

The First Night of *The Caretaker*

The first short run of *The Caretaker* began at the Arts Theatre Club in Great Newport Street by Leicester Square, on April 27, 1960, with Alan Bates, Peter Woodthorpe and Donald Pleasence in the cast. It transferred to the Duchess Theatre in the West End at the end of May, where it won an *Evening Standard* award. These are useful pieces of information which you can find in almost any Pinter textbook; but my aim here is to provide some background to these facts, to colour in the surfaces and add some light and shade.

I reviewed *The Caretaker* for a film company, Paramount British Pictures. It was one of my first assignments, and not the most easy, for it was an office rule to supply a summary of the plot before telling your colleagues what you thought of a play. But it was not easy to tell the story of *The Caretaker* briefly, and if you did, it would not convey much about the play itself. Like *Waiting for Godot* (with which it was often compared) or the novels of the French New Wave, the story of *The Caretaker* was thought to be minimal and disconnected, like life perhaps, but not like the plays which we mainly reviewed.

The Caretaker was produced at a time when it was starting to be fashionable to question formal narrative structures, but in contrast, the other success of the season was Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, a didactic history about Thomas More, which now seems old-fashioned. *The Caretaker* bridged a gap between the avant-garde and more traditional plays of the West End, for it could be described as Absurdist or Naturalistic, praised for not having a story or for telling it obliquely, and relished for its representation of life among the tramps of London's underworld or for the nuances of its dialogue.

These seemingly contradictory views were scattered among the critics at the time. Bamber Gascoigne of *The Spectator* admired the

“distilled naturalism” of Pinter’s writing, while Martin Esslin included him among the writers of the Absurd, with Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and N. F. Simpson. They cannot all have been right, but the first night reviews were more in touch with the theatrical mood which greeted *The Caretaker* than many of the more scholarly essays which have since appeared. In his Introduction to *Harold Pinter* (1986), a selection of critical essays, the editor, Michael Scott, wrote that Pinter “is the product of a post-war generation that has attempted to reject the evils of the twentieth century and present a new outlook on society”, which may be so but feels misguided. I do not think that the audience on the first night felt that we were watching a “socially significant” play.

The Caretaker has been described as an example of a new proletarian drama emerging after the war, which is at best a half-truth. Elsewhere in British theatre, there were working-class plays and writers, but the Arts Theatre Club did not produce them. They would have been seen at the Unity Theatre in Camden or Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop at Stratford-atte-Bowe, which were socialist theatres; and Littlewood had an unrivalled record in finding proletarian talents, such as Brendan Behan and Shelagh Delaney. But she would not have directed a Pinter play, or wanted to do so, nor would he have wished to have been directed by her. They came from different strands in British theatre.

The Arts Theatre Club was the most prestigious of many small theatre clubs, in the days before fringe theatres. The British fringe can be said to have begun in 1963-64, with the performances of the small but marvellous anarchic People Show in the basement of a book shop in Charing Cross Road and (in Edinburgh) with the establishment of the Traverse Theatre Club in a disused brothel. A feature of the fringe was its refusal to follow normal stage conventions, such as proscenium arches and front-of-house curtains. Improvisation was a feature, not the poised language of Pinter’s distilled naturalism, and all fringe groups challenged the censor, which was why they played mainly in clubs. The small theatre clubs, like

the Arts, were also censor-free zones, but they imitated the standards of the West End and were often used as try-out venues for new plays, such as *The Caretaker*.

There were many small theatre clubs, such as "Q" (near Kew Gardens) and the New Watergate, where Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* was staged, which were only experimental in the sense of trying out new, sometimes controversial plays. The Arts Theatre Club was about the size of a large drawing-room with a proscenium arch stage and comfortable seating for about 150 people, very middle-class. It was in the West End and famous for staging some bold seasons during and after the Second World War, from 1942-50, under its actor-manager, Alec Clunes. It became a favoured venue for leading play-producing companies, such as H. M. Tennent Ltd., particularly for plays which might appeal to young intellectuals, such as *Waiting for Godot* or the plays of Christopher Fry, but were too risky for straightforward commercial ventures. The impresario, Michael Codron, who produced Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1958) and *The Caretaker*, ran a new plays season in 1964, which included Joe Orton's *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, another Codron discovery.

The Arts Theatre Club placed *The Caretaker* in a certain context. It was not a working-class or experimental club, or a forerunner of the fringe. The audience was polite, but ready to listen to a young writer about whom much had been written. The disaster of Pinter's first full-length play, the one-week flop of *The Birthday Party* at the Lyric, Hammersmith, has been well documented by theatre writers; but it is forgotten that the same play had well-received short runs in the university towns of Oxford and Cambridge. Although he went to RADA and the Central School of Speech and Drama, and not to an ancient university, Pinter was not shunned by the post-war university wits who emerged during the mid-1950s – Peter Hall, Michael Frayn and Bamber Gascoigne among them – but celebrated by them. This was the key to his eventual success, for after *The Birthday Party*, his reputation was

rapidly restored by writing sketches for intimate revues for stage and radio, such as *The Lyric Revue* and *One to Another*, the vehicles for aspiring college wits. Gascoigne wrote *Share My Lettuce* (1956), with help from Frayn, which was produced by Codron. I have to admit that in a marginal way, I was one of them, writing plays and sketches for BBC comedy programmes.

If Pinter's play, *A Slight Ache* (1958), caught the tone of Samuel Beckett, his sketches, such as *The Black and White* (1959), owe a debt to the Master, Noël Coward, who influenced us all, particularly in the dry, ironic detachment with which working-class and other unfashionable types were presented. "It don't look like an all-night bus in the day, do it?" opined one of two derelict old women at an all-night bus shelter. The line itself was not funny. When delivered, after an immense struggle and a long pause as if pondering one of life's profundities, it was made to seem funny through the contortions of the actress. It was a good performance line, which ended the sketch strongly, but Joan Littlewood would never have allowed herself to make fun of an old tramp.

Coward had a way of making place names sound funny: "very flat, Norfolk" was a well-known laugh line from *Private Lives*. He started a trend among university wits, who wrote sketches and songs about Woking or Wimbledon, with more than a trace of metropolitan snobbery. When Davies in *The Caretaker* rambled on about Sidcup, Luton or Wembley, he aroused a similar laughter, which took the edge away from his search for his papers; but elsewhere, his obsessive concern with cards of identity might have been treated more sympathetically. It was just after the war. We all knew or had heard of the panic of refugees.

I am inclined to think that the style which came to be known as Pinteresque was a mixture of Coward-like poise with low-life vocabulary. Pinter used shock-words more liberally than Coward – "bastards!", "toe-rag!" – but if we take almost any short piece of dialogue from *The Caretaker*, a Coward-like irony can be felt, floating in all directions in the sub-text:

MICK. He doesn't like work.

(Pause)

DAVIES. Go on!

MICK. No, he just doesn't like work, that's his trouble.

DAVIES. Is that a fact?

MICK. It's a terrible thing to have to say about your own brother.

DAVIES. Ay.

MICK. He's just shy of it. Very shy.

DAVIES. I know that sort.

MICK. You know the type?

Since then, many critics have tried to explain the secrets of the Pinteresque. Michael Billington, who has written a study of *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter* (1996), might interpret the play as inherently political. Mick, a latent fascist, is taunting Davies the social discard. His sarcasm is part of the process of domination. But this style of writing can be found in many other writers of the time, in the scripts for comedian Tony Hancock, in *The Arthur Haynes Show* and even the BBC's *Monday Night at Eight*. It is not so much political as social, if such a distinction can be made.

Pinter brought his trained instincts as a poet and actor to a style of writing which had a long history before he came on the scene, which was why audiences responded readily. Later on in the 1960s, when his reputation became established and he had been adopted by the Royal Shakespeare Company under Peter Hall as a kind of house dramatist, the stylistic traits became more pronounced, even affected, and in such plays as *Landscape* and *Silence*, the contact with the public seemed less sure. The laughter was uncertain. In 1960, *The Caretaker* seemed to come from an original mind, but not startlingly new, which was why it achieved a wider popularity than expected.

There was another factor to *The Caretaker's* success, its casting. At a time when a production's success was thought to depend on the presence of major stars, of which there were a large

number, *The Caretaker* featured three actors who each had successes to their names, but were not stars. Peter Woodthorpe (Aston) was a member of the original London cast of *Waiting for Godot* (1955), directed by Peter Hall, in which he played Estragon. Hall and Woodthorpe studied at Cambridge University, where they were contemporaries and leading lights in a small but sparkling firmament. Alan Bates (Mick) played Cliff in *Look Back in Anger* (1956), the quiet but self-possessed foil to Kenneth Haigh's Jimmy Porter. Haigh was already a star, but not Bates; while Donald Pleasence (Davies) was an older actor who had appeared in relatively minor roles for twenty years, but always with distinction. In particular, his appearance as the Dauphin in Jean Anouilh's *The Lark* had been much admired at its London premiere at the Lyric, Hammersmith, in 1955.

Pleasence was the one who most seized his opportunities; stabbing the air compulsively, wincing at the cold, whining his excuses, putting on airs. Woodthorpe had one compelling monologue, stumbling and quietly broken, about his electric shock treatment in a mental hospital; while Bates overturned his reputation for quiet receptivity by provoking the tramp with alternating kindnesses and cruelty, a tormentor in the making, as he was afterwards to become in Pinter's *One for the Road* (1984). I can remember the wonderful flow between them, the teamwork and particularly the timing, which kept us in suspense, waiting for a drop of water to clip into a pail.

It reminded me of a moment in Anglo-American production of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Visit*, when Alfred Lunt shook a stone from his shoe, and then another, that 'silky' timing (as Coward called it), so exact that if the actor breathes in when he/she should be breathing out, the moment would be spoilt. It was the timing of drawing room comedy at best or an intimate revue sketch, performed by Joyce Grenfell. There was nothing rough or improvisatory about their pauses: it came from a long tradition of British comic

acting, but not music hall. Alec Guinness was another actor with this masterly gift, but he was even then of a past era.

Woodthorpe, Bates and Pleasence epitomised the generation who emerged in the revival of British theatrical energy in the mid-1950s. The director, Donald McWhinnie, is less well-known today, but came from another side to the renaissance, the BBC. He commissioned Pinter to write plays for the BBC in the dark days after the failure of *The Birthday Party*, with the support of the Head of BBC Drama, Martin Esslin. With Michael Codron, an ambitious young impresario-about-town, a natural (when the time came) to H. B. "Binkie" Beaumont, *The Caretaker* was supported by what might be described as the unacknowledged trend-setters of British theatre.

The audience had expected an avant-garde play, which turned out to be not so alarming or difficult to handle as *Waiting for Godot* or (for other reasons) Behan's *The Quare Fellow*. It had many Beckett-like scenes, such as the boots and the nasty noises in the night; but its rhythms were not those of Beckett's, nor its jokes, and although we linked the play with *Godot*, I do not think in retrospect that it was much like Beckett at all, except a Beckett misunderstood and filtered through a British sensibility of the time.

If the Pozzo-Lucky scenes in *Godot* are compared with the power struggles in *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*, an interesting feature emerges. The sado-masochistic relationship of Pozzo and Lucky have been inserted into a text which is not sado-masochistic in itself. Estragon and Vladimir may quarrel but they are not always jockeying for the whip. *The Caretaker* on the other hand is largely concerned with sado-masochistic games, with Davies as the visiting slave, Mick as the dominant and Aston as the submissive. It is possible to read a political message into this relationship as the erotic origin of all power struggles, but to do so runs the risk of shifting the relationships on to a different level. It would be like confusing between lion cubs at play with adult lions at kill. No-

body means to kill or seriously to maim anyone in these sado-masochistic games. The real cruelty is accidental.

Davies is not actively persecuted by the brothers: his is not a life-or-death struggle. He may be tormented or rejected, and given a false idea of his importance; but this amounts to not much of a repression, when set against the grand political repressions of our time. The revelation of *The Caretaker* lies elsewhere, in linking sado-masochism with charity, or rather, by showing how a kindly gesture can turn into sado-masochism and how power-games can cause more bruises than they intend. The US director, Charles Marowitz, described it in the *Village Voice* as a play "about a British sub-society, rendered in the tart language of the regions from which these characters hail" and concluded that it might be translated but "appreciated nowhere else but in England." It was "an elaborate network of ambiguity stretched tight over a simple little story" (quoted in *Confessions of a Counterfeit Critic*, 1973).

What Marowitz failed to mention was the significance of class bullying to the British way of life, matching and often complimenting its kindness. In other words, every school, each family, every community had its own ways of putting people in their places, of locating them, if necessary, by force. This may have been true of Hackney where Pinter grew up and was so of Brentwood, where I did. It was a form of tribalism, which did not amount to ethnic cleansing or the brutalities which could be found elsewhere, but staked its territorial claims to every metre of town and countryside.

The Caretaker appeared at a time when our society was unusually self-conscious of its class-divisions. The audience was not likely to approve of Davies, or to be on his side, but we watched with amusement and shame as to how he was treated. As a parable, the play was hard to ignore. It still is.

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