WORDS on PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

The Homecoming

BY HAROLD PINTER
DIRECTED BY CAREY PERLOFF
AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
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**OPPOSITE** Sketches of Teddy and Ruth by costume designer Alex Jaeger

The first sketch of the *Homecoming* set by scenic designer Dan Ostling
CHARACTERS, CAST, AND SYNOPSIS OF
THE HOMECOMING

The Homecoming was first presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company (rsc) at the Aldwych Theatre in London on June 3, 1965. It was first presented in the United States by the rsc at the Music Box Theatre in New York City on January 5, 1967.

CHARACTERS AND CAST

MAX
Lenny, Max’s son, the middle child
Sam, Max’s younger brother
Joey, Max’s youngest son
Teddy, Max’s eldest son
Ruth, Teddy’s wife

Jack Willis
Andrew Polk
Kenneth Welsh
Adam O’Byrne
Anthony Fusco
René Augesen

SETTING
An old house in North London.

SYNOPSIS

ACT 1. SCENE 1. Evening. As Lenny (a pimp) reads the paper, his father, Max (a retired butcher), nostalgically prattles on, ignoring his son’s expletive-filled requests to be left alone. Sam, Max’s brother, returns from work in his chauffeur uniform. After a lifetime as a driver, he says, he has become the most sought-after chauffeur at his firm. Max mocks his brother’s profession, joking that it is a wonder that Sam never married: “When you find the right girl, Sam, let your family know. . . . You can bring her to live here, she can keep us all happy. We’d take it in turns to give her a walk around the park.” Not taking the bait, Sam fondly remembers Max’s deceased wife, Jessie, whom he would drive around when Max was busy. Joey, Max’s youngest son, returns home from the gym, where he is training to be a boxer after working his day job in demolition, and retires to his room. Lenny also leaves. Alone with his brother, Max threatens to kick Sam out of the house even though, legally, it belongs to them both.

SCENE 2. Later that night. While the family sleeps, Teddy (Max’s eldest son) and his wife, Ruth, arrive, suitcases in hand. After vacationing in Italy, they have stopped in London on their return to the United States, where they live with their three sons. The couple initially left London six years ago, immediately after marrying; Teddy’s family does not know he
has a wife. Ruth questions their decision to make this unannounced visit and refuses to go up to bed. Instead, she goes out for a stroll. Lenny enters, and the two brothers catch up before Teddy goes to bed. Ruth returns to find Lenny alone in the room. They introduce themselves, and soon Lenny is telling Ruth about how he beat up a woman by the docks. He follows this with an account of how he gave a different lady a jab to the stomach just for wasting his time. When Lenny tries to take Ruth’s glass of water away from her, she does not let him. He warns her against starting any trouble; she responds by inviting him to sit on her lap. She laughs at his stunned reaction and retires to her room. Lenny shouts after her, waking his father, who comes down to berate him. Without telling Max about Teddy and Ruth’s arrival, Lenny hijacks the conversation, questioning his father about the night he was conceived. Max spits on him.

**Scene 3. The next morning.** Teddy and Ruth surprise Max, Sam, and Joey. Max is furious that Teddy spent the night in his house without his knowledge and, moreover, brought a “tart” with him. Teddy explains that Ruth is his wife, but Max does not distinguish between “wives” and “whores.” He tells Joey to throw them out, but he refuses. Max attacks Joey and Sam before collapsing with exhaustion. Max then asks Teddy for a “kiss” and a “cuddle.”

**Act II. Scene I.** That afternoon. Max, Teddy, Lenny, and Sam smoke cigars while Joey and Ruth serve coffee. Max remembers Jessie as the backbone of the family, responsible for the moral upbringing of their three sons while he labored 24 hours a day in the butcher shop. By comparison, he argues, his brother is useless. Sam excuses himself. Teddy tells Max about life in America—his job in the university’s philosophy department has enabled him to make a fine life for his family. Lenny poses a philosophical query to his more-educated older brother—“What is a table?”—but Teddy refuses to answer. Ruth, however,
joins the conversation, quickly adding her own spin to Lenny's question. Teddy suggests they cut their visit short and goes upstairs to pack. Alone with Lenny, Ruth explains that she was a model before she had children, recalling some of her more pleasant photo shoots. Teddy returns with the suitcases and offers Ruth her coat. Lenny puts on a record, and he and Ruth dance. They begin to kiss. Joey and Max return, and Joey goes to the dancers and begins kissing Ruth. Ruth suddenly pushes Joey and Lenny away and demands whisky and food; as they do her bidding, Ruth asks her husband whether his family has read his critical works. He claims that they wouldn't understand his work because they are “too far behind” and entrenched in their limited perspective of reality.

Scene 2. That evening. Teddy remains in the main room with the suitcases. Lenny returns to find that Teddy has devoured a cheese roll Lenny had prepared for himself before he left. Lenny demands an apology for such blatant disrespect, but his attention turns to Joey, who has been upstairs, presumably having sex with Ruth, for the last two hours. Lenny demands details but learns that Joey was not able to “go the whole hog.” Max and Sam return home and Max makes a proposal—that they keep Ruth when Teddy returns to the States. Lenny points out the expense of keeping a woman around and suggests that he enlist her in his ranks of prostitutes so she can pay her own way. Teddy, he suggests, could even promote her to his colleagues back in America for when they travel abroad to England. Ruth enters and Teddy explains that the family has invited her to stay, but that she would have to pull her own weight. Lenny fills in the details, and, after Ruth is satisfied that her own demands—a three-room apartment, a personal maid, a wardrobe, etc.—will be met, she says that the arrangement sounds very attractive. Teddy leaves for the airport. Ruth remains, stroking Joey's hair as he lies with his head in her lap. Sam reveals that Jessie cheated on Max, collapses, and lies immobile on the floor. Max falls to his knees, crawls across the floor to Ruth, and begs her for a kiss.
Aside from working with Tom Stoppard, meeting Harold Pinter and working with him was one of the greatest experiences I will ever have in the theater. I remember Stoppard saying to me once (and he didn’t say this out of arrogance), “When I read other people’s plays, I can imagine writing almost all of them. But then I get to Pinter and think, ‘How the hell did he write that?’” It’s true. There is nothing else in the world like Pinter’s plays. He changed the landscape for all of us who get to make theater.

I met Pinter when I was running csc [Classic Stage Company] in New York. His agent, who was very fierce and terrified me, loved my production of *The Birthday Party*, so she gave us the rights to do the American premiere of a new play of his called *Mountain Language*, a one-act about political torture. This was just before Lexie was born, my daughter who’s 21 now, and his agent was very unhappy I was pregnant. She kept ringing, asking, “Have you had that child yet?” because she thought it was going to interfere with rehearsals. Lexie was indeed born six days before we started rehearsal and I had no childcare. I put her in the dressing room at csc, in the back, and fortunately she can sleep anywhere, so she just slept. Pinter never commented on the fact that there was a baby back there—until there was a bad rehearsal of *Mountain Language*. Peter Riegert, who was playing the political prisoner, was sort of stuck. He was supposed to be playing a guy who’s a political prisoner who has never seen his own baby. Harold, who was sitting in rehearsal, suddenly stood up—he was a huge man, something like 6’3”, with a very deep voice—and said, “One moment please.” He went back to the dressing room and picked up Lexie—fast asleep, little Lexie, who was just ten days old—brought her out and put her on the table, and he said to Peter, “It’s not abstract. This is your child, you’ve never seen the child, it’s very upsetting, now play the scene!” Peter started to cry. He’s been friends with Lexie ever since.

A lot of garbage has been written about Harold Pinter—people think his plays are metaphorical and peculiar and difficult and alienating, when, in fact, they are the truest plays in the world. He didn’t look at them as metaphors, at all. They were intensely, specifically, profoundly real to him, but, because he was a great poet, he was able to look at reality and distill it down to its essence and put that on the page. He said, “My characters tell me only so much about themselves and no more.” What is incumbent upon us is to try to take the traces of what we get and deduce what they mean. He was not at all someone who believed in biography. He thought it was hard enough for anyone to agree about what happened ten
minutes ago, so how could we ever agree on the past of a set of characters? He’s interested in the present moment—what happens on this stage in this moment in real time.

Pinter’s plays almost always take place in a room, and they’re always about territory. Somebody enters that room, that territory is violated, and somebody is eventually ejected. What happens in between is a kind of jungle warfare masked by a sort of civility—it’s hilarious and horrifying.

Ultimately The Homecoming, as Harold said, is Ruth’s homecoming. She’s one of the greatest characters ever written. This is something I’ve always wanted to do with [A.C.T. core acting company member] René [Augesen, who plays Ruth]. We’ve talked about it for a long time. If we do it right it should be very sexy and very funny and very dangerous. These men are all fighting, for her. For years after the play was first produced, people were shocked by it and said, “Oh it’s so misogynistic.” I think absolutely the opposite is true. Ruth sets the terms of her own future; she decides exactly how she wants it to go. You have no idea at the end of the play whether she’s actually going to stay long, or just for a day, but she’s finished with her husband, she’s finished with America, and she’s going to do her own thing in her own flat and live the way she wants to live. It’s an amazing moment.
THE RIPPLE EFFECT
An Interview with Scenic Designer Dan Ostling

BY DAN RUBIN

An old house in North London.
A large room, extending the width of the stage.
The back wall . . . has been removed.

—The Homecoming, opening stage direction

If it had not been for a Dutch astronomy professor, scenic designer Dan Ostling might be helping you with your taxes right now. “I was studying accounting and sort of hated it. I took a general education course in astronomy and the professor was a trip. The class ended up being more about politics and philosophy than astronomy, but he really shook up my world view and made me ask myself what it was I wanted to do.” A longtime lover of film and rock concert lighting, Ostling registered for introductory film and theater classes. “The first play we read was The Cherry Orchard, and it just bowled me over. I had never read any plays, and it was so ambiguous and unclear and unresolved. I was literally surprised when I came to the end of it, and I thought that it felt more like life than anything I had ever experienced before. That’s how I stumbled into [theater]. It was pretty accidental. I didn’t know anything, so I had to really learn everything.”

That was 25 years ago. Since then, Ostling has worked all over the country, mostly as a scenic designer, but not exclusively. He has dabbled in writing, acting, and costume and sound design. Until ten years ago, he also did a lot of lighting. “I’m really interested in telling the whole story,” he explains, which is why he has found a home with Chicago’s Lookingglass Theatre Company, where he has been an ensemble member since 1997. “There aren’t many companies that have designers as part of the ensemble. Lookingglass is different, in that design is really integrated into the whole process. Often it’s done before the plays are even completely written, so it informs the world, it informs the writing, and it informs the direction. I mostly do new plays and really like to work on shows from the ground up.” He is a frequent collaborator with Mary Zimmerman (also a Lookingglass ensemble member) and has worked on numerous premieres of plays by Bruce Norris (including Clybourne Park in New York), who, he says, may be “the greatest living American playwright.” For a.c.t. Ostling designed the set for José Rivera’s Brainpeople in 2008 and Lillian Groag’s War Music in 2009. In addition to his design credits, he has been an associate professor at Northwestern University since 2003.
How did a designer who normally works on new plays become involved with a production of a 45-year-old classic? “I’ve always loved The Homecoming,” Ostling answers. “It was one of the first plays I ever read, in that same class. It was so weird and so different; and yet, again, it felt authentic. It’s about those uncomfortable moments between people—not so much literally, as experientially. It gives the audience the experience of life, I think. When I heard A.C.T. was doing it this season, I contacted [A.C.T. Artistic Director/director of The Homecoming] Carey [Perloff] and asked if I could design it. I was really excited when she said yes. I’d never worked on a Pinter before.”

During the week before the first rehearsal of The Homecoming, we met with Ostling to ask him about Pinter’s work and how he came upon his design concept for the production.

**WHEN YOU READ THE HOMECOMING THE FIRST TIME, DID YOU HAVE A SENSE OF WHAT THE PLAY WOULD LOOK LIKE IF YOU WERE TO DESIGN IT?**

I don’t know that I knew what this play was, but I felt very comfortable with it. I felt comfortable the design would easily emerge. And I loved the first sketch I did [see page iv]. I felt it was exactly right. I made a quick model from that sketch to show to Carey (it was one of the quickest models I’ve ever done in my life). I showed it to her thinking
that she would want revisions, but she loved it, too, even in its roughness. I usually present more finished models, but there was something important about those initial impulses. Something immediate.

**WHAT WAS AT THE HEART OF THAT IMPULSE?**

The grittiness of it. I think the theater is about experience. Really the only thing that the audience takes away, besides their program and maybe a souvenir T-shirt, is a memory. Their experience. That’s why I don’t think of myself as making the set as much as making the experience. This design came out of me so quickly and so intuitively that I felt like that’s what I wanted the audience to feel. It’s a very simple design, actually. It’s just four walls. It’s not a real place. If you try to understand this play realistically, you’re going to get messed up. Those houses in North London are small. As Carey said, the reason Pinter says in the stage direction that the back wall is blown out is because he wanted to have it in a big space. He wanted it to be big and empty.

I love the floating quality of the walls in this design: they’re leaning in and splayed out and go way high, but they’re all dis-integrated. There are gaps. I textured it, sanded and sanded it, so it feels like it’s been scrubbed. Carey reacted to it like it was a slaughterhouse that was cleaned every night—cleaned and cleaned and cleaned. All of the detailing is bleached out of it. I’m happy she felt that way, but that was never my intention, and I haven’t done anything since that conversation that pushes it towards feeling more like a slaughterhouse, because I think the audience might have a completely different way of seeing it. If you don’t do a lot, then the audience can make sense out of it in a way that is way more than you could ever do for them.

**YOU’RE LETTING THEM MAKE THEIR OWN METAPHORS.**

Good art does that. I feel like if I do something right, it’s like throwing a stone in a pond: it ends up rippling out, and then this ripple hits that ripple and creates something way beyond anything I could have thought up. That’s when I know something is really happening. If I try to control all that, the play gets smaller. It often happens with Shakespeare, where we put concepts on his plays—we set them in different periods—and they become petty. We watch the concept and not the play. You’re forcing the play into a little box. Shakespeare was a better writer than that, and I think Pinter was a better writer than that.

**IT FEELS LIKE THIS SET CAN BECOME A VERY DARK PLACE. CAVERNOUS.**

Definitely. It’s very dark. The walls just fade to black as they go up. It feels architecturally real—you can imagine yourself coming down these stairs—but it is also not like any real
house. This play is really about the actors. I wanted to create a neutral space that focused our attention in on these people. The space between them is more important than the space around them. The play is more about negative space than about the positive space.

**DO YOU DESIGN YOUR SETS WITH LIGHT IN MIND?**

I definitely do. I’m always thinking about light. Lighting is a connective with the environment. I feel like my sets unfold more with lighting than they do in terms of moving parts. I’m a minimalist. I like my sets to change with light rather than things flying in and out. Then the space can instantly change. I feel like it engages the audience more when they cannot get caught up in the physical world, when you allow the audience to seamlessly go on a journey. You do as little as you can so you spark their imagination. As soon as you start to fill everything in, theater becomes a really passive experience. It doesn’t engage the audience. So I think lighting is perfect. It’s ethereal. It can change instantly. It can fundamentally affect your experience of a space.

**IS YOUR SET AT ALL BASED ON LONDON ARCHITECTURE?**

I did a lot of research on spaces and houses, and there was some use in them, but, again, it’s not a real house. It would look very weird if you used the proportions of a real London flat onstage. There are a lot of details that are from that research, but in terms of the texture and worn quality, that aesthetic just came from architectural spaces that were battered and distressed. Research for me is really important. You always research the specific elements—the newel post, the molding, etc.—but you also do a lot of intuitive, looser research.

**DO YOU HAVE THOUGHTS ABOUT WHAT THIS PLAY IS ULTIMATELY ABOUT? OR DID YOU FEEL LIKE THIS PLAY COULD GO SO MANY DIFFERENT WAYS THAT YOU JUST WANTED TO GIVE THE DIRECTOR AN OPEN SPACE TO PLAY WITH?**

I think as I get older I understand Pinter’s writing a lot more than I did when I was younger. It’s like Beckett: you can add all sorts of weird concepts, but really Beckett is simple. It is exactly what it is. The trick is to boil away and boil away down to the plays’ essential actions. *Waiting for Godot* is two guys waiting, and the audience has the exact same experience that the characters have. Or *Endgame*: two guys literally living one day of their lives and being that one day closer to their deaths. And what are we doing as audience members? We’re one evening closer to our death. So it’s not abstract at all; it’s unbelievably real, because it is actually happening right in front of you.

In the same way, I think Pinter is very straightforward. The relationships don’t add up the same way they do in a traditional play, and, indeed, if we look at our own lives,
we do these things that go against all logic. We’re self-destructive or destructive towards people we love. These actions don’t make sense in terms of what’s going on in our heads, but they do make sense in terms of other patterns in our lives, other ways our psyche has been shaped by the experiences we’ve had. And we never even think about it. We’re going through our day and suddenly we do something that makes absolutely no sense, and we don’t even stop to recognize it.

I think the play is unbelievably truthful. If there is anywhere that you see the strange ways human beings interact, it’s with family. Here’s this family with its complicated history; we see them come together, and this really bizarre, twisted, and yet quite authentic way a family relates to each other unfolds. Weirder things happen. Reality is much stranger.

ARE YOU ABLE TO DISTILL THE HOMECOMING THE SAME WAY YOU ARE ABLE TO DISTILL WAITING FOR GODOT OR ENGAME?
Pinter to me is about relationships. About how relationships don’t add up. And they’re about power. Every relationship has some sort of power struggle. It’s impossible for two people to be completely equal all of the time. That’s a fantasy. Relationships are full of things that aren’t pretty, and I think that echoes out [from this play] into the audience. I don’t think Pinter is interested in creating some metaphor—“This character is the u.s. and this character is the u.k.”—even though Teddy has come back from America. It’s about those ripples rippling out from this immediate family—even from a specific character.

YOU AND PINTER ARE DOING SIMILAR THINGS: YOU’RE BOTH CAREFUL NOT TO PRESCRIBE METAPHORS.
In that same way I am interested in creating frames around the actor—the actor, the room, the house, the proscenium, the back wall of the stage. Geometrically, I’m saying, “Look here. This is where everything is taking place.” Outside of those frames is the audience. Theater is about the audience and the actors, how they meet each other. I could have easily made the set more realistic, and sometimes you want to do that, but this is not a real world.

The audience becomes a part of this world, and I’m interested in the play echoing out into the questions of the audience’s world. With Pinter there is nothing outside of the house. There is a void outside of those walls. People just disappear when they leave the stage. There is a weird vacuum, and we’re in that vacuum. We’re the fourth side of that vacuum. It’s very uncomfortable. You can’t go into Pinter with assumptions of what it’s about; you have to let the play affect you. I just tried to create the best place for these characters to run into each other.
THE DETERIORATION OF THE SPACE SUGGESTS THAT YOU HAVE A CONCEPT OF HOW TIME PLAYS A ROLE IN THIS WORLD.

I think time is always the fourth dimension in design. It’s always a part of how I approach my design—its dynamic movement and arc. We don’t go to the theater and see people who are fine and nothing happens to them and then they’re fine. We see something happen to them, and they land somewhere other than where they were. I feel the same way about the set. Something should happen. That doesn’t mean things have to move, but you should feel a sense of a journey with the space. Time is in this room.

I don’t want you to walk in and feel like it is totally disjointed and falling apart. I want it to feel cozy in a certain way and that it holds together in a certain way, so that as the night goes on, we accentuate more and more the disintegrated quality of it, both in terms of the architecture and the texture so that it feels like it goes from a warmer, more solid “I know where we are” to more of a “What the hell is happening here?” Hopefully you will feel like this room is falling apart a little more after these people bang around it for two hours.

COSTUME DESIGNER ALEX JAEGER ON THE HOMECOMING

It was great having Carey’s insight into Pinter because [the costume design] ended up in a completely different place than I thought it would when we started. When you see a world like this and you read the behavior of these characters, the initial impulse is to go very low class. But these characters aren’t low class. There are lines in the play when they talk about ladies’ dress fabrics. They know their goods. Carey pointed out that, at some point in their lives, they were all natty dressers, and Lenny still goes out into the world like that. I realized that the more respectable they look, the more extraordinary their behavior becomes, so we made them pretty respectable. And Teddy and Ruth have gone to America. He’s a professor, she’s a professor’s wife, they have kids, and I think they play their roles very well. They are representing England in America and dress that way.
SPoken Identity
An Interview with Voice and Dialect Coach Jill Walmsley Zager

By Dan Rubin

Harold Pinter’s plays are so recognizable for their equivocal and halting dialogue that the playwright has his own adjective—Pinteresque. Famous for precisely placing his pauses, Pinter knew what he wanted his plays to sound like, and when he heard them in his head, each character spoke in a specific dialect. The sound of The Homecoming is grounded in the idiom of the playwright’s Hackney youth; in the play, says actor Henry Woolf, Pinter’s childhood friend, “Harold . . . captured the tone of the voice and the environment” of home. It is the job of voice and dialect coach Jill Walmsley Zager (who is also co-head of voice and dialects in the a.c.t. Master of Fine Arts Program) to make sure that we hear The Homecoming in that specific voice as well.

Zager joined a.c.t. as a coach and faculty member in 2009 and splits her year between San Francisco and Milwaukee, where she is a freelance coach with Milwaukee Repertory Theater and several Chicago-area troupes. She became interested in the voice through performance. She received her undergraduate degree in opera, which introduced her to “every language under the sun” and trained her ear to pick up on any sound. She was also a talented dancer, so, after graduating, rather than pursuing an opera career, she went into musical theater. She performed regionally for 22 years and was frequently cast in dialect-heavy shows, so when she decided to go back for a master’s degree in order to teach she was attracted to Northwestern University’s program at Central School of Speech and Drama in London, which allowed her to focus on voice and dialect.

Now that Zager is an established expert on creating identity through voice, she is grateful for her first career as a performer: “I know how to talk to actors and not get in their way,” she says. “Everyone has a different way of working, and you don’t want to get in the way of their process. They won’t appreciate that.”

Two weeks before The Homecoming started rehearsal, she had already combed through the script and begun dialect sessions with a.c.t. core acting company member Jack Willis, who plays Max. She spoke with us about the role a coach plays in—and out of—the rehearsal room in deciphering Pinter’s linguistic riddles.

What Does a Speech and Dialect Coach Do, Exactly?
My job as a coach is to unearth clues within a text as to what the voices of the characters might be. Some texts are very clear—they say where the characters are from, when the
period is set, where the play is, what the educational background of a character is. Voice also reflects the confidence of a character, the image of themselves that they want to project. There is something called code-switching, where the voice you use with one person may be a different voice from the one you would use with another. The voice you use when you’re trying to get your mom to give you the keys to the car is different from the voice you use with your friends. The voice and language you use in a job interview will be different from the one you might use on a night out.

I’m looking for clues within the text of *The Homecoming* that identify when that kind of thing is happening. Pinter’s language is really specific, because the length of thought that his characters have is really prescribed within the text. If you’re doing Shakespeare, you’ll see that the length of thought of a character might be 12 lines long. But Pinter is very prescriptive in terms of where he puts the pauses, and the pauses are unspoken dialogue. They should be fraught. If nothing is going on within those pauses, then there’s no play. Pinter’s really prescriptive as to what he wants the sound of his play to be. If you were to do the play in a different dialect than it’s supposed to be [urban London], it would change the rhythm of the piece and it would change the emotional content of the characters. *The Homecoming* is very violent verbally, and, really, that London urban sound is written into the script. Here’s an example of that violence *[Jill reads the following with a North London accent. The vowels are elongated, but the consonants are sharp.]*:

```
Lenny: But I’m your son. You used to tuck me up in bed every night. He tucked you up, too, didn’t he Joey? *Pause.* He used to like tucking up his sons.
Max: Lenny?
Lenny: What?
Max: I’ll give you a proper tuck up one of these nights, son. You mark my word.
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If you did that in a different dialect, the violence of this repeated word [“tuck”] and the “ck”s inherent in it wouldn’t land. Suppose if it were done in a southern American dialect. *[Jill reads it again in a southern American dialect. The sounds fluidly flow into one another.]* “But I’m your son. You used to tuck me up in bed every night.” You see how it’s sort of lazy, it doesn’t have that aggressive energy that gives you the meaning of this play. It’s really interesting to look and see what is actually in there. The clues that are in there. That’s what I have been working on with Jack, just to make sure he’s really using that North London, working-class dialect that realizes what Pinter has already written.

I just told you about the repetition. Another good example of it is here: *[Jill reads the following, again with a North London accent.]*
max: Look what I’m lumbered with. One cast-iron bunch of crap after another. One flow of stinking pus after another. Pause. Our father! I remember him. Don’t worry. You kid yourself. He used to come over to me and look down at me. My old man did. He’d bend right over me, then he’d pick me up. I was only that big. Then he’d dandle me. Give me the bottle. Wipe me clean. Give me a smile. Pat me on the bum. Pass me around, pass me from hand to hand. Toss me up in the air. Catch me coming down. I remember my father.

You see how the length of thought accelerates because it is “long thought, long thought,” then “short, short, short, short”?

I understand how this informs the psychology of the characters; I’m less clear about what the length of the thought tells you about how they are saying the words.

I’ll go from the other direction. The dialect itself will dictate the length. Certain dialects elongate vowels and hit consonants harder than others, so if you’re realizing those aspects it will give you the pace even without looking at the length of thought. The elongated vowels and the clean articulation—violent, aggressive articulation—of the consonants will give you the energy of the line. And then the repetition in it is also something you’re going to lift. (Of course, you’re going to lift any repetition in any text that you get.) The moments before this passage are just quick thoughts back and forth between Max and his brother, Sam; now Max has got all this time where Sam isn’t jumping in. This is a character who, at this point, is not going to let anyone get a word in. This ability to hold the floor tells you a lot about the confidence of this character at this point in the play. A lot of Pinter’s plays are about power—who has it, who wants it, and how secure they feel about their position. This is also indicated by the ability of a character to hold the floor.

Another example is when Ruth is with Lenny for the first time and he offers her a glass of water. It’s brilliant because it is all about the use of the pause. [Jill reads the following with a North London accent.]

ruth: Have a sip.

No wait, Ruth could possibly not speak in an urban dialect. [Jill reads the following in a smoother British accent.]

ruth: Have a sip. Go on. Have a sip from my glass.
WHY DOESN'T SHE SPEAK IN THE SAME URBAN DIALECT AS THE MEN? SHE GREW UP IN THE SAME COMMUNITY.

She’s from the same place, but she’s picked herself up a level to marry. Actually, her husband, Teddy, is a great example of code-switching. He’s become a doctor of philosophy, so he has code-switched up. I went to school at Central School in London, and we were always getting phone calls for coaches to help people acquire an RP, or Received Pronunciation, dialect so they could move up in business. In England your success is so much more tied to how you sound than here. In the U.K. many doors are closed to a person if they don’t sound the expected way. Here we care less about that and more about industry, ability, or financial status. George W. Bush is a good example of that. He has a regional American dialect. In another country he might have been coached to acquire a regionally nonspecific dialect, but we don’t truly have that in the States. Everyone sounds like they are from somewhere, even if it’s very light. In the U.K., RP truly is not geographically specific. It was received upon the boys at public schools like Eton and Harrow and became the accent of privilege. But here you can sound like a Texas farmer and become president of the United States.

Teddy is from North London, too, but he’s not going to sound like the family. And Ruth—he might allow what happens to her in the play to happen to her because she doesn’t sound like him. She doesn’t further his career in academia. But I think right now we’re

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A page from the Homecoming script, scored with International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols to help guide the actor’s dialect pronunciation.
starting from the fact that she’s moved herself up enough to be with men who are at a different level. Another exciting aspect of coaching for me is when all of the facts aren’t laid out. Then it can be truly collaborative, and when you have a wonderful actress like René [Augesen, who plays Ruth,] it can be very exciting to support her in the work.

**Does the text suggest that she falls back into the rhythms of the dialect she was raised with as she gets deeper in with this family?**

That’s such a great question. It’s not inherent in the text itself that that happens to her, which is even more of an interesting disconnect. There are so many layers to it. It’s quite clear what the family sounds like, but then you’ve got Teddy, who ran off. Why does he come home? What does Ruth think she’s going to get out of the arrangement that is reached at the end of the play? Why doesn’t she go back with Teddy?

These are the kinds of questions that the director has to answer before I can help the actor. She has to decide why Ruth stays, and I’ll support whatever decision that is. I’ll make that truthful, because if it isn’t made truthful, the audience might now know why, but something won’t ring true. They won’t know why they don’t believe a character, but it may be that the actor is simply falling out of dialect. This might read as the acting being bad rather than their technique being off. This is why it is so great to be at a regional theater that has coaches come in, because the success of a piece is hugely dependent on how the actors sound. That said, my job is done when I make myself obsolete in the rehearsal room—when I don’t need to be there any more. My work should be invisible. It will come out in the actor’s performance, but you don’t want to shine a spotlight on the process.

**How would you define the dialect of the family in *The Homecoming*?**

It’s specified in the text that it’s North London. That is an urban dialect. There’s jaw tension. It’s aggressive. Most urban dialects are aggressive—New York, Dublin, London. Any urban dialect in the modern world is going to have that, because you are going to need vocal energy to cut across the sounds of the city, and there’s a way of making yourself move through a city that shows up in the sound.

**What are the mechanics of getting an American actor to speak that way?**

I work different ways with different actors. Some actors work with the International Phonetic Alphabet and like to score their entire script. For them when the “i” vowel comes up, they might make a note or a symbol that means they should say “ah” instead. Some people work technically like that; other actors are kinesthetic, and I find a physical way for
them to learn it. For the urban London dialect, you can think of the energy coming off your jaw. I find a way for their bodies to feel it. Some actors are more visual. They like to see how the mouth works. Or they're physical and like to feel how their tongue moves in their mouths when they say that “r” or they say those double “l”s. I try to find a way in for each particular actor. When I'm working with a large group, there could be ten different ways into a dialect.

But most actors like to work aurally. They listen to me and we do a kind of call-and-response by mimicking the sounds. I always give them a couple different examples of real speakers so that they aren’t just hearing me do it. Some actors ask me to record all their lines for them without giving line readings [interpretations of what the lines mean]. They just like to hear their text. Everybody is different. And directors are really different, too. Some directors love to have me at tablework and want me around constantly; some don’t want me in the room at all. They want it to happen magically in a tutorial. A lot of my job is reading how the actors and director like to work, and finding a way to realize the integrity of a show or a sound for myself.

I love what I do. It’s really exciting and very gratifying.

WHAT ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF PRIMARY SOURCES THAT YOU WOULD GIVE TO SOMEONE LEARNING THE DIALECT OF THE HOMECOMING?

One that I gave Jack was Ian Holm. He’s from North London. He was in the original production of The Homecoming, and his sound is just spot on. Perfect. And the energy is there. The clip I gave Jack is actually a scene from The Homecoming. I think it was Peter Hall’s Homecoming, so it had Pinter’s stamp of approval all over it. And I ran it by the director, [A.C.T. Artistic Director] Carey Perloff, before I gave it to Jack. Ian Holm in an interview about Lord of the Rings is not going to give you what you want, but the clip of him in The Homecoming is really right. There are times when even someone like Clive Owen, whose sound is very modern, will have that London energy in his voice; I might use that for the younger actors.

DO YOU THINK EITHER TEDDY OR RUTH PICKED UP ANY AMERICANISMS WHILE LIVING HERE?

I started studying in London ten days after 9/11. My flight over was empty; I was the only one on a 300-seat plane because it was one of the first ones out of O’Hare. I could have passed for a Brit, and my family asked, “Well, did you just become a Brit?” And I told them, “No, my voice took on an even stronger American sound for some reason.” It was bizarre. But I very keenly felt and owned my American-ness, and I know that was why. So
I think for Teddy he might have become an even stronger RP speaker while in the U.S. For one thing, in the world of academia he might have found more respect elevating his RP dialect. Yet I believe that Ruth is a chameleon. That’s why it’s going to be really interesting to see where René and Carey want it to go for her, because it’s totally plausible that she can morph into whatever she needs to be. I imagine Ruth to be extremely adept at taking on different sounds. And it may have taken Teddy incredible work to bring himself up to his dialect. People were spending 100 pounds for half-hour RP lessons when I was at Central. Here in the States, I’ve been hired by businesses and individuals to help them with what some people call accent-reduction. So I might work with an Australian businessman or a German educator to tone down their dialects in order to better communicate material. This may take just a few sessions or a very long time depending on the student.

**DOES IT TAKE A LONG TIME BECAUSE THERE ARE MUSCLES IN THE MOUTH THAT NEED STRENGTHENING IN ORDER TO MAKE CERTAIN SOUNDS?**

Yes. For example, it’s hard to tone down the Scottish “r” because the tongue, that muscle, is so strong. It’s often easier for Americans to learn an RP dialect than for an RP speaker to learn an American dialect, because it is easy for us to take the “r” out, and it’s hard for them to put the “r” in. Obviously, any actor who can effectively master another dialect and be believable will be more marketable.

So it’s that, but also the ear needs to be made aware, as well. Then you add in that unquantifiable element of desire. When I was on the faculty at the University of Illinois, I was sent quite a few of the Asian engineering faculty because they couldn’t be heard by their students, and American students will not respond to professors they can just barely hear. All of their evaluations from students and other faculty members told them that they had to be louder and clearer, because the students couldn’t get the material. So they came to me. But they were tenured. They didn’t really want to be there [with me]. Also, changing how you speak changes how you see yourself, in a way. Your dialect is a part of your cultural identity. It’s part of who you are.

**I DIDN’T REALIZED THAT LEARNING A DIALECT IS LIKE LEARNING A NEW LANGUAGE.**

It is a new language, and to do it well requires a transparency. You are in another person in a really profound way. And you understand their world in a really profound way. There has to be so much respect.
“IT’S GONE. IT NEVER EXISTED. IT REMAINS.”
Pinter and the Mist of Time

BY MICHAEL PALLER

Apart from any other consideration, we are faced with the immense difficulty, if not the impossibility, of verifying the past. I don’t mean merely years ago, but yesterday, this morning. What took place, what was the nature of what took place, what happened? If one can speak of the difficulty of knowing what in fact took place yesterday, one can I think treat the present in the same way. What’s happening now? We won’t know until tomorrow or six months’ time, and we won’t know then, we’ll have forgotten, or our imagination will have attributed quite false characteristics to today. A moment is sucked away and distorted, often even at the time of its birth.

—Harold Pinter, “Writing for the Theatre”

With those words, spoken at the Student Drama Festival in Bristol in 1962, Harold Pinter codified one of the great shifts in drama that occurred in the years after World War II: from plays that depended on an agreed-upon series of past events that explained or justified what characters do in the present, to ones where, as Andy in Pinter’s late play Moonlight says, “the past is a mist.” Pinter helped bring that change about.

Since Aeschylus, the most durable convention of the theater has been exposition: the narrated summary of events that occurred before the action of the play begins, or between its scenes, about which we and the characters are reliably informed by someone who witnessed or heard about them. The characters take this information to be true, and the audience, unless given a good reason to think otherwise, does, too. The Greeks, who inherited the idea of exposition from Homer and other Greek epic poets, transformed it into a powerful dramatic tool: Oedipus Rex is a master class in exposition—it consists almost entirely of information about the past revealed at just the right moment for maximum dramatic impact.

Beginning in the 19th century, entire first acts of plays were devoted to the narration of past events that audiences needed to know about and which they took to be true. The main action of the play was delayed until the following three or four acts, where plot complications ensued, a crisis was reached, and a resolution attained. Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, and Chekhov each had their reasons for ringing significant variations on this model, called the well-made play, but they held in common a belief in a knowable, stable past. For
confident Victorians, the past was one more territory to conquer, and these visionary artists pressed on it their own meanings in order to change the future of drama.

The well-made play still enjoys good health in television and film, but it has been vanishing from theater for the last 60 years. Exposition relies on an agreement between playwright and audience in order to work: if the characters are going to talk about a common past that set their present conditions in motion, then there must be a common past to talk about. There must be an agreement that the past is, first, knowable and, second, shared among a number of people. In a play with a stable, knowable past, we can all agree on what happened yesterday, and we can all agree that yesterday occurred. Characters may differ about who ate, wore, or said what, but there is a general consensus on the shape of what happened.

In the 20th century, playwrights began arguing with this proposition. Pirandello began by asking, “What is appearance and what is reality, and where can truth be found?” After World War II, this and similar questions were taken up by many others, among them Beckett, Ionesco, and Genet in Europe and Albee, Kopit, and Gelber in America. The critic Martin Esslin put them and others in the category of theater of the absurd. Although each of them had his own concerns and viewed the world in his own way, none took such a thing as a knowable or single past—or even a universe behaving according to the logic and rules that pertain to the surface of everyday life—for granted.

There is no single reason why playwrights began dispensing with the past. Scholars often point to the development of the atomic bomb: suddenly, we were all living in the
absurd position of knowing that at any moment the planet might be destroyed, and therefore of what use was the past or even action in the present? Perhaps the horror of World War II and of the blood-soaked decades preceding it made the past too unbearable to contemplate—better to just start with a clean slate, today, at this moment.

Most playwrights, however, don’t respond to abstract propositions, but to what they observe and experience in a specific and visceral sense. Harold Pinter was born in 1930 and grew up in Hackney, just beyond the traditional border of London’s East End (where The Homecoming is set), which was heavily bombed during the Blitz. Like thousands of other children, Pinter was evacuated to the countryside in 1940 during the so-called Phony War. The nine-year-old boy who was the cosseted, only child of a Jewish family found himself uprooted and anxious on the Cornish coast. There was, he said later of his existence there, “no fixed sense of being . . . of being . . . at all.” Back in London for the worst of the Blitz, Pinter experienced not only the falling bombs but the fear that the world might be obliterated at any moment: with that is bound to come a heightened awareness of the present, and that the present is over as soon as you pronounce its three syllables. The experience provided, he said, “a real sense of an extreme and perilous life.”

Compared to some of his other plays, the past in The Homecoming seems, at first glance, fairly dependable and straightforward (even the title suggests a knowable past: there was a home, someone went away and now has come back). Unlike The Birthday Party, all the characters have a single name and an agreed-upon identity inside and outside the house: Max is a (retired) butcher, Sam a limo driver, Joey a demolition worker and amateur boxer, and Lenny a pimp. Teddy is a college professor and Ruth his wife and the mother of his children. It is as close to the surface workings of our everyday world as Pinter gets. But cracks in that world begin to appear whenever Max talks about his late wife, Jessie. He remembers her “rotten stinking face,” that she was the backbone of the family who taught their sons “every single bit of the moral code they live by” and “a slutbitch of a wife” whom he treated as a queen. Even allowing for the mask that Pinter’s characters wear to hide their deepest feelings, one is allowed to ask, “Who was Jessie, anyway?” The answer is that to Max she was all these women, and whatever he says about her is true in the moment that he says it.

In The Homecoming, as in most of Pinter’s plays, the past exists more potently in the minds of the characters than as a set of independent, objective, verifiable facts. It is the act of remembering that makes a memory real, and something happened because someone said that it did. “There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened,” says Anna in Old Times, written five years after The Homecoming. “There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place.” As they may exist differently in different characters’ minds, the past is multiple and not
necessarily consistent from one character to the next, or even within a single character from one moment to another. This means that the past is a malleable, endlessly usable thing and—like sex, and indeed like words in Pinter’s work—can be wielded as a weapon. The past belongs to the person who can use it most persuasively or most aggressively.

In *The Homecoming*, Lenny regales Ruth with the story of a dockside encounter between himself and a woman who made him a certain proposal: a proposal, he explains, that under normal circumstances he would have entertained. But, “as she was falling apart with the pox,” he declined the offer in a particularly definitive way. When Ruth asks, “How did you know she was diseased?” a pause ensues, after which Lenny responds, “I decided she was.”

With his answer, Lenny is forced to admit (without apology) that he has constructed this bit of the past at the minimum; with her challenge, Ruth suggests that she’s unwilling to let him control it. This exchange is only the beginning of a battle for supremacy between Ruth and *The Homecoming*’s men that will take up the balance of the play.

If the past is a mist and the future has yet to arrive, what is left to a play besides the present, and what does that mean for its production? Where there is only the present, everything we see takes on added size and importance, so it becomes incumbent on the playwright, director, actors, and designers to reduce everything to the barest essentials: each movement must be clean, precise, and necessary; furniture, costumes, props, and words must be pared to the bone. Whatever isn’t fundamental becomes clutter to be removed; otherwise we won’t sense the play’s mysteries with clarity. The more that is taken away, the more room there is for meanings to emerge.

When Pinter’s plays were first seen, critics and audiences accused them of being obscure, in part because of his refusal to anoint a single version of past, or even current, events. Since then, we’ve come to accept this as a convention of Pinter’s theater. Isn’t it also, though, the way that we view the past? Don’t we also have multiple versions of at least parts of it, versions that change from year to year, from day to day, even from moment to moment, depending on whom we’re talking to, how we’re feeling, or what just happened? Perhaps it’s those earlier plays, the ones that insist on a more fully knowable past, that are less like life, while Pinter’s, which admit more complexity about the way we perceive the past, are examples of realism.

“I certainly feel more and more that the past is not the past, that it never was past. It’s present,” Pinter told Mel Gussow of the *New York Times*. Present not in the Faulknerian sense that we’ll never escape the past’s weight so that the sins of the fathers will be forever visited on the sons, but rather in the way that Pinter’s characters invent and reinvent it, and in the act of doing so make it true. Or, as Hirst, the well-off man of letters in *No Man’s Land* says, “It’s gone. Did it exist? It’s gone. It never existed. It remains.”
THE RUTH PUZZLE

BY EMILY HOFFMAN

“Don’t be too sure though. You’ve forgotten something. Look at me. I . . . move my leg. That’s all it is. But I wear . . . underwear . . . which moves with me . . . it . . . captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is simple.”

—Ruth in *The Homecoming*

Though Pinter’s *The Homecoming* cannot be said to have a single protagonist, it is Ruth or, more accurately, Ruth’s decision that has been the play’s primary puzzle for audiences and critics since its first production in 1965. The puzzle is as follows: Are we to believe that the wife of a university professor would choose to leave her husband and children in order to become a prostitute? Pinter’s characters are notoriously inscrutable, and were so even to Pinter himself. As he said in his famous 1962 speech “Writing for the Theatre”: “My characters tell me so much and no more, with reference to their experience, their aspirations, their motives, their history. Between my lack of biographical data about them and the ambiguity of what they say lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration, but which it is compulsory to explore.” Pinter’s exploratory mandate is especially imperative in the case of Ruth, where in that treacherous territory lie questions of the highest importance: Is Ruth victimized by the men in *The Homecoming*? Or is that a paint-by-numbers interpretation that fails to contend with what is really said and done in the play? If she has not been coerced, what stories might we tell ourselves about her to make sense of her decision? And what new stories must we then tell ourselves about marriage, femininity, sex, and power?

“Because Ruth expresses no ‘Ah-ha’ recognitions, no faked or genuine moral outrage, when the family springs their plan,” Pinter scholar Penelope Prentice wrote in a 1980 article responding to the largely misogynistic body of critical writing that then existed on *The Homecoming*, “she is often deemed immoral.” Prentice argues that Ruth traffics in action, rather than in felt response. She is practical, clear-headed, and not above manipulation or power play simply because she is a woman. “Like . . . all of Pinter’s women whom men cannot dominate,” Prentice claims, “Ruth, once she understands what is at stake, silently waits for the best moment to defend herself, then takes control.” She extracts from the family promises of a flat with “three rooms and a bathroom,” a new wardrobe, a personal maid, and a contract drawn up to her liking, without ever officially agreeing to their proposal. Prentice points out that throughout the negotiations Ruth speaks exclusively in the
conditional ("I would want at least three rooms and a bathroom"); "I would naturally want to draw up an inventory of everything I would need"; "it might prove a workable arrangement) and casually refuses to shake on the deal, saying, "Oh, we’ll leave it till later." Yet, at the close of the play she is without her husband, surrounded by four men, one of whom is a pimp and two of whom are admitted rapists. One of the men, however, is passed out on the floor, one is lying with his head in her lap, and another is sobbing at her feet.

Pinter, like Prentice, questioned Ruth’s final capitulation. “She does not become a harlot,” he said in a 1967 interview in the Saturday Review. “At the end of the play she’s in possession of a certain kind of freedom. She can do what she wants, and it is not at all certain she will go off to Greek Street.” He continues in a characteristic twist, “But even if she did, she would not be a harlot in her own mind.” This is something of a Shakespearean quip, calling to mind Hamlet’s “nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so.” But while Hamlet’s thinking is on full display in his play, in The Homecoming Ruth’s is only barely discernible in her ellipses, non-sequiturs, and disarming physical actions.

Ruth’s opacity has led to a whole host of interpretations of her behavior, including, but not limited to: that she is morally bankrupt, that she was already a prostitute before she married Teddy, that she and Teddy are not really married, and that
she is a nymphomaniac. Pinter denied the latter claim in a 1968 interview in the *Evening Standard*: “In *The Homecoming*, the woman is not a nymphomaniac, as some critics claimed. In fact she’s not very sexy. She’s in a kind of despair which gives her a kind of freedom. Certain facts, like marriage and family, for this woman, have clearly ceased to have meaning.” For Pinter, Ruth’s choice is not baffling, so much as it is deeply revealing. If one of the small set of things this character tells Pinter about herself is that she would rather become a prostitute than return to America with her husband, then she is also telling him something about marriage and desire more broadly. “If this had been a happy marriage,” Pinter continued, “it wouldn’t have happened. But she didn’t want to go back to America with her husband, so what the hell’s she going to do?”

“She’s misinterpreted deliberately and used by this family,” Pinter readily admitted in the *Saturday Review* interview. “But eventually she comes back at them with a whip. She says, ‘If you want to play this game I can play it as well as you.’” Alastair Macaulay, in a 2006 article about Pinter’s women, picks up where Pinter leaves off: “She plays the men’s game, but on her own terms,” he begins.

Isn’t [Ruth] the necessary descendant of Nora at the end of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*? Like Nora, she claims that she has a duty to herself that is more important than her duty as wife and mother; unlike Nora, it is Ruth’s husband who walks out and closes the front door. Ruth’s homecoming is, for her husband and for us, dismaying. But it is among the more breathtaking acts of independence to be found in Pinter.

Prentice makes the same comparison, wondering why it is that “for over a half century theatergoers, drama critics, and scholars have praised Nora in *A Doll’s House* for her courage in her similar decision to leave a husband, which also meant leaving her children” but have not praised Ruth for leaving Teddy and her own sons. Perhaps it is a testament to Pinter’s brilliance that the thought of praising one of his characters is laughable. For one thing, praise implies certainty: this action was good. And even more basically: this action happened. We can never be so certain about Ruth. And yet we must contend with what we do know, and ask ourselves: Are we ready to see Ruth’s decision as an act of independence, and if we are, how far from home have we come?

The American theatergoing public’s propensity to analyze and explain everything is currently being exercised ad absurdum on this season’s Tony Award–winning best play, Harold Pinter’s *The Homecoming*. . . .

The 36-year-old British playwright is himself baffled and annoyed by most of the interpretations that have appeared. For instance, he calls the psychiatric conjecture “rubbish” and adds, “I have never read Freud.” He much prefers an interpretation by the critic (George Ryan) of a small Catholic newspaper (*The Pilot*) who found the play to be about the family of man waged in so desperate a search for love that it reverts to the barbaric and animalistic whenever challenged and confronted by such love.

While a good play requires no footnotes, it may be helpful to record some of the answers Pinter and actors in *The Homecoming* have made to the inevitable questions.

**WHAT IS THE HOMECOMING ABOUT?** Pinter replies: “It’s about love and lack of love. The people are harsh and cruel, to be sure. Still, they aren’t acting arbitrarily but for very deep-seated reasons.” Actor Paul Rogers, whose performance as the patriarchal father, Max, won him a Tony Award as best actor, says: “Among many things *The Homecoming* is about betrayal. What we’re all after is identification with the family. We try to achieve this by playing the game of getting each other. When Teddy, who has betrayed the family by leaving it, returns with his wife, we get them with abusive insults, until Teddy finally takes off his glasses and stands ready to fight his father. Then we know he’s back in the family, which is why Max gives him that big greeting.”

**DO THE MEMBERS OF THIS FAMILY STAND FOR OR REPRESENT UNIVERSAL FORCES IN MODERN SOCIETY AND ARE THEY THEREFORE DISTORTED FROM REALITY?** Pinter replies: “I was only concerned with this particular family. I didn’t relate them to any other possible or concrete family. I certainly didn’t distort them in any way from any other kind of reality. I was only concerned with their reality. The whole play happens on a quite realistic level from my point of view.”

**DOES THIS FAMILY REPRESENT A DISINTEGRATION INTO PURE EVIL?** Pinter replies: “There’s no question that the family does behave very calculatedly and pretty horribly to each other and to the returning son. But they do it out of the texture of their lives and for other reasons which are not evil but slightly desperate.”

. . .
IS IT REALISTIC FOR A HUSBAND TO STAND BY WHILE HIS WIFE ROLLS ON THE COUCH WITH ANOTHER MAN? Pinter replies: “Look! What would happen if he interfered? He would have had a messy fight on his hands, wouldn’t he? And this particular man would avoid that. As for rolling on the couch, there are thousands of women in this very country who at this very moment are rolling off couches with their brothers, or cousins, or their next-door neighbors. The most respectable women do this. It’s a splendid activity. It’s a little curious, certainly, when your husband is looking on, but it doesn’t mean you’re a harlot.”

IS IT CREDIBLE THAT THE WIFE STAY BEHIND AND BECOME A PROSTITUTE? Pinter replies: “If this had been a happy marriage it wouldn’t have happened. But she didn’t want to go back to America with her husband, so what the hell’s she going to do? She’s misinterpreted deliberately and used by this family. But eventually she comes back at them with a whip. She says, ‘If you want to play this game I can play it as well as you.’ She does not become a harlot. At the end of the play she’s in possession of a certain kind of freedom. She can do what she wants, and it is not at all certain she will go off to Greek Street. But even if she did, she would not be harlot in her own mind.”

IS THERE, THEN, A DANGER IN ACCEPTING EVERYTHING THE CHARACTERS SAY AND DO AS WHAT THE PLAYWRIGHT INTENDS AND MEANS? Pinter replies: “Finding the characters and letting them speak for themselves is the great excitement of writing. I would never distort the consistency of a character by a kind of hoarding in which I say, ‘By the way, these characters are doing this because of such and such.’ I find out what they are doing, allow them to do it, and keep out of it. Then it is up to the audience to decide how much is truth and how much is lies.”

WHY DO AUDIENCES ASSUME INCORRECTLY THAT THE UNCLE AND THE FATHER BOTH DIE OF HEART ATTACKS AT THE END OF THE PLAY? Rogers explains: “There’s an appalling fact about Pinter. You may not allow a single word he writes to pass unnoticed. There’s no moment when you can have a little quiet doze-off or go searching after complications that are irrelevant. When the uncle collapses after telling his dirty little secret it is his cowardly way of retreating from the situation. And if you listen you will hear us say he’s not dead. As for Max, the stage directions only say that he falls to his knees sobbing and crawls to the side of Ruth’s chair.” Pinter adds: “He doesn’t die. Actually he’s in fine form.”

Excerpted from “Probing Pinter’s Play,” by Henry Hewes, which originally appeared in the Saturday Review, April 8, 1967.
When I was 19 and a freshman at Stanford, I walked into Martin Esslin’s class on theater of the absurd and met Harold Pinter for the first time. Not Pinter the man—that wasn’t to happen for another decade—but Pinter the writer. It was like a land mine detonating in my mind; my career in the theater began the day I encountered The Birthday Party.

Twenty-five years later, on the day after the terrible events of 9/11, I stood on the American Conservatory Theater stage as the artistic director of a.c.t. and welcomed a shocked and saddened audience to the first preview of a double bill of Pinter one-acts: his first play, The Room, and his newest (which turned to be his second-to-last), Celebration. It seemed so fortuitous that the work we were offering at the moment of this national calamity was the surreal, elliptical, disturbing, enigmatic work of the playwright who had caused me to fall in love with theater to begin with.

I will never forget that night: The Room (1956) is a terrifying look at a woman in a boardinghouse who becomes convinced that her room is about to be invaded by a hostile, unknown force. In the midst of banalities and scrambled eggs comes the knock at the door. That audience on September 12, 2001, sat without breathing as they watched Rose desperately trying to keep the enemy at bay. At intermission, they were quiet, subdued.

Then came Celebration (2000), a scabrous, hysterical look at the titans of the universe in an upscale restaurant, dining on osso buco and celebrating what has to be the nastiest wedding anniversary ever penned. Within moments of the curtain rising on Peter Riegert’s obnoxious, take-no-prisoners Lambert, the audience began to scream with laughter. The emotional release was so intense, it nearly overwhelmed the actors. By the time Gregory
Wallace arrived as the inappropriately gregarious Waiter to announce that his grandfather “was one of the very few native-born Englishmen to have had it off with Hedy Lamarr,” the noise from the audience was as loud as the noise onstage.

ASTONISHING EVENING

It was an astonishing evening. Two plays, written nearly 50 years apart, had the power to terrify and unify an audience in a potent collective experience, in which every single person seemed to feel complicit, connected, part of the action. If you’d asked them afterward what the plays were about, they probably couldn’t have answered. It didn’t matter; Pinter’s work, as Beckett famously said of Joyce, “is not about the thing, it is the thing itself.”

What is that thing? So much has been written about the nature of “Pinteresque” that it is difficult to articulate what continues to be so astonishing about Pinter’s work. Taken at face value, his language is simple, direct, and unadorned; his characters say things that feel familiar, even clichéd. But the terrain is fraught with danger. The characters tell you just so much and no more. Secrets are everywhere.

Over and over again, Pinter sets up a startling image and leaves it to dangle, forcing you to ponder it on your own. “This house is on the list,” the boardinghouse owner Meg keeps repeating in Pinter’s first full-length play, The Birthday Party. What list? Whose list? What does it mean? That the house is condemned, or desirable? Is it a target or a landmark? The more Meg asserts, the less we know. As the play goes along, this house “on the list” becomes pregnant with dramatic possibility. And when two strangers invade it, the universe explodes.

Pinter had immense respect for the mystery, the privacy, the “unknowingness,” of the people in his plays. This is rare in a writer. Pinter knew that his characters were hidden, silent, often lying, always evading. His job was to listen acutely to what they were willing to say, and to wait for the moment when their masks would drop.

TEASING OUT CHARACTERS

“Between my lack of biographical data about [my characters] and the ambiguity of what they say lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration but which it is compulsory to explore,” he said in a 1962 speech. Perhaps this is why Pinter’s plays don’t date. It’s like a conversation overheard on a bus: We catch glimpses of lives being lived, and we long to know more.

Pinter understood in a profound way that humanity is an immense mystery and that his job as a playwright was not to provide the answers but to strip everything away until, unexpectedly, something is revealed.
At the same time, his plays are games with complex rules—thrilling and impossible for actors because they must be attacked with precision and virtuosity. Working with Pinter in rehearsal was like being with a conductor searching for the exact note to be struck; he adored actors, being one himself, and knew what could happen, for example, when you let a complex performer have a moment of true silence onstage.

He loved puzzling out the solution to the problems his plays raised, as if his characters were objective beings whom he had only recently encountered. When asked in a rehearsal of *The Birthday Party* why Meg keeps asking Petey what’s in the newspaper, he pondered for a moment and then replied, “I think she’s forgotten how to read.”

He loved acting with his back to the audience, just to raise the stakes. He loved changing the names of his characters halfway through the play. He loved double negatives that made the audience stop in its tracks, as when the best Jerry can say to his lover, Emma, in *Betrayal* (1980) is, “I don’t think we don’t love each other.”

Why does Pinter’s work still matter, now more than ever? Because in this relentlessly information-driven age, when language is transparent at best and deeply manipulative at worst, it is not only thrilling but necessary to be asked to tease out the mystery of words. To participate in the puzzle. To use our imaginations to look past the silence of two characters onstage and to create their language in our own minds. To enter into the game, and to play to win.
Watching a Pinter play is an active, fully lived experience. It is different from Arthur Miller, who has to tell us, “Attention must be paid.” We pay attention to Pinter’s characters because their secrets arrest us. Their actions terrify us. Their sexuality arouses us. And their motives elude us. We want to know more, to understand.

Conventional drama would have us believe that all human behavior is motivated and that our actions have known intentions. Pinter knew this was a mirage; he watched his characters behaving in certain ways without ever insisting that he knew why. During rehearsals of the climactic attack on Stanley in The Birthday Party in 1989, Pinter kept saying to us, “Keep going! You’ll see. In any interrogation, if a person is accused of enough things, one of them will turn out to be true.” We are all guilty. We are all hiding. We are all terrified. Just by virtue of living in the world. This is why communication is so dangerous.

“To enter into someone else’s life is too frightening,” he told an audience in 1962. “To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility.”

**ABSORDLY FUNNY**

And yet Pinter’s plays are not bleak exposés of modern life; they are often hilarious, funnier than almost anything written in the English language. Perhaps this is because, as Beckett said, nothing is funnier than unhappiness. Perhaps it is because they are so brutally honest.

“Even though it made me sick just to look at her rotten, stinking face,” Max says about his dead wife in The Homecoming, “she wasn’t such a bad bitch.” An intense romantic encounter in Old Times (1971) ends with the summation, “I wandered over to the sofa. There was no one on it. I gazed at the indentations of four buttocks. Two of which were yours.”

Nothing made Pinter happier than sitting in on a rehearsal of one of his own plays and laughing at all the good jokes. He took particularly wicked glee in watching actors try to memorize his notoriously difficult dialogue, filled as it is with ellipses and endless non sequiturs.

But then, he was a dedicated cricket player. He loved the thrill of the sport. He also loved women. As a 13-year-old Jew living through the London Blitz, the young Pinter snuck back into his destroyed house to rescue two items: his cricket bat and a recently penned love poem.
Later in life, Pinter became a surprisingly didactic writer and a fanatic opponent of American foreign policy. His 2005 Nobel acceptance speech was filled with anger and vitriol at the hypocrisy of what he perceived to be American imperialism cloaked in the language of Jeffersonian democracy.

Now that he is dead, much will undoubtedly be written about the unjustified extremity of his views, about his perverse support of Slobodan Milosevic during the Serbian show trials, about the irrationality of his hatred for America. But it is not Pinter’s political views that will last; there is something far more important at stake.

Pinter died just as all of us in the American theater are wrestling with the role we ought to play in this enormous and difficult new moment in American political history. Having capitulated for years to the crass forces of “relevance” and television commercialism in our quest for attention in an increasingly noisy world, the American theater has run out of resources and audiences just at the moment when what we do ought to matter more than ever. It is up to us to assert that the potency of two people in real time in a live encounter onstage can engage us more deeply and fully than all the blogs and special effects in the world.

So perhaps the passing of this astonishing writer is the wake-up call we need, to dare again to do work that is fierce and nuanced, that demands imagination and play, that questions the tyranny of political double speak, that revels in the virtuosity of great acting, that refuses easy answers and earnest palliatives but demands that we examine ourselves in all our complexity and mystery.

Pinter’s is a theater with no agenda other than itself—pure theater, pure experience, caught in the moment of creation.

“When you can’t write, you feel as if you’ve been banished from yourself,” he once said. Thank god he could write, and that we are left with enough theatrical treasures to keep us occupied well into the future.
HAROLD PINTER (1930–2008)
One of the greatest of modern dramatists, his plays decisively shaped the medium in which he worked.

BY MICHAEL BILLINGTON (DECEMBER 2008)

Harold Pinter, who has died at the age of 78, was the most influential, provocative, and poetic dramatist of his generation. He enjoyed parallel careers as an actor, screenwriter, and director. He was also a vigorous political polemicist, but it is for his plays that he will be best remembered, and for his ability to create dramatic poetry out of everyday speech. Among the dramatists of the last 50 years, Samuel Beckett is his only serious rival in terms of theatrical influence, and it is a measure of Pinter’s power that early on he spawned the adjective “Pinteresque,” suggesting a cryptically mysterious situation imbued with hidden menace.

Aside from his public achievements, which included the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005, what was impressive about the private Pinter was his mixture of indomitable will and unstinting generosity. Over the last eight years, he fought a succession of illnesses from cancer of the oesophagus to septicaemia that severely restricted his movements. Yet, time and again, he overcame this to support causes in which he believed, or to honour old friends. He was there, unforgettably, at the vast demonstration against the war in Iraq in Hyde Park in February 2003. And the last time I saw him, four weeks ago, was at a private showing of a TV film—Langrishe, Go Down, which he himself had written—screened as a memorial tribute to the film’s director, David Jones. Although confined to a wheelchair, he spoke movingly about his old colleague. His presence was a mark both of his spiritual tenacity and his almost sacerdotal belief in friendship.

Pinter was born into a Jewish family in the London borough of Hackney. His grandparents were Ashkenazic Jews who had fled persecution in Poland and Odessa. His father, Jack, was a tailor whose own family had artistic leanings. His mother, Frances (née Moskowitz), came from a convivial, extrovert, and spiritually sceptical clan. It was not difficult to trace in Pinter’s own complex personality elements from both sides of the family. He balanced his father’s iron determination with his mother’s instinctive generosity.

The circumstances of his upbringing conspired to give him a sense of solitude, separation and loss—the perfect breeding ground for a dramatist. An only child, he was evacuated to Cornwall at the age of nine where he became aware of the cruelty of schoolboys in isolation. But he returned to London during the Blitz and absorbed the dramatic nature of wartime life—the palpable fear, the sexual desperation, the genuine sense that everything could
end tomorrow. All this fed into his work as a writer. His memories of wartime London led to a particularly vivid screen adaptation of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* in 1989.

Always a wide reader, Pinter devoured Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Eliot, Lawrence, Woolf, and Hemingway and became the centre of an intellectually voracious Hackney clan who remained close for the rest of their lives. He also fell under the spell of a teacher, Joe Brearley, whose passion for poetry and drama fired his imagination. Under Brearley’s direction, he played Romeo and Macbeth at Hackney Downs grammar school, and was good enough to get a grant to study at RADA [Royal Academy of Dramatic Art], which he detested and, with characteristic independence, soon left.

His suspicion of authority was seen in the autumn of 1948. Receiving his call-up papers for national service, he registered as a conscientious objector, thereby risking imprisonment. He was summoned before a series of increasingly Kafkaesque military tribunals, in the end escaping with a fine. But the incident epitomised Pinter’s inbuilt nonconformity and suspicion of the state.

His early determination, however, was to be an actor. After a second spell at drama school, he joined Anew McMaster’s Shakespearean Irish touring company in 1951 and later worked with Donald Wolfit’s company in Hammersmith. From these two masters of the big effect, the young Pinter learned how to achieve maximum intensity through silence or gesture.

But in the mid 1950s he found himself leading a strenuous double life. On the one hand, there was the aspiring actor, slogging round the rep circuit and filling in with odd jobs as doorman, dishwasher, waiter, and snow shoveller. On the other hand, there was the closet writer, penning poems, prose sketches, and an autobiographical novel, eventually published as *The Dwarfs* in 1990. He was always hard up, although after 1956 his troubles were shared by his first wife, Vivien Merchant, a glamorous, middle-class girl from Manchester who was something of a star on the rep circuit.

The turning point came in 1957 when one of Pinter’s old Hackney friends, Henry Woolf, asked him to write a play for Bristol University’s recently established drama department. The result was *The Room*, and it reveals Pinter staking out his territory from the start. The play shows an anxious recluse resisting the insidious pressures of the outside world, and artfully blends comedy and menace. It was a staggeringly confident debut which attracted the attention of a young producer, Michael Codron, who decided to present Pinter’s next play, *The Birthday Party*, at the Lyric Hammersmith in 1958. The result was a disaster. The play was roundly dismissed by the critics and taken off at the end of the week. Pinter’s only consolation was that Harold Hobson wrote a glowing encomium in the *Sunday Times*, stating that Pinter “possessed the most original, disturbing, and arresting talent in theatrical London.”
Pinter not only survived the disaster; he showed that he had immediately found his voice as a dramatist. Using many of the devices of the rep thriller, he produced a work that was comic, disturbing, strangely unresolved, and deeply political in its plea for resistance to social conformity and inherited ideas. Despite its initial failure, *The Birthday Party* also brought him a series of commissions. He wrote revue sketches for West End shows, *A Slight Ache* and *A Night Out* for BBC radio, and *The Dumb Waiter* as an accompaniment to *The Room*. But, although often bracketed with absurdist such as Beckett and Ionesco, he was an instinctively political writer. Proof came with a play written in 1958 but not actually produced until 1980—*The Hothouse*, a savage farce set in a state-run “rest home” which aims to turn the dissident inmates into model citizens.

The play that finally secured his reputation was *The Caretaker*, first produced at the Arts Theatre in 1960 and eventually transferring to the West End. The same critics who had dismissed *The Birthday Party* as gibberish now found masterly technical skill and thunderstorm tension. What was largely missed at the time, however, in all the tributes to his tape-recorder dialogue, was Pinter’s ability to find the hidden poetry in everyday speech—his greatest single contribution to modern drama. In all the games of hunt-the-symbol, people also overlooked the more obvious point; that this was both a deeply humane play about the universal need for pipe dreams as well as a microcosmic study of power in which the tramp hero, Davies, forms shifting alliances as part of his strategy for survival.

*The Caretaker* was a turning point for Pinter. It gave him fame and security. It prompted all sorts of exciting commissions. But it also led to the unravelling of his marriage. Like many of his plays, it was triggered by personal experience, in this case, that of living in a house in Chiswick, southwest London. The landlord was a builder whose handyman brother one day brought back a vagrant who was eventually expelled. Vivien hated the play because she felt it was a betrayal of the brother who had shown the struggling Pinters great kindness. She also realised that the success of *The Caretaker* meant a decisive shift in the balance of
marital power. Nevertheless, Vivien became in the early 1960s the embodiment of a certain kind of Pinter woman, black stockinged and high heeled and combining external gentility and inner passion—a character seen, in various forms, in Night School, The Collection, The Lover, Tea Party, and reaching its fulfilment in Ruth in The Homecoming in 1965.

Pinter’s attitude to women was always a source of debate. Some saw in his work a fetishistic exploitation of female sexuality; others regarded him as a cryptic feminist who celebrated women’s strength and resilience. What is important, however, is that his plays constantly pit male weakness and insecurity against female strength and survival. No one can pin a decisive meaning on The Homecoming, but it seems clear that Ruth, in abandoning her husband to live with her in-laws and apparently work as a prostitute, is making her own choice and feels empowered rather than enslaved.

Power and sex—these were always two of Pinter’s classic themes. But in the 1960s he explored them in cinema as much as theatre. Indeed, his greatness as a playwright has obscured his mastery of screenwriting, and just as in the theatre he had found the perfect interpreter in Peter Hall, so in the cinema he found a kindred spirit in director Joseph Losey, who shared his economy and precision as well as a horrified fascination with the English class system. The greatest of their collaborations remains The Servant (1963), in which Dirk Bogarde’s working-class predator balefully exploits the infantile dependence and sexual ambivalence of James Fox’s master.

But in Accident (1967), Pinter explored a complex network of erotic relationships against the background of an Oxford summer. Sex and class again collide in The Go-Between (1970), in which Julie Christie’s upper-class heroine pursues a clandestine affair with Alan Bates’s tenant farmer. All three films were based on novels, yet all three bear Pinter’s unmistakable imprint.

His immersion in cinema was one of several possible reasons for a major change that overtook his theatre work after The Homecoming (other reasons may have been the influence of Beckett and Pinter’s growing sense of marital solitude). He dispensed with the paraphernalia of realism. His plays became more distilled, direct, and, in the case of Landscape and Silence in 1969, took the form of poetically interwoven monologues.

His plays not only became starker in setting and bleaker in tone, but also more preoccupied with the theme of memory. Pinter had always been fascinated by the way we use an idealised past as a consolation for an unhappy present. But in Old Times (1971), memory became a weapon used by two competing characters to gain psychological dominance over a third. When Pinter came to adapt Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu for the cinema—published as The Proust Screenplay and never filmed, although it was later staged—he was also to grapple with the greatest 20th-century treatment of memory. And in No Man’s
Land, premiered at the National Theatre in 1975 with Ralph Richardson and John Gielgud, he dramatised a collision between two desperate men, one haunted and cursed by memories and the other constantly seeking to reinvent himself in the moment.

In 1975 Pinter’s own life underwent an upheaval that was to have a profound effect on his work. His marriage broke up in a blaze of publicity and he went to live with the historian Antonia Fraser, who in 1980 became his second wife. This was not, as many people assumed, the inspiration for his 1978 play, Betrayal, which dealt with the corrosive effect of infidelity. That was much more closely related to his earlier affair with the television presenter and journalist Joan Bakewell. But his blissfully happy new life with Fraser undoubtedly helped to intensify his fascination with politics. His plays had always dealt with the intricacies of domestic power. He now felt able to turn his attention to the wider public arena. His closest friends included the Marxist playwright David Mercer and the campaigning actor Peggy Ashcroft, who in 1973 encouraged him to voice his opposition to American involvement in the overthrow of Chile’s President Allende. But it was only in the mid 1980s that he started to express, in dramatic form, his strong feelings about torture, human rights, and the double standards of the western democracies.

First, in 1984, came One for the Road, a psychologically complex play about the tortured nature of the torturer and his unresolved craving for respect, admiration, and even love. Four years later he wrote Mountain Language, inspired by the Turkish suppression of the Kurdish language but also reflecting Pinter’s concern with the restrictions on speech and thought in Thatcher’s Britain. In 1991 he pursued the theme in Party Time, showing an affluent, smugly insular high-bourgeois world indifferent to the erosion of civil liberties. But the best of all of his late political plays is Ashes to Ashes (1996), a hauntingly elusive work that starts with a man’s nagging enquiries about a woman’s lover but almost imperceptibly opens up to admit Auschwitz, Bosnia, and the whole landscape of 20th-century atrocity.

In Britain, Pinter’s later political plays have generally been viewed with a bemused tolerance. But when he and Fraser hosted a series of private discussion groups in their Holland Park home in the 1980s, they were ridiculed by the press—so much so that the group was disbanded. His political plays, however, have enjoyed wide circulation, not least in countries that have emerged from totalitarian rule. Undeterred by mockery, in his later years he also lost no opportunity to attack the cynicism and double standards of Western democracies and, in particular, u.s. foreign policy.

However, he continued to write plays such as Moonlight (1993), which explored the brutal battleground of family life, and Celebration (2000), which sharply satirised the moral coarseness of the super rich. He also renewed his career as an actor, appearing onstage with a muscular authority in revivals of No Man’s Land, The Collection, and One for the Road, and
performing on screen in a variety of movies from Mojo to Mansfield Park. He was also a lifelong director of his own and other people’s plays, a task to which he brought absolute clarity of vision and a total respect for actors and text.

No other dramatist of his generation has proved as durable as Pinter. But he was also one of those rare writers who decisively shaped the medium in which they work. For a start, he banished the idea of the omniscient author. After plays such as The Birthday Party and The Caretaker, it was no longer de rigeur for dramatists to know the backstory or the future of their characters. As Pinter said in a lecture to students in 1962: “My characters tell me so much and no more with reference to their experience, their aspirations, their motives, their history.” But alongside that, he showed that theatrical poetry is not an ornate, verbal appendage. He proved that it can be found in the banalities, repetitions, evasions, and even hiatuses of everyday speech. He became famous for his use of the pause, something he claimed to have learned from the comedian Jack Benny. But for Pinter dramatic speech was also frequently a camouflage for unexpressed, hidden emotion. “So often, below the word spoken is the thing known and unspoken.”

As for the man himself, he was full of contradictions. He had a reputation for being short-tempered, but, in writing a critical biography of him, I was more struck by his unflinching loyalty. He remained close to the friends of his youth—the Hackney gang of Henry Woolf, Mick Goldstein, and Morris Wernick. He also listened to what other people said—the secret of his gift as a writer. And he had an immense zest for life. He loved poetry, wine, bridge, and just about every kind of sport, especially cricket. I often thought he was as proud of the cricket team he first played for and then managed, the Gaieties, as of almost all his literary accomplishments.

His life had its tragedies, but his marriage to Fraser provided infinite joy. She survives him, as does his son, Daniel, by his first wife, who died in 1982. For all his rage against injustice and constant illness, his later years were crowned with happiness. He was particularly thrilled by the superb festivals of his work staged by Michael Colgan at the Gate Theatre in Dublin. They reminded us that Pinter was an all-round man of the theatre of a kind that we are unlikely to see again, a working playwright-actor-director who all the time nursed his own private vision of the universe. And that, in the end, was his supreme achievement. He mapped out his own country with its own distinctive topography—a place haunted by the shifting ambivalence of memory, flecked by uncertainty, reeking of sex, and echoing with strange, mordant laughter. It was, in short, Pinterland, and it will induce recognition in audiences, and ensure his classic status, for as long as plays are staged.

THE HOMECOMING’S LONDON
BY ZACHARY MOULL

AN OLD HOUSE IN NORTH LONDON
Harold Pinter specifically sets The Homecoming in North London, the historically working-class area of inner London to the north of the central city, which includes such boroughs as Hackney, Islington, and Camden. These neighborhoods are urban in character, and many streets are lined with four- and five-story buildings of residential flats. Hackney lies on the edge of London’s East End, and its residents are often described as Cockney.

Born in 1930, Pinter grew up in a working-class Jewish family in Hackney. In his unpublished memoir, The Queen of All of the Fairies, he describes the neighborhood of his youth:

It brimmed over with milk bars, Italian cafes, Fifty Shilling tailors, and barber shops. Prams and busy ramshackle stalls clogged up the main street—street violinists, trumpeters, matchsellers. Many Jews lived in the district, noisy but candid; mostly taxi drivers and pressers, machinists, and cutters who steamed all day in their workshop ovens. Up the hill lived the richer, “better-class” Jews, strutting with their mink-coats and American suits and ties. Bookmakers, jewelers, and furriers with gown shops in Great Portland Street [in the West End].

By the mid 1960s, the people of Hackney faced growing unemployment as London’s economy began to shift from manufacturing and industry towards the service sector.

“WE WERE TWO OF THE WORST HATED MEN IN THE WEST END OF LONDON.”
The West End is the fashionable part of downtown London that includes such areas as Piccadilly, Mayfair, Soho, and the Strand and is at the heart of London’s nightlife. The West End has a seedy side, too: in the middle of the 20th century, the boisterous Soho neighborhood earned a reputation for its music halls, gambling clubs, and strip joints. Greek Street, just west of Charing Cross Road, became known for the prostitutes who worked in the flats of its walk-up apartment buildings.

“WHAT DO YOU THINK OF SECOND WIND FOR THE THREE-THIRTY?” /
“WHERE?” / “SANDOWN PARK.”
A horse-racing course to the southwest of London in the county of Surrey, Sandown Park is a 55-minute drive from Hackney.
“EPSOM? I KNEW IT LIKE THE BACK OF MY HAND.”
Epsom Downs is another horse racing course in Surrey, not far from Sandown Park.

“I’VE BEEN TO LONDON AIRPORT.” / “WHAT, RIGHT UP THE M4?”
Renamed Heathrow Airport in 1966, London’s busiest airport is 50 minutes away from Hackney with no traffic. The M4 motorway runs all the way west to Wales, but the eight-mile stretch that links the western suburbs of London to Heathrow Airport is one of its most heavily traveled portions.

“PICKED HIM UP AT THE SAVOY. . . . TOOK HIM TO THE CAPRICE FOR HIS LUNCH. . . . TOOK HIM DOWN TO A HOUSE IN EATON SQUARE.”
One of London’s most famous hotels, the Savoy was built in the West End next to the Savoy Theatre in 1889 and has been popular with actors, musicians, and politicians ever since. Le Caprice, an upscale restaurant located behind the Ritz Hotel in the Piccadilly area of the West End, opened in 1947. Eaton Square is a three-block long park in the wealthy community of Belgravia, just to the southwest of Buckingham Palace.

“YOU’RE WELCOME TO BRING YOUR BRIDE HERE [OR] YOU CAN TAKE A SUITE AT THE DORCHESTER.”
Another fancy hotel in London’s West End, the Dorchester overlooks Hyde Park.

“YOU’D BEND OVER FOR HALF A DOLLAR ON BLACKFRIARS BRIDGE.”
The busy Blackfriars Bridge in central London, built in 1860, takes cars and pedestrians across the River Thames. To “bend over” there would be a very public act of indecency.

“I’M DRIVING A MAN TO HAMPTON COURT AT FOUR-FOURTY-FIVE.”
A lavish palace built for Cardinal Wolsey in the 16th century, Hampton Court lies a few miles southwest of London.

“WE DIDN’T TAKE THEM OVER THE SCRUBS.”
The Wormwood Scrubs, known locally simply as “The Scrubs,” is a large public park in the northwestern part of London. It was used as a military site in both world wars and was also once the main dueling grounds of the city. Adjacent to the park is Wormwood Scrubs Prison, which houses more than a thousand inmates—so the police would likely take note of any suspicious activity in the area.
“IT DOESN’T HAVE TO BE RIGHT IN GREEK STREET, DAD.”

Running south from Soho Square to Shaftesbury Avenue in the West End of London, the heart of the theater district, Greek Street is at the epicenter of London’s sex trade. During the 1960s, prostitution as such was not illegal in Britain, but the solicitation of potential clients was; the Street Offences Act of 1959 imposed heavy fines on streetwalking, forcing the business of prostitution to move indoors. Entrepreneurial pimps controlled many of the walk-up buildings in the area (which bore euphemistic signs in their stairwells and on doors advertising the various “models” to be found within); they rented the small flats to women on an organized hourly schedule, coordinated furtive advertising campaigns, took a large cut of the profits, and sometimes resorted to violence both to protect their territory and to exert their control over the women. This seems to be Lenny’s profession; he’s “got a number of flats around the area.” Lenny’s actions are illegal and would expose him to the charge of “living on the earnings of prostitution.” But police tended to go after pimps in high-profile cases—those involving large organizations, media coverage, or violence—and focused less attention on small-time operators.

FIGHT DIRECTOR JONATHAN RIDER ON THE HOMECOMING

The moments of physical struggle are going to be very poignant and they’re going to be very real. Like Carey said, this is jungle warfare masked with civility, and I think that’s exactly how the violence should be. It should be without the classic [visible] preparation in a strike that allows the audience to have that half a second of “Oh!” just before the moment of contact. It should be fast and violent and realistic and disturbing, even in the smaller moments. It should be like when a dog you’ve seen many times in the neighborhood, playing with the kids, comes over to your house, and it’s wagging its tail, and you stick your hand out to say, “Hi”—and you just can’t believe it when it bites you. When a dog bites you, it’s so fast and so vicious, it just takes a big chunk out of your hand before you realize what it’s doing. This should be that savage and that quick.

Sketch of Joey by costume designer Alex Jaeger
“YOU THINK I WASN’T A TEARAWAY?”
“Tearaway” is British slang for a wild, reckless, young person, originally used to refer to a tough guy or mugger and later synonymous with “juvenile delinquent.”

“AFTER ALL, THEY’RE SITTING IN A HUMBER SUPER SNIPE, THEY CAN AFFORD TO RELAX.”
Quintessentially British cars, Humber Super Snipes gained popularity from their use as army staff cars in World War II. After the war, Super Snipes were marketed as luxury automobiles with roomy interiors, cherrywood dashboards, and elegant styling.

“PROBABLY A NAVIGATOR . . . IN A FLYING FORTRESS”
“Flying Fortress” is the nickname of the B-17 bomber, one of the best-known American planes from the World War II era. These four-engine Boeing-built airplanes were used to target German and Japanese industrial facilities. They also caused civilian calamities: hundreds of B-17s bombed Hamburg in 1943 and Dresden in 1945, creating firestorms that killed tens of thousands. The Flying Fortress became a symbol of the United States’s technological innovation and military might.

“I WAS DRIVING A DUST CART AT THE AGE OF 19.”
“Dust cart” is the British term for what Americans call a garbage truck.

“BEEN HAVING A FEW CRAFTY REEFS IN A LAYBY, HAVE YOU?”
To “reef” is to fondle someone’s genitals. The slang term had currency from the 1940s to the 70s and was used to describe homosexual encounters in particular. A “layby” is a wide shoulder on a highway where drivers can pull over to fix mechanical problems or let faster vehicles go past.

“YOU SPEND ALL THE DAY SITTING ON YOUR ARSE AT LONDON AIRPORT, BUY YOURSELF A JAM ROLL.”
The jam roll is an English pastry made from a combination of dough and fruit jam. It has the consistency of bread pudding.
“HE’LL BE CHUFFED TO HIS BOLLOCKS . . . WHEN HE SEES HIS ELDEST SON.”
To be “chuffed” is to be pleased or delighted. “Bollocks” is a versatile and much-used British term for the testicles.

“IF I’D BEEN A SOLDIER IN THE LAST WAR—SAY IN THE ITALIAN CAMPAIGN”
Italy surrendered to the Allies in September 1943, shortly after the invasion of Sicily and the ousting of Mussolini. The German army, however, still had control of the boot of Italy. Over the following year and a half, Allied troops led by the British and U.S. worked their way north in a land war that is considered one of World War II’s most difficult campaigns.

“ONE NIGHT . . . DOWN BY THE DOCKS, I WAS STANDING ALONE UNDER AN ARCH, WATCHING ALL THE MEN JIBBING THE BOOM, OUT IN THE HARBOUR, AND PLAYING ABOUT WITH THE YARDARM.”
According to Elin Diamond in Pinter’s Comic Play, “Jibbing the boom’ is an archaism and ‘playing about with the yardarm’ is an absurdity.” “Jibbing (rhymes with ‘fiddling’) the boom” refers to what we now call “gybing” (soft “g” and rhymes with “imbibing”), a maneuver in which a sailboat traveling downwind turns so that the wind switches sides of the boat, causing the boom to swing across the center of the boat. A “yardarm” is a semifixed horizontal timber that stretches out from the mast to support a square sail. These are complicated and unwieldy, not necessarily things with which one would “play about.” Diamond suggests that “Lenny is improvising, borrowing technical jargon to sound informative.”

“AN OLD LADY . . . ASKED ME IF I WOULD GIVE HER A HAND WITH HER IRON MANGLE.”
A machine for ironing clothes, the mangle was made of cast iron and had two heated rollers through which clothes were pressed by means of a hand crank.

“WE’VE HAD A SMELLY SCRUBBER IN MY HOUSE ALL NIGHT.”
A slang term for a prostitute, “scrubber” originated among the ranks of the British military and is particularly common in port cities. “Scrubby” more pejorative than “tart,” because it impugns not only a woman’s chastity but also her hygiene.

“IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA . . . NO TIME OF THE DAY OR NIGHT YOU CAN’T GET A CUP OF COFFEE OR A DUTCH GIN”
A Dutch doctor invented gin in the 17th century, and the drink soon became exceptionally popular in England, even eclipsing beer. Dutch gin is sweeter and more aromatic than the more common English liquor. As Dutch gin was not widely available in the United States during the 1960s, it appears that Lenny once again claims expertise that he does not possess.
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What do you think Ruth actually decides at the end of the play, and why? How do you think interpretations of her behavior have changed since 1965? What does the family hope to gain from her continued presence? Why does Teddy return to the United States without her?

2. How is it significant that Teddy has a Ph.D. in philosophy? How do the jobs of the characters fit their personalities?

3. How does each of the men in The Homecoming view women?

4. How is sex used in The Homecoming?

5. How do the characters spar with each other? What are they trying to gain? What do they have to lose? What are some of the ways the characters mask their underlying emotions? Which emotions/reactions are they willing to show and which are they determined to hide? How do they really feel about each other?

6. How does each character’s behavior support or undermine the information revealed in the dialogue? Do the characters say what they are really thinking and feeling? If not, how do we understand what they are really thinking and feeling?

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION


