

Just a Smack at the Pinteresque:
A Page and Stage Revaluation of *Caretaker*
Interpretation

The mid 1990's provides an interesting vantage point from which to reassess the significance of Harold Pinter's first major success *The Caretaker*. Not only do the 90's provide the cultural historian with a more informed view of the first one and a half decades of the Cold War era, but the gap in time provides the director with a chance to take a fresh look at the links between page and stage. Being involved in both practical theatre and higher education, the current moment may also prove quite useful in reassessing how both theatre critics and academics have influenced the public perception of both *The Caretaker* and Pinter's early work in general. The resulting process of critical reflection provides a basis from which to place the play in both a historical perspective and to gauge its contemporary relevance and standing as a work of dramatic art.

The expanding universities and college campuses of the 1960's rapidly began to hijack and consume literary production to an unprecedented degree. Pinter, rapidly designated a key figure of the *Anger and After* group of playwrights by John Russel Taylor was one of the major targets of this development. With its enormously successful shift from the Arts Theatre to the Duchess Theatre in May 1960, *The Caretaker*, perhaps more than any other single Pinter play, was instrumental in establishing Harold Pinter's national and international standing. From then onwards college campuses had a live dramatic genius writing and producing as the ink of the lecture notes was drying. Harold Pinter's success of the early to mid sixties

thrust him into the curricular vortex of the burgeoning literature and drama departments. Arguably it was also the success of *The Caretaker*, which did the most to typify what audiences, critics and students came to refer to as “Pinteresque.”

By the late sixties in Britain and the seventies in West Germany, students at schools and colleges were often heard to groan about countless essays and exam questions on the “Pinteresque”. *The Caretaker* was seen as significant enough to form part of many obligatory university and college set texts. From the playwrights’ point of view, one which has become very familiar since the 1960’s, it must have been highly disorientating to see to what extent their plays became blank screens onto which no end of often trite and contrived thematic and structural interpretations could be projected.

Theatre foyers and bars, campus seminar rooms, college greens, and refectories rang with the echoes of such catchphrases as “non-communication”, “Pinteresque nightmares”, “the comedy of menace in a social vacuum” and so on. The kind of standardised interpretations to which both amateur and professional directors’ stage renderings were expected to correspond, can be summed up in some of the early critical evaluations of *The Caretaker*; many of which would make excellent material for *Pseuds Corner* in *Private Eye*. Perhaps Martin Esslin was just a little over the top when he proclaimed *The Caretaker* to be:

The naturalistic picture of an old man trying to conquer a place of his own is the foundation on which, because it is so solidly built, so firmly established, the moral parable, the poetic metaphor, the archetypal symbol out of the collective unconscious can securely rest.¹

The award for the greatest generalisation may well be awarded to James T. Boulton for the following comment on *The Caretaker*:

Pinter seems to suggest that man is a mystery, unknowable and yet fascinating, living in his own separate world, which impinges only by

accident on others equally separate, and it is these moments of impact which provide insight into the overall human situation.²

A glaring example of school student interpretive guiding gone mad is to be found in *The Caretaker* edition of *Longman Literature Guides*. Here to the assumed enlightenment of students looking for exam formulas and social causalities G. M. Stephen's notes confidently proclaim that:

In particular the hidden menace and sudden eruptions of violence that are a feature of Pinter's early plays, could almost act as an emblem for the state of many Londoners in the 1940's, when air raids could come at any time, people lived under constant threat and a few seconds could turn what had been a home into a bomb-blasted ruin. Here, as in Pinter's plays, the enemy was faceless, hostile and always waiting to pounce.³

A director's response to this may well be to have Davies enter lowered from above dressed as a Luftwaffe war pilot carrying bombs in his pockets.

By the 1970's and 80's Pinter had emerged as one of the standard set text authors in German schools and universities. German Abitur questions until quite recently have been noted for requiring the hapless candidate to explain the dramatic purpose of a mathematically specified number of pauses in a given Pinter play.

The damage done on both sides of the channel to young students' attitudes to Pinter through this kind of obligatory curricular straight jacketing has been considerable, and legislates against the promotion of theatre as a dynamic and socially relevant cultural asset.

The structuralist and post-structuralist campus shifts of the 1980's may have lent an air of methodological professionalism to the analysis of Pinter's work. However, does the kind of painstaking linguistically biased structuralist approach, exemplified here by David Lodge's structuralist reading of *Last to Go*, imply that a work of dramatic art is merely the sum of its linguistic parts?

According to A. J. Greimas all concepts are semantically defined by a binary relationship with their opposites (e.g. life versus death) or their negatives (eg. life versus non-life), yielding the basic semiotic model $A:B::\neg A:\neg B$ (eg. Life is to Death as Non-life is to Non-death), and all narrative can be seen as the transformation of such four-term homologies into characters and actions. In 'Last to Go' the life/death theme is presented as presence/absence.⁴

Any student willing to learn the formulas will be able to carry away a structural blueprint of the play without having to bother about such dimensions as emotional response, the dynamics of performance and non-verbal theatrical conventions.

Yet these theoretical bugbears may pale into insignificance in comparison with conflict which has centred around Pinter's role as being that of a political or non-political dramatist. The nature of such categorical demarcation disputes often put the playwright into the position of having to react to the charge of being either too unpolitical or too indirectly political to satisfy the Marxist critical establishment.

There were furious debates I remember at Leicester University and Teacher Training College after the 1965 Phoenix Theatre production of *The Caretaker*. Marxist critics at the time tended to claim that Pinter functioned as a bourgeois writer evading political commitment through obscurity and exhibiting a rather jaundiced and distanced view of the working class. On the other hand, the liberal arts lobby often claimed that their guru didn't have to stoop to political didacticism in order to be considered a significant playwright and so on.

By the late 1960's, directors wishing to experiment with the staging of Pinter's work could be almost intimidated by the challenge of meeting the expectations of established 'Pinteresque' conventions. The plays like Beckett's forming tightly woven poetic structures around carefully orchestrated pauses. Thanks to Peter Hall, the tight poetic interpretation of Pinter's early plays created some memorable productions. On the negative side a kind of band

waggon effect grew up, and the Pinter production with its intimidating dramatic pauses became a kind of obligatory debt to the spirit of the age. Nevertheless compared with the effect of the Reagan/Thatcher and son era upon the British theatre, the band waggons of the 1960's and 70's provincial venues and the blossoming amateur dramatic scene may now seem like a golden age.

The most simplistically repetitive clichés with which Pinter has been associated are those of 'non-communication'. Such platitudes tend to underestimate Pinter's psychological accuracy in dramatising more subtle levels of communication. For the director therefore, is important to resist the temptation to see *The Caretaker* as belonging to one particular genre in order to shape the production. For instance opting for a too narrowly Kafkaesque approach to the dramatisation of menace may be done at the cost of ignoring the highly penetrating naturalistic elements embodied in the language and silences of the play. Crudely lumping *The Caretaker* together with genres of the comedy of menace and absurdism may thus seriously detract from the play's essential dramatic rhythms. It is all too easy to neglect the joint comic potential of the rhetorical flights of fantasy and the bathos of each character's social reality.

In the late 50's the essential comedy and pathos of these contradictions were pioneered on radio by Ray Galton and Alan Simpson's Tony Hancock scripts and later in the television series *Steptoe and Son*. The combined lower middle class and working class language and wit of inner suburban London, present in these social comedies, fuel and colour the verbal interaction of *The Caretaker*. The breadth of the play's appeal lies in its being socio-geographically and culturally located in the popular culture of London in the late 1950's and early 60's. This sense of deep cultural location was immediately picked up on by Kenneth Tynan in his review of the play's opening night at the Duchess Theatre in 1960:

...but London is unique in the declass   decrepitude of its Western suburbs, with their floating population, their indoor dustbins, there desolate bed-sitters, their prevalent dry rot – moral as well as structural – and their frequent casual suicides. Mr. Pinter captures all this with the most chilling economy.⁵

Here again Pinter shares substantial common generic roots with the Galton and Simpson above mentioned classics. The flights of rhetoric indulged in by Mick and Aston mask the pathos of oppressive suburban London mediocrity which traps the characters within the small space of their mutual dependency.

Producing the play in the 1990's, now that the ideological heat has gone out of the debate as to what does or does not constitute a political play, does allow *The Caretaker* some undisputed political significance whilst also allowing the 1950's and 1960's to be evaluated in a more historical light. Both of these developments allow one to be able to identify more clearly the qualities of the play which have allowed it to withstand the test of time.

The 1950's and early 60's are now generally regarded as having been a highly schizophrenic age beset with deep social tensions. The comforts of the American led populuxe era and the almost static materialism of Welfare State Britain were accompanied by deep seated political uncertainty and repressive measures taken against radical dissidents. The ways in which conscientious objectors, pacifists, and anti-nuclear protesters for example, were treated presents us with the image of a society which was anything other than politically tolerant.

In working out guidelines for a student course in staging *The Caretaker*, I located the action in the central tensions of the 50's ; organising the exercises around Aston's pivotal speech alluding to possible electro-shock treatment or lobotomy. The central ambiguity of Aston's having either been singled out as a political subversive or somebody who has simply shown signs of mental instability, is embedded in the sub-text of the preceding interaction. Knowledge of the way in which dissidents in both the Soviet Union and the

United States were locked up in mental or similar institutions, plus the clear echoes of the post treatment debilitation of Orwell's Winston Smith in 1984, surely qualify *The Caretaker* for recognition as a political play, albeit of a subtly exploratory rather than an overtly doctrinaire nature.

Pinter was writing in the thick of a debate on the institutional as well as political misuse of psychiatry. Established practices were challenged from the left by R. D. Laing, whose affinity to the thematic projects of Pinter's early work is mentioned in Pat Waugh's recent reference to *The Caretaker*:

Pinter's point – also an important emphasis in the existential anti-psychiatry of R. D. Laing at the time – is that to invoke depth, to stray from surfaces of evasion, risks a dangerous exposure of vulnerability which enables the other to claim one's identity in his or her power games.⁶

A second speech which links the individual power games to the the broader political schizophrenia of the populux era is Mick's long passage describing what he plans to do with house once he gets round to it:

MICK ... I'd have teal-blue, copper and parchment linoleum squares. I'd have those colours re-echoed in the walls. I'd offset the kitchen units with charcoal-grey worktops.⁷

Following hard upon the adumbrated break down of Aston's probably radical views at the end of Act Two, this speech embodies the flight into the corporate led regime of American inspired consumerism which has dominated Western society ever since. This thematic connection was overlooked in Alvarez' review of the 1960 Arts Theatre production of *The Caretaker*:

...But in Aston's long speech the terrors are at last spoken. If only Pinter would go on from there and not just lapse back into what he has already done better in other plays!⁸

Furthermore, the kind of aggressive racism that grew up amongst all the sections of English society during the waves of Afro- Caribbean and Indian sub-continental migration the 1950's is carefully thematically placed in Davies' speeches. Charting one's way through the racist paranoia of Davies' preoccupations from the perspective of a 1990's Europe plagued with increasing social breakdown and marginalisation, one may find the connection between perceived low social status and racism explored in *The Caretaker* is of as much thematic relevance now as it was in the 1960's.

Another dimension of *The Caretaker's* continuing relevance to the everyday experience of young people today lies in their currently widespread experience of single parent or broken family units. Working with students on various workshop research techniques of status, pace, and gesture, frequently generates the notion that the emotional centre of the play is informed by an underlying cycle of guilt and anxiety associated with narrow family units whose close interdependency is a matter of survival. Davies has walked into just such a situation. Mick and Aston are trapped by their mutual dependency. Both fantasise about breaking out of the dependency for which they both feel contempt. However as soon as this relationship is seriously threatened by the interrupting force, then the unit closes up in a form of tight solidarity and rejects the outsider. On this level the interactive fabric *The Caretaker* still corresponds to the experience of many who have lived through such close interdependent relationships. Using the various workshop techniques developed since the 1960's, these elements of the play can be explored through improvisation. The actors may then go back to the original 'blueprint' free from a too restrictive adherence to pauses and over precise stage directions. Such an approach reinforces the importance for any potential producer today, of being able to shrug off the kind of obsessive categorisation that many drama theorists have been prone to.

It is perhaps easier to allow *The Caretaker* to find its own form of relevance now that the most restrictive ideological conflicts of the

late 1960's and 1970's as to what does and what does not qualify as political theatre have largely faded into cultural history. Apart from its linguistic brilliance, the anchoring strength of *The Caretaker* resides in its power to fuse closely orchestrated and insightful representations of social and individual psychology, with the broader social and political climate. The play succeeds in welding together these various perspectives in a way which not only encapsulates the spirit of an age, but also has not allowed itself to become dated.

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Notes

- 1 Martin Esslin, *Pinter: A Study of His Plays*, London: Methuen, 1973, p. 109.
- 2 James C. Boulton, *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice Hall, 1972, p. 103.
- 3 *The Caretaker*, "York Notes", G. M. Stephen, London: Longman, 1981.
- 4 "Last to Go: A Structuralist Reading", David Lodge in *Harold Pinter: a Casebook*, Lois Gordon ed., Garland Publishing Inc. 1990.
- 5 Kenneth Tynan, *The Observer*, 5 June 1960.
- 6 Patricia Waugh, *Harvest of the Sixties*, OPUS 1995, p. 83.
- 7 Act Three, *The Caretaker*, Methuen, Student Editions, 1982, p. 60.
- 8 A. Alvarez, *The New Statesman*, 7 May 1960.