

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. The designer may pre-empt the interpretation. A set which is too colourful, which has too much character, or is too naturalistic in detail, will stop the play reverberating. It says too much. 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. In *The Homecoming*, all the action occurs in the arena of the room – a defined, protected place of uneasy security – uneasy, because it is open to invasion at any moment. This room has already been opened up; a wall has been knocked down. There has already been a violation of the space ('An old



9 From left to right: Greg Hicks, Nicholas Woodeson, Warren Mitchell, and John Normington in *The Homecoming*, directed by Peter Hall, The Comedy Theatre, 1991

house in North London. A large room, extending the width of the stage. The back wall, which contained the door, has been removed. A square arch shape remains. Beyond it, the hall. In the hall, a staircase, ascending up left, well in view').

We learn later that the room has been opened up, 'to make an open living area'. There are no secrets in this place, everything is 'well in view'. It is a public area where this all-male family fights out its battles between the father and his sons, in full view of each other. There is no door to shut. The metaphor of the set is clear: it is a dangerous, exposed place.

Yet everything that is on stage, from the large, dominating father's chair (the insistent, but now impotent ruler of the family) to the huge, visible staircase which Teddy will use to lead his bride to their bedroom in the middle of the night, is used and useful. Nothing is there for decoration. The precision and discipline of Pinter, where less is consistently more, must be translated into the design. Decoration is misleading. Atmosphere can be too strong.

Pinter wrote *The Homecoming* for the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre. He was worried initially by the largeness of the stage. Would it have sufficient claustrophobia, sufficient tension? The 'open living area' came from responding to the strengths of the wide stage. So the Aldwych, in some sense, provoked the image of *The Homecoming*.

I record this to remind any director that Harold Pinter is a man of the theatre, even before he is a great dramatist. He is a director himself, and an actor who understands the processes of acting. What he asks for in his plays is not asked for lightly. So design, lighting, sound and above all the performances must be ambiguous.

For the director, the work with the actors has three distinct stages, though they of course often overlap. The first stage must be a study of the text. The form and the rhythm of Pinter are as particular as the iambic rhythms of Shakespeare. The Silences and the Pauses and the Dots have to be learned precisely and differentiated, and the repetitions of all the antithetical phrases have to be pointed and understood. Pinter, even at his most cockney, is a precise rhetorician. His characters love contradiction and paradox. And so should his actors. All this is a formal, technical work process. Hearing the rhythm of the line is essential. So is accuracy. We are not dealing here with understated, naturalistic dialogue that has no resonance.

I have found that the most useful guide to directing a living playwright's work is to listen carefully to how he speaks. Not his dramatic speech, but his speech as he goes about the ordinary business of living. The tone of his voice is inevitably never far away from the dialogue in his plays. Whether it be Pinter's assertive, staccato phrases, that are frequently followed by sudden silences; Stoppard's dry, yet highly illuminating quips, that deflate even as they help

you to understand; Shaffer's infinitely antithetical qualifications; David Hare's cryptic and sudden dialectic challenges; or the rueful and very comical repetitions of Samuel Beckett, they all help us *hear* the writer. It is invaluable knowledge for the rehearsal room and one of the undoubted benefits of working with a living writer.

Pinter came into a theatre which was dominated by seemingly 'real' dialogue, but dialogue that was frequently sloppy and imprecise. Many actors in the early years found the discipline of Pinter unbearable. But just as in the classics, they have learned over time to respect his form and his craft. His lines have a shape and an economy, which the actor cannot ignore. If he tries to make Pinter more 'naturalistic' by ignoring his pauses, chopping up his lines and denying his rhythms, he simply ruins the potency of the writing. His form must be assimilated and endorsed. Finally, of course, the actor must and will make the lines his own – just as a great pianist makes the phrase his own. But the phrase is still Pinter's, if the actor has done his work properly.

After the formal text work, I move to rehearsals which concentrate on the psychological processes of the characters, and what they want. The methods of Stanislavsky are cautiously brought into play and the natures of the characters are considered. I stress 'cautiously', because this process cannot result in improvisation, or alteration of the dialogue, or the pauses, or the shape of the text. If the actor feels uncomfortable with the text once he has found his motives, then the motives are wrong, not the text. A conductor would be surprised if one of his first violins rose from his desk and said 'I can't play this A flat: I don't feel it.' But many actors believe themselves justified in questioning a line, if they feel that their character wouldn't say it. Occasionally, of course, this can be a valid objection. But the danger is that however true the actor's instinct may be, what he wants to represent may be less original than what the author envisaged. So, the actor has to accept that when he is dealing with a major dramatist, it is usually the character that the actor has created that is wrong, not the line. If Harold Pinter is asked what something means in rehearsal, his usual response is to ask another question: 'What does it say?'

The next process of work is to release the melodrama that lies underneath the text. It is not fanciful to see the suppression of emotion as one of the great strengths of English literature. From Jane Austen to Oscar Wilde and then on to Noel Coward and Harold Pinter, many varieties of the stiff upper lip are evident. When characters in Oscar Wilde feel unbearable emotional conflict, they break into epigrams in order to preserve their equilibrium. When Noel Coward's characters care too much, they rise above it with a quip. Pinter's characters have a new kind of stiff upper lip. Their animosities are concealed by charm and restraint – an understatement that often verges

on the malicious. These hot passions have to be understood and then resolutely masked.

The melodrama rehearsals are very hard to sustain, because the emotions unleashed by the actors are frequently so extreme that they verge on obsession, if not hysteria. Yet the actor must explore them, and chart them as the journey of his character. Then he must hide them, suppress them, contain them. His emotions have to be felt with great intensity at every performance. The audience will know what is hidden. Most actors yearn to let some of this emotion out, to reassure the audience by telling them what they are feeling. It is an anxiety to communicate, but it is not only unnecessary, it is dangerous. It can easily look like special pleading – asking the audience to understand. If the actor feels the emotion and hides it, the audience will apprehend it.

So once the passions have been unleashed, they have to be controlled. And in the next stage of rehearsals, it becomes a fault, a demonstration of failure, if one actor can recognise the naked emotional needs of the other. The form is now used as the means of containing the emotion.

The staging – the physical life of a Pinter production – also needs the same restraint as the acting and design. Excess must always be avoided. Too much movement blurs the text and reveals emotional weaknesses in the characters. Stillness leads to concentration and accentuates the potency of the dialogue. The glass of water in *The Homecoming* becomes a symbol of the sexual contest between Ruth and Lenny. Who will actually touch it? Who will actually drink it? Uncle Sam takes an apple (the only life-enhancing thing in that arid room), and it becomes a symbol of violation, an assertion of ordinariness. (I found, incidentally, that the apple had to be green. Redness made a statement.) There is something elemental and quite precise about the staging of any Pinter play. The moves seem to be written into the text, if the motives of the characters are clearly understood. The sudden outbursts of violence and the sudden movements only have their full effect if they are set in stillness – just as the silences are defined by words.

Done flexibly and with humanity, all these disciplines can make a life on stage which is completely convincing. It can, of course, also add up to something mannered, self-consciously restrained and inhuman. Then the production has failed. But my experience is that if the form is respected, there is a moment of release when the actors dance to their own tunes, although they are still dancing to Pinter's. The play becomes theirs. It is like learning a complicated dance, or a difficult duel. When the technical form is completely mastered, then the performer makes it his own and lives it. But that interpretation, although it should be free, has by the very disciplines imposed on it, the capacity to vary from Pinter's requirements by only an infinitesimal amount. But this variance born of the individual response of the actor is finally what makes the play live. The play is still Pinter's, but it transcends Pinter.

T. S. Eliot wrote in 'Poetry and Drama': 'A verse play is not a play done into verse, but a different kind of play ... The poet with ambitions of the theatre must discover the laws, both of another kind of verse and of another kind of drama.' I would go further. I believe that no play is worth our attention unless we can describe it in the widest terms as a poetic play. Only the poetic play makes metaphors rich enough to persuade the audience to play the essential dramatic game of make-believe, and have its imaginations fired by the actor. I do not mean a play that uses poetry in the literary sense, but a play that achieves metaphorical strength by using all the vocabulary of the theatre. Word, action, visual image, subtext, all combine to make something dramatically poetic. In our age of the screen, provoking the imagination is the unique strength of theatre – the imaginings that are encouraged by a live performance. Poetic theatre can deal with the widest subjects, the most improbable transitions. We can imagine that we are anywhere. We can imagine the heights and depths of feeling. Though verse is not a prerequisite of this metaphorical potency, form is – because it represents the means to encourage a metaphorical interpretation of the play's language or action. Or both. Pinter is pre-eminently the playwright of form, and his director must honour that.

The great plays have always been and always will be poetic plays. Pinter's stage is a metaphor. His form is complex and intensely studied. And it is his form which makes his dialogue crackle with theatricality. He can be a very lyrical writer, particularly when he deals with memory. He can be a very funny writer – his sense of the ridiculous is part of his very being. But above all, his form allows him to explore the instinctive hostilities between human beings. They fight duels not with swords, but with words and silences. He has restated that the theatre's strength is metaphor, and by doing so, has been able to demonstrate that its primal potency is always invested in language. His director must celebrate the ambiguity by charting and then hiding the strong emotions. He must trust the audience to understand, even when they are dealing with contradictions. And above all, he must make his actors as precise as the singers of Mozart. Yet that precision must paradoxically also be a means of expressing their own particularity. 'The opposite is also true', said Marx. (Groucho, not Karl.) And this is true of directing Pinter. It is not easy; but it is not easy to direct any great dramatist who deals with the contradictions of living.