Wings Of Fire: **Volume 1 (2024), No. 2**

Foreword to Issue 2: Harold Pinter and the Theatre of Menace

FRANCESCA COPPA
Muhlenberg College

Foreword to Issue 1: Harold Pinter and the Theatre of Menace, Wings of Fire, 2024.

Coppa, Francesca. 2024. "Foreword to Issue 2: Harold Pinter and the Theatre of Menace," *Wings of Fire*. Volume 1, No. 2.

As students who have worked with me will tell you, I think that Harold Pinter (1930 - 2008) is the most important playwright of the 20th century, even more important than his close friend and inspiration, Samuel Beckett. Beckett's plays are about the comedy of the human condition, about what it means to spend seventy or so years on a spinning ball of dust. (Answer: nothing.) These concerns are huge and existential, but Pinter's are more local: they are specifically about power, force, violence, and man's inhumanity to man. Pinter rarely concerns himself with the "really big" questions, because he's too busy tracking the small brutalities that result in most people's pain and suffering. For this reason—a sad reason, a terrible reason—Pinter is the playwright of the 20th century, with its global terrorisms, its ghettos and mass graves, its totalitarianisms and despotisms, its domestic violences and petty cruelties, as well as its bleak recognition of hierarchies and oppression: of class, of race, of gender and sex and economics.

Ironically, Pinter wasn't always seen as a political playwright. In the context of the 1950s, when Pinter's first work debuted, to be "political" was to be involved in a very specific subset of left-wing causes: the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, for instance, or trade unionism. Kenneth Tynan divided the playwrights of this era into two groups: "the hairy men—heated, embattled, socially committed playwrights like John Osborne, John Arden, and Arnold Wesker," and "the smooth men—cool, apolitical stylists like Harold Pinter." And yes, Harold Pinter certainly *was* a stylist: a writer with an incredibly distinctive literary language. His use of words was so distinctive that the phrase "Pinteresque" had to be coined to describe it. But Pinter is perhaps even more famous for his use of silence: the so-called "Pinter pause," a scripted silence pregnant with subtext or unspoken meaning. Pinter's work, on the sentence level, is as stylized as poetry. But at the same time, he is easily the most political playwright of his age—not because he advocated for one cause or another (though he was involved in many political causes in his life) but because he was so keenly aware of how hierarchies are constructed by language, of how power manifests itself, and of how apparently calm situations can erupt into violence.

Pinter's awareness of the hum of power and the possibilities of sudden violence was no doubt developed as a Jewish child growing up in England during the Second World War. He was sent away from his parents during the Blitz, and his life after the war was marked by antisemitisms, both global and local. Like everyone else of that era, Pinter reeled from the shock of the concentration camps, but Pinter also encountered antisemitic violence at home:

> Everyone encounters violence in some way or other. It so happens I did encounter it in quite an extreme form after the war, in the East End, when the Fascists were coming back to life in England. I got into fights down there. If you looked remotely like a Jew you might be in trouble. Also I went to a Jewish club, by an old railway arch, there were quite a lot of people often waiting with broken milk bottles in a particular alley we used to walk through. (Perloff)

[From his very first play, Pinter was staging strange situations that ended unexpectedly, often in violence: this is what critics termed the "theatre of menace." *The Room* (1957) ends with a silent hulk of a man kicking a blind Negro to death. In *The Birthday Party* (1958), two men show up at a seaside resort to terrorize and take away a man who had been hiding there. In *The Dumb Waiter* (1957), a hit man becomes the object of a hit. In his early plays, Pinter shows us what happens to the characters without ever explaining *why* it should happen: *Who was the blind Negro? Why was the man hiding at the seaside resort? Who ordered the hit on the hit man?* These questions are never answered. Critics found these plots almost hilariously surreal, but I would argue that history provides us with many analogous situations: Black men are killed for no reason, a knock on the door leads to one of your neighbors being taken away, criminals are murdered by other criminals. There's nothing surreal to any of this; it's in every newspaper.

In his middle period, Pinter's plays began to focus on the (often gendered) power dynamics of close relationships: including the betrayal of friendship and the terrors of lost love. These plays, too, refuse to answer our questions; in fact, they make us realize that we won't ever get answers to our most pressing questions: *Were we ever really friends? Why doesn't she love me anymore? Why don't you remember the past the way I do?* In his late works, Pinter began to write plays that were more overtly about state-sponsored violence: works about an invading power's suppression of the local language, for example, or of the smiling torture of political dissidents. These stories, too, were taken as either "unreal" or "surreal," but again, in my opinion, Pinter's version of the world looks more like reality than the strained efforts of much realist drama: the almost playful American abuse of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib (stacking the prisoners into human pyramids, taking selfies) is a real-life Pinter play, as is the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul (choked to death and then dismembered by a forensic specialist who was listening to music on a Walkman.)

Harold Pinter was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005, three years before his death from cancer in 2008. His legacy continues, however, from the naming of the Harold Pinter Theatre in London to the extraordinary festival of work that played there upon the 10th anniversary of his death: *Pinter at the Pinter*. Most importantly, Harold Pinter's influence continues in the work of writers such as Caryl Churchill, Joe Orton, David Mamet, David Hare, Alan Ayckbourn, and Sarah Kane; as a screenwriter, Pinter also affected the history of British cinema, writing scripts such as *The Servant* (1963, dir. Joseph Losey), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981, dir. Karel Reisz), *Sleuth* (2007, dir. Kenneth Branaugh), and others.

The student papers in this collection deal not only with a variety of Pinter's own theatrical works, but also with both his influences and the many writers he himself influenced.

References

Perloff, Carey. 2022. "Fragments, Loss, and Language: On the Jewishness of Pinter and Stoppard." *American Theatre*. June 10. https://www.americantheatre.org/2022/06/10/fragments-loss-and-language-on-the-jewishness-of-pinter-and-stoppard/