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## PINTER AND POLITICS

Pinter's political interests have taken many forms, but none more important than his call to resistance.

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The search for “politics” in Pinter’s plays dating from the 1950s through the early 1980s proves elusive.<sup>11</sup> In their claustrophobic environments (*The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, *The Dumbwaiter*, *The Homecoming*, *No Man’s Land*, and others), an almost uncanny tension permeates the stage. We witness almost continual struggles for power, but in them no one would claim that Pinter dramatizes larger geopolitical forces or the resistance of the underclass. Gender, the erotic, and sexual jealousy—frequently subtle, sometimes overt — play an important role in these and other plays (*Night*, *The Lover*, *Old Times*, *Betrayal*), leading some critics to see the regressive politics of misogyny at work. This seems unlikely, given how effete, impotent, and cruel Pinter’s male world often is.

Time and again a mysterious, disturbing, and potentially violent visitor enters from the outside. Scholars like Martin Esslin and Michael Billington glimpse in these visitations an image of authoritarian forces at work; the subjugation of Stanley in *The Birthday Party*, for example, supports this interpretation. However, most of the plays focus on how the outsider exploits tensions already present, shaking up and re-aligning domestic power; we do not see a microcosm of some wider political struggle.

Language is carefully wrought in Pinter, as characters speak less to communicate than to insinuate, intimidate, prevaricate, or confuse, but their targets are local. The pauses and silences that characterize Pinter’s dialogue suggest psychological, rather than political, manipulation. Indeed, each character puts forth a different (even self-contradictory)

<sup>11</sup> For Pinter’s plays, see his *Collected Works* (4 volumes), 1st Evergreen ed. (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1990) and *Plays Four*, 2nd expanded ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).

version of what happened before, revealing the past as unstable and memory as unreliable. If history is mere assertion, a matter of convenience, an idiosyncratic story based on the vagaries of personal memory, then there is no reliable check on the past. However, if the theater is to do the political work of telling the truth, exposing hypocrisy, and breaking through propaganda, then it depends on history having determinant facts and at least some objective truths. For this reason alone, the plays that made Pinter a household name offer little firm ground for political insight or protest.

Beginning in the early 1980s, however, Pinter wrote some overtly political plays, including *Mountain Language*, *One for the Road*, *Party Time*, and others. Many critics find these inferior to Pinter's earlier work, accusing him of abandoning psychological and erotic menace for political heavy-handedness. Whether or not one agrees with these judgments, Pinter's political plays never lose the bitter and sardonic wit that characterizes his earlier drama. They remain deeply involved in the game of language, unmasking doublespeak and indirection as a favorite mode of manipulation and control.

Stanford Summer Theater (a professional theater I started in 1996) presented a Pinter Festival in the summer of 2004, only a few months before Pinter won the Nobel Prize for Literature. We staged productions of *The Lover*, *Night*, *The Collection*, and *The Applicant* (an early sketch about a job interview that turns into physical torture). Our film series featured Pinter screenplays, and we presented a daylong symposium during which we performed his short political plays, *Press Conference* and *The New World Order*.<sup>2</sup> In the former, a new Secretary of Culture (formerly head of Secret Police) jokes and wisecracks about violations of human rights, managing to make great things look small and irrelevant. His ease and comfort in the role of professional liar has its obvious counterparts in the real world, but Pinter exposes the delight in the game of hiding hypocrisy, something politicians work hard to keep from showing.

In *The New World Order* (1991), two men torture a third, hooded and bound to a chair. They repeat the mantra "It's just the beginning, it hasn't even started," to terrifying effect. Given where we have come in 20 years (the "war" on terror, extraordinary rendition, officially sanctioned torture, Guantanamo), this short piece seems like evil prophecy. However, the play focuses on the interaction between the torturers and their worries about how their actions might be understood. Eventually they

<sup>2</sup> *Press Conference* (London : Faber and Faber, 2002); *The New World Order* (in *Plays 4*, above note 1).

convince themselves that what they are doing is “keeping the world clean for democracy,” and they return to their job with a new dedication and energy. Here the ideology of the Minister of Culture in *Press Conference*—what WE do is good, noble, necessary, and praiseworthy—lodges in the minds of those who do the dirty work of torture, a recognition of the way that the public deception of political leaders plays out on the individual cogs in the machine.

Pinter explored this “trickle down” effect in his 2005 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, entitled “Art, Truth & Politics” (delivered via video tape from his wheel chair): “Language [among US politicians and apologists] is actually employed to keep thought at bay. The words ‘the American people’ provide a truly voluptuous cushion of reassurance. You don’t have to think. Just lie back on the cushion. The cushion may be suffocating your intelligence and your critical faculties but it’s very comfortable.”<sup>3</sup> We might consider Pinter’s observation in light of the recent political performance piece by Jane Comfort Dance Company, “American Rendition,” where political abduction and torture merge with television “reality shows.” In Comfort’s piece, competition, humiliation, and public display in the mass media are reflected in the (more or less) hidden acts of political subjugation, torture, and murder. We Americans sit back on the sofa, the comfortable cushion that tells us the world is ours (and rightfully so), and we watch, assured that as part of “the American people” we can do what we like, because it is noble, good, and intrinsically worthwhile. And we can always change the channel.

In his acceptance speech Pinter also distinguished between his sense as a writer that “a thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both” and his need as a citizen to know “What is true? What is false?” Among artists who have spoken out in recent years, few have been so forceful and effective as Pinter in throwing the question “What is true?” back in the face of the “leaders” who have led the US (and its clients, including the UK) into wars of aggression in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the former Yugoslavia, as well as proxy wars fought by Israel in Lebanon and the Occupied Territories. And unlike many critics of the current Iraq War, Pinter viewed this conflict not as an aberration, but as a continuation of American imperialism with the gloves off (given the end of the Cold War). On Turkish repression of the Kurds, on the overthrow of the Allende regime in Chile, on Western support for apartheid South Africa (often forgotten these days), on the illegal US embargo and ongoing acts of terrorism against Cuba, on the US overthrowing democracies

3 “Art, Truth & Politics”, Nobel Prize for Literature acceptance speech delivered Wednesday Dec. 7, 2005 (<http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/2005/pinter-lecture-e.html>)

and funding military dictatorships in Central and Latin America, and on a variety of related issues, Pinter has proven an eloquent and resolute champion of truth-telling in the face of public lies and political propaganda.

In his speech against the Iraq War delivered before the House of Commons in 2003, Pinter not only told the truth but also called us to action: “The stink of hypocrisy is suffocating. This is in reality a simple tale of invasion of sovereign territory, military occupation and control of oil. We have a clear obligation, which is to resist.”<sup>4</sup> His death on December 24, 2008 is a great loss, not only to those of us who love the theater, but also to those of us who struggle for the good things of the world—fairness, equality, freedom, solidarity—and who recognize in

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## ПИНТЕР И ПОЛИТИКА

Резиме

Пинтерова интересовања за политичка питања испољавала су се у различитим аспектима, од којих је свакако најзначајнији онај који се односи на његов позив на отпор.

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4 Speech before House of Commons, delivered Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2003 ([www.haroldpinter.org/politics/lobby\\_of\\_parliament.html](http://www.haroldpinter.org/politics/lobby_of_parliament.html))