AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
Carey Perloff, Artistic Director • Peter Pastreich, Executive Director

PRESENTS

WORDS on PLAYS
INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

The Birthday Party

By Harold Pinter
Directed by Carey Perloff

The Geary Theater
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**COVER** Design by Elspeth Sweatman and Tabriana Willard.

**OPPOSITE** Director Carey Perloff and lighting designer Robert Hand during a design meeting for A.C.T.’s 2018 production of *The Birthday Party*. Photo by Simon Hodgson.
Overview of *The Birthday Party*


**Creative Team**

- Scenic Designer: Nina Ball
- Costume Designer: Candice Donnelly
- Lighting Designer: Robert Hand
- Sound Designer: Darron L West

**Characters and Cast (in order of appearance)**

- Petey: Dan Hiatt
- Meg: Judith Ivey
- Stanley: Firdous Bamji
- Lulu: Julie Adamo
- McCann: Marco Barricelli
- Goldberg: Scott Wentworth

**Synopsis**

**Act I**

Petey, a deck-chair attendant, returns home from the beach for breakfast. As he reads the newspaper, his wife Meg brings him cornflakes and asks him the same questions she asks every morning: about his work, the news, and the cereal. She also inquires if Stanley—the only tenant staying at their boardinghouse—is awake yet. Petey says he...
doesn’t know. He mentions that two men approached him the night before to ask if they could stay at the boardinghouse. They must have heard about the house, Meg replies, because it’s on “the list.” She already has a room ready.

Meg yells up to Stanley that if he doesn’t get up, she’s going to make him. She counts to three before climbing the stairs. We hear Stanley’s shouts and Meg’s laughter. Meg returns downstairs, panting. Shortly after, an unshaven, pajama-clad Stanley appears. Meg serves him cornflakes. Stanley grumbles about the milk being sour and not getting any sleep.

Petey heads back to work. As Stanley eats, Meg dusts the table around him, much to his irritation. She strokes his arm and tries to tickle his neck, but Stanley pushes her away. Meg announces that two gentlemen are coming to stay. Startled, Stanley grills her for information about them. When Meg is unable to answer, he convinces himself that they won’t come. Stanley then asks for his tea, but Meg has taken it away. He demands that she come to him, but she stands her ground. Groaning, he lets his head fall into his hands.

In a small voice, Meg asks Stanley when he will play the piano again; she misses watching him play. Stanley says he’s considering playing in a world tour. Meg begs him not to leave.

Stanley tries to scare Meg. He tells her that “they” are coming. Today. In a van. With a wheelbarrow. He asks Meg if she wants to know who “they” are looking for, but she doesn’t want to hear. As Meg leaves to go shopping, her neighbor Lulu appears at the front door with a package. Lulu invites Stanley to go for a walk with her, but he declines.

The two visitors, Goldberg and McCann, arrive. Stanley sees them and sneaks out the back door. Meg returns and greets the men. When they ask about Stanley, she mentions it’s his birthday. The three decide to throw a party for him.

Having listened in, Stanley confronts Meg about the men, only for Meg to present him with a gift. It isn’t his birthday, he tells her, but she ignores his protests. He unwraps a toy drum, hangs it around his neck, and begins to play gently, but as he marches around the room, the beat becomes louder and wilder.

Act II

That evening, McCann sits at the table ripping a newspaper into strips. Stanley enters, but hesitates at the sight of McCann. They exchange a brief greeting. Stanley turns to leave, but McCann intercepts him. Stanley can’t leave, he says, because there will be a party in his honor. Stanley and McCann both attempt to discover whether they’ve ever met before and why Meg thinks it’s Stanley’s birthday; then Stanley suddenly grips McCann’s arm, desperate to know who he and Goldberg are and why they’ve come.

Petey and Goldberg enter, deep in conversation. Goldberg has been telling Petey about his childhood. He prompts Stanley to share something from his past, but Stanley
doesn't answer. Petey says that he won't be staying for the party because it's his chess night. Left alone with Goldberg and McCann, Stanley panics. There is no room for them at the boardinghouse, he says, and they must leave. Irritated, Goldberg orders Stanley to sit. When Stanley defies him, Goldberg asks McCann to make Stanley sit. The two men silently face off.

In his own time, Stanley sits. Goldberg and McCann interrogate him, subjecting him to accusations that include killing his wife, betraying “the organization,” defiling his mother, and picking his nose. Initially Stanley maintains his innocence, but as the accusations pile up, he struggles to ward off the onslaught. As he huddles in his chair, Goldberg and McCann declare him dead. Suddenly, Stanley kicks Goldberg in the stomach. McCann seizes a chair and lifts it above his head. Stanley does the same.

Then, they hear a loud drumbeat—the birthday party is starting. Meg enters in an evening dress, playing Stanley’s drum. Goldberg nudges Meg to make a toast for Stanley. McCann turns off the lights and shines a flashlight on Stanley as Meg delivers a teary speech. Lulu arrives just before Goldberg regales everyone with a toast.
After the speeches, Meg and McCann chat while Lulu and Goldberg flirt. Stanley sits alone. Meg asks Stanley to dance, but when he doesn’t respond, she dances by herself. Lulu sits in Goldberg’s lap as he tells her about his late wife. Meg and McCann talk about Ireland and about their childhoods, which prompts McCann to break into an Irish love song.

Meg and Lulu suggest a party game—blind man’s buff. Meg goes first. As Meg roams blindly, Goldberg fondles Lulu. Meg finds McCann, ending the first round. Lulu blindfolds McCann and, once again, everyone scatters and then freezes. McCann draws close to Stanley; his arm extends and finds Stanley’s glasses. With that, it’s Stanley’s turn.

As Stanley wanders blindfolded about the room, McCann snaps Stanley’s glasses in two and places the drum in his path, tripping him. Stanley recovers and, dragging the drum on his foot, moves towards Meg. After he starts to strangle her, McCann and Goldberg intervene. Suddenly, the lights go out.

In the darkness, McCann loses his flashlight. Everyone scrambles to find it. We hear the sound of a drum, followed by a whimper and a scream. When McCann turns on the flashlight, Lulu is lying spread-eagled on the table with Stanley bent over her. As the others approach, Stanley lets out an eerie giggle.
Act III

The next morning, Petey and Meg return to their routine. Over breakfast, Petey comments that Meg slept like a log. She sees the broken drum, but doesn’t remember it getting broken. Has Stanley come downstairs yet? she asks; Petey says he hasn’t seen him. When she tried to bring Stanley a cup of tea, Meg says, McCann answered the door. They must be old friends, she concludes.

As Meg leaves to go shopping, she sees a car outside—it wasn’t there yesterday. She asks Petey if he looked inside it. Did he see a wheelbarrow? Petey says the car belongs to Goldberg. Seeing Goldberg descending the stairs, she asks him if Stanley will be coming down, and Goldberg replies that he will be soon. Meg goes to get supplies for breakfast.

Petey asks Goldberg about Stanley. He suffered a nervous breakdown from the commotion at the party, Goldberg says. Petey offers to take Stanley to the doctor but Goldberg tells him that Monty has taken care of everything. Confused, Petey presses Goldberg to elaborate. McCann enters with suitcases. Petey takes the dishes into the kitchen, giving Goldberg and McCann a moment to conspire. Goldberg hisses at McCann to finish the job, to which McCann replies that he’s not going back upstairs.

When Petey again pressures Goldberg for details about Stanley’s condition, Goldberg says that he will take Stanley to see Monty. Is he a doctor? Petey asks. Why, Goldberg retorts, isn’t Petey attending to his deck-chairs? Uneasy, Petey goes outside. McCann starts tearing the newspaper into strips again, to Goldberg’s annoyance. They argue about their next move; McCann wants to just get it over with. When Goldberg doesn’t respond, McCann calls him Simey—a personal nickname. Goldberg seizes him by the throat and McCann backs down.

As the men prepare to get Stanley and leave the boardinghouse, Lulu confronts Goldberg and accuses him of taking advantage of her. He turns the tables on her with his own accusations, backed by McCann, who demands that Lulu confess. Retreating, Lulu warns that she knows what the men have done.

McCann leads in a clean-shaven Stanley. Goldberg and McCann taunt him, but Stanley just stares at the floor. When he does turn his head to answer, he can’t speak. Petey returns to see Goldberg and McCann escorting Stanley from the house. He tells the men to leave Stanley alone. Goldberg invites Petey to join them. As Petey stands, defeated, Goldberg, McCann, and Stanley get in the car and drive off.

Returning home, Meg observes that the car has gone. Will Goldberg and McCann be coming back for lunch? she asks. No, says Petey. She asks about Stanley. Petey answers that he’s still asleep. Meg reminisces about last night’s lovely party. She was the belle of the ball.
Pinterland
The Life and Work of Harold Pinter

By Elspeth Sweatman

A room. A person, maybe two people. Then, an outside force: a stranger. Beneath the small talk and colloquial turns of phrase smolders a persistent, unspoken threat. A battle ensues. One person jabs—“I bet it is”—as another parries—“I know it is.” One achieves the upper hand, then the other, each striving to gain, reclaim, possess. Today, we would call this type of situation “Pinteresque,” after British playwright Harold Pinter. Bursting onto the theatrical scene in the 1950s, Pinter radically changed storytelling on the Western stage. In his 29 plays and 23 screenplays, he explored universal themes of loyalty, friendship, memory, communication, and the thin line between the personal and the political, transforming the language of east London into a unique poetry. He “took the narration out of theater,” says American playwright David Mamet, “and put the poetry back.”

Pinter was born on October 10, 1930, in Hackney, a working-class suburb in east London. Despite having a large extended family, he was an only child who could often be found daydreaming alone under the backyard lilac tree. This Eden came crashing down in 1939 with the outbreak of World War II. At the age of nine, Pinter found himself on a train to rural Cornwall with other children fleeing the Blitz.1 The conflict was a formative time for the youngster, exposed to the trauma of bombing, the separation from his family (he was evacuated twice more), the cruelty of boys, and the beauty of the British countryside.

As a teenager at Hackney Downs Grammar School, Pinter’s interest in theater blossomed. Encouraged by his English teacher Joseph Brearley, Pinter played Macbeth and Romeo in school productions and took trips to see shows in the West End. But theater was just one of his many interests. Pinter was an avid cricket player and a good sprinter; he broke the school record for the 220-yard dash. He also loved discussing the works of James Joyce, William Shakespeare, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Franz Kafka, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Ernest Hemingway with his friends Mick Goldstein, Henry Woolf, and Morris Wernick. The camaraderie, intellectual discussions, and squabbles of the “Hackney Gang” shaped Pinter into a man who could be competitive and quick-tempered, dogmatic and

1 Derived from the German word Blitzkrieg, meaning “lightning war,” the Blitz was the nickname that British newspapers gave to Nazi Germany’s bombing of London during World War II.

sharp-witted, but who also valued male friendship and loyalty.

At the age of 17, Pinter left school and enrolled at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. He lasted only a few weeks, finding his upper-class classmates insular and detached. He did a series of odd jobs before attending London's other leading drama school, the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. In 1951, he left education altogether, opting to learn his craft on the job as part of actor-manager Anew McMaster's repertory company. Touring through Ireland, Pinter acted in Shakespeare—playing Iago, Macduff, Bassanio, and even, for one Thursday matinee, Hamlet. He also appeared in more contemporary comedies and thrillers, such as Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Indians*, and Patrick Hamilton's *Rope.*

His experiences acting in rep gave Pinter a crash course in dramatic construction: the importance of pacing, the poetry of classics by Shakespeare and Sophocles, the tightly woven plots of thrillers and melodramas, the power of laughter and of silence. For the rest of the 1950s, he learned firsthand from such great actors as McMaster and

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**Plays by Harold Pinter**

1957  
*The Room*  
*The Birthday Party*  
*The Dumb Waiter*

1958  
*A Slight Ache*  
*The Hothouse*

1959  
*The Caretaker*  
*A Night Out*

1960  
*Night School*  
*The Dwarfs*

1961  
*The Collection*  
*The Lover*

1964  
*The Homecoming*  
*The Basement*

1966  
*Landscape*

1968  
*Silence*

1969  
*Sketch Night*

1970  
*Old Times*  
*The Lover*  
*The New World Order*  
*Party Time*

1972  
*Monologue*

1974  
*No Man's Land*

1978  
*Betrayal*

1980  
*Family Voices*

1982  
*Other Places*  
(Victoria Station, A Kind of Alaska, Family Voices)

1984  
*One for the Road*

1988  
*Mountain Language*

1991  
*The New World Order*  
*Party Time*

1993  
*Moonlight*

1996  
*Ashes to Ashes*

1999  
*Celebration*  
*Old Times*  
*Monologue*  
*No Man's Land*  
*Betrayal*  
*Family Voices*  
*Other Places*  
(Victoria Station, A Kind of Alaska, Family Voices)

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2 As a young man, Pinter worked as a dishwasher, snow-shoveler, and doorman, among other things. His experience of getting fired from a restaurant job for interrupting a customer to correct his statement about Kafka inspired a character in *Celebration* (1999).

3 The latter would inspire him to create the duo of Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party.*
Donald Wolfit, and from stars of the repertory stage, such as Vivien Merchant (whom Pinter married in 1956). Under the stage name David Baron, Pinter acted in theaters from Bournemouth to Birmingham, playing killers, detectives, and romantic heroes.

Between performances, Pinter was writing: poems, plays, sketches, and a novel, *The Dwarfs*. He was submitting work to BBC radio and television, without success. Ironically, Pinter’s “big break” came about not via this institution, but thanks to his Hackney friend Henry Woolf. In 1957, Woolf asked Pinter to write a play for Bristol University’s drama department. After initially responding that he couldn’t possibly write something in less than six months, Pinter sat down and created *The Room* in just four afternoons, an intense burst of creativity he would repeat throughout his career. Set in a single room, this play already contained the distinctive elements of Pinter’s aesthetic: mysterious characters, confined spaces, threat, and verve. It was a success with audiences and critics alike. “Throughout there runs a rare vitality,” wrote the *Bristol Evening Post* critic, “and, with experience and greater conciseness, one feels Mr. Pinter may well make some impact as a dramatist.”

Based on the positive reception of *The Room*, Pinter moved ahead with plans to bring another of his plays, *The Birthday Party*, to the West End. The inspiration for this work had come three years earlier when Pinter was playing Tops (the horse’s head) in
L. du Garde Peach’s *A Horse! A Horse!* on tour. He spent a surreal night in a rundown boardinghouse with a ditzy landlady and a former piano-playing lodger who never seemed to leave. Using this situation as a starting point, Pinter wrote *The Birthday Party* in 1957 while touring in a production of *Doctor in the House*.

After runs in Cambridge, Oxford, and Wolverhampton, *The Birthday Party* opened at London’s Lyric Theatre on Monday, May 19, 1958. The critical response took Pinter by surprise. Every British theater critic—save one—dismissed the play. Having just reviewed Terence Rattigan’s drawing-room comedy *Variations on a Theme* and Leslie Sands’s thriller *Something to Hide*, London critics didn’t know what to make of Pinter’s tale with the pace of a whodunit but none of the clarity regarding who did what to whom and why. Where was the exposition? Where were the characters’ backstories? What was the play about? Only Harold Hobson of the *Sunday Times* got it, declaring Pinter to have “the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London.” But Hobson’s review didn’t run until Sunday, and the producers had closed the production down the previous night.

“The very intemperateness of the reaction turned the play into a *cause célèbre*,” says Pinter biographer and theater critic Michael Billington. *Encore Theatre Magazine*, which championed contemporary and experimental work, praised his writing. Radio and TV producers raced to acquire his work. Producer Peter Willes got hold of *The Birthday Party* script and immediately asked Pinter to adapt it for British television station ITV; it aired in March 1960 and was watched by 11 million people (by contrast, *The Royal Variety Performance*, a traditional ratings winner, was watched by only 8.4 million the following year). By the time Pinter’s next major play, *The Caretaker*, premiered in the West End in April 1960, theater critics had done a U-turn. They hailed the work as a resounding success and Pinter as British theater’s leading new voice.

The reason for this about-face in the span of only a few years is twofold. First, critical thought had finally caught up with the revolution in theatrical storytelling that was happening at the end of the 1950s. Britain’s emerging playwrights were not content to write “Loamshire plays,” cozy middle-class comedies set in country houses. Inspired by the poetic language of Samuel Beckett and the political, alienation techniques of Bertolt Brecht, they felt emboldened to discard realistic settings and lengthy explanations of plot and motive. Theater critics initially bemoaned these advances, but by 1960 they had changed their tune.

Second, London’s theater critics had now been exposed to more of Pinter’s unique aesthetic. They could see and appreciate “the oddball wit, the pugnacity, the idea that nine-tenths of human communication was an unwilling process of evasion and silence,” wrote director Richard Eyre and playwright Nicholas Wright. What the critics had initially found impenetrable in *The Birthday Party* they now hailed as a perfectly calibrated mixture of seething dialogue, thrilling shifts, and sudden humor.

By 1965, Pinter had risen far, fast. His work could be heard on the radio and seen on television and at the cinema, as well as in the West End and on Broadway. He owned a townhouse in London’s upper-class Regent’s Park neighborhood. He had

**OPPOSITE** Regent’s Park Terrace, August 12, 2008. Photo by Herry Lawford. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.
found a collaborator and champion in director Peter Hall, and an artistic home at Hall's newly established Royal Shakespeare Company. In 1966, Pinter was awarded a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) and the next year, *The Homecoming* won the Tony Award for Best Play.

But Pinter was growing weary of the limitations of naturalistic drama. Inspired by the storytelling he was exploring in his screenplays for *The Servant* (1963) and *The Go-Between* (1971)—depicting time as fluid and memory as malleable—he moved away from the tactile, grounding details of specific cities, products, and stores to create more poetic worlds. *Landscape* (1967), *Silence* (1968), and *Old Times* (1970) are set in unspecified rooms in unspecified countries. Gone are entrances, exits, and other extraneous stage business. The characters talk across each other, each seemingly in the throes of his or her own monologue. Their lines are filled with repetitions and contradictions. In his previous plays, Pinter's characters had used memory as a nostalgic escape; now, memory was their primary weapon, a weapon heightened by the coexistence of the past and the present onstage.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Pinter seemed to change direction again, moving away from an exploration of time and memory toward another of his passions: politics. *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988), *Party Time* (1991), and *Ashes to Ashes* (1996) center on individuals being interrogated or tortured, and touch on contemporary topics including human rights abuses, nuclear warfare, and the rights of minorities around the world. Many theater critics saw these plays as an unwelcome departure for the artist. “Pinter is hitching an undignified ride on other people’s all-too-real suffering, under all-too-real tyrannies, in order to excoriate a nation, Britain, that rightly allows him complete freedom to indulge his fantasies,” wrote *Daily Telegraph* critic Charles Spencer.

But those critics who accused Pinter of meddling in areas where artists didn't belong didn't understand Pinter the playwright or Pinter the man. His plays—from *The Room* to *Celebration*—center on power, be it the domestic power plays of couples or the actions of nations and leaders. “Pinter’s plays have always been political,” wrote John Peter in *The Sunday Times* in 1994. “They explore the private roots of power, the need to dominate and mislead, the terror of being excluded or enclosed, the compromising contagion of past actions, the compulsion to reimagine the past.” For Pinter, the line between the personal and the political had always been blurred; now he was overtly using the personal to discuss larger political themes.

At his core, Pinter was a political person; at the age of 18, he had refused to participate in Britain's mandatory military national service, choosing instead to withstand several trials and pay multiple fines as a conscientious objector. He was always nonconformist and suspicious of tradition, government, and religion. But after he left his wife Vivien in 1975 and moved in with Antonia Fraser (the former wife of a member of Parliament), Pinter became more outspoken about his political views. He and Antonia founded the June 20th Group (a group of leftist writers who would gather to discuss current events).

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4 In *Old Times*, for example, the character Anna doesn't enter the scene through a door but simply turns around to face the audience.
He traveled to Turkey with American playwright Arthur Miller to bring attention to the plight of the Kurds, a minority ethnic group who have suffered discrimination, injustice, and torture at the hands of the Turkish government. “The more he immersed himself in the public world and the more his moral sensibility was outraged both by arbitrary cruelty and the hypocrisy of Western democracies,” says Billington, “the more he began to see art not as something self-sufficient but as a way of expressing his justified anger.”

Although Pinter’s last major play premiered in 1999, he continued acting, directing, and writing—penning several sketches, directing No Man’s Land (2001) and Simon Gray’s The Old Masters (2004), and acting in Samuel Beckett’s Krapp’s Last Tape (2006) in London and New York. He frequently wrote letters to leading newspapers to criticize Prime Minister Tony Blair and his decision to send troops into Iraq and Afghanistan. Behind all this activity, however, Pinter’s health was deteriorating. When he won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005, he was too ill to attend the ceremony, but he left the hospital to record his lecture. In it, he talked about his work and, ever the nonconformist, he used the opportunity to rail against American foreign policy. Pinter continued to be vocal about current events until his death on Christmas Eve, 2008.

“I’m well aware that I have been described as ‘enigmatic, taciturn, terse, prickly, explosive, and forbidding,’” said Pinter in a 1995 speech. “Well, I do have my moods like anyone else, I won’t deny it. But my writing life, which has gone on for roughly 45 years and isn’t over yet, has been informed by a quite different set of characteristics which have nothing whatsoever to do with those descriptions. Quite simply, my writing life has been one of relish, challenge, excitement. . . . Whether it be a poem, a play or a screenplay—if the relish, challenge, and excitement in the language and through that language to character isn’t there then nothing’s there and nothing can exist.” It is this passion for the power and precision of language, the thrill of unspoken threats and connections, and the creation of bold characters that make Pinter’s plays universal and unforgettable.

Mystery and Muscle
An Interview with Director Carey Perloff

By Simon Hodgson

In 1987, 28-year-old theater director Carey Perloff wrote to British playwright Harold Pinter. Her aim was to secure the rights to The Birthday Party for Classic Stage Company, the New York–based theater company at which she’d recently been appointed artistic director. But the odds were against her. Pinter was unhappy about several American productions of his plays that he regarded as overly psychological and insufficiently comedic. Perloff understood his concerns. “Americans tend to do dramaturgy that’s confessional,” she says. “If you tell the truth, you absolve yourself. The British don’t tend to tell people what they think. For them, language is a smokescreen. You keep a mask up so that nobody knows you’re vulnerable.” Undaunted, she kept writing to Pinter. “I know how to do this,” she said to him, “I know who these characters are.” The playwright granted CSC the rights to produce the play in 1988, then came to New York for its reprise the following year, launching a working relationship between the two theater-makers that would span three decades and more than half a dozen productions. As Perloff prepared to reenter the world of The Birthday Party—her final directing job as artistic director of A.C.T.—she talked with us about her long relationship with the playwright and the enduring resonance of his work.

Why do you keep coming back to Pinter?

There’s nothing better. [Laughs] He’s such a touchstone for me. I find his work hilarious. Meg asks Goldberg, “Do you like my dress, Mr. Goldberg?” and he says, “It’s out on its own.” Who writes like that? It’s so crazy and yet so real and brilliant. I’ve never read anything like it. I love the mystery of it, the muscle. Every line is active. You’re either predator or prey. When you direct this play, it’s your job to know in every moment: who’s on top? It’s like staging a boxing match.

What did you learn from working with Pinter?

Having him in the room was incalculable. When we were staging the party scene in The Birthday Party, something didn’t feel menacing enough. Pinter watched it and said,
“You know, Irishmen usually drink alone.” It was his way of telling us that if McCann is too convivial, we don’t get the terror of the man. McCann is a violent, complicated man who’s being set up to do something that he doesn’t understand and so he is highly stressed.

Pinter never explained anything in terms of what it meant. That question did not interest him. I asked him why Meg always asks Petey to read her the newspaper; what does it tell us about their marriage? He said, “I believe she’s forgotten how to read.” That is something an actor can play. He always said “I believe” because, as a writer, he trusted his characters to teach him what the play was about. He never started with abstract characters, themes, or didactic messages. He would listen to two people talking in a room and follow his nose. He was a genius of observation.

What was he like as a man?
Terrifying. I adored him. I mean, look at him. Very sexy, very Jewish, very tall (everybody seems tall to me). A big man with a baritone voice. From 10 a.m. on, he always had a glass of chardonnay in his hand. He was an amazing collaborator. It made him roar with laughter when actors forgot his lines, because he knew his stuff was hard to improvise.

He did have a temper. Theater photographer Martha Swope came into CSC and started arranging a photo shoot, saying, “Mr. Pinter, can you hold your script like this?”
And he shouted, “I wrote the bloody play, I’m not going to hold it!” And when the *New York Times* wanted to edit an interview with Pinter, because it was too political, he absolutely let them have it. But he was *lovely* to the actors!

I didn’t find him the least bit difficult. I found him incredibly rigorous, deeply curious about the world, very political. I never felt that there was this huge ego that had to be massaged. This was Harold Pinter, at the height of his powers, working at CSC, where we were paying actors $250 a week. And he took it incredibly seriously. He was fierce about the work.

**That was in 1988. What’s different about this play for an audience in 2018?**

We’ve gone through a lot more terror. We’ve been through 9/11. Remember that Pinter grew up during World War II. He knew that the knock at the door was not good news. The fact that he was a Jewish kid living in London during the Blitz at a time of enormous anti-Semitism is highly relevant to Pinter’s sense of the world. *The Birthday Party* is about the resistance to being boxed in—the visceral experience of being hunted—but it’s also about coercive political and religious groups. Those themes really announce themselves more now because of the world we live in.
Pinter always said that this was his first political play. Although his later career is known for his political opinions, it's all part of the same world view. The individual against the state. To capture that, I've cast Firdous Bamji as Stanley. He has that mix of complicated vulnerability and sexuality, and he's a man of color—he was born to play Stanley.

Can you tell us more about your cast?
Well, there's Marco Barricelli (McCann), with whom I've probably done more plays than with any other actor except Anthony Fusco. Marco came to A.C.T. in 1996 and played Mangiacavallo in *The Rose Tattoo*. He was exquisite. He told me I needed to start an acting company and it should start with him. And I did. He was my muse through Pirandello and Pinter and Mamet and O’Neill and Stoppard. Marco has an indelible sense of language, unbelievable power onstage, and the greatest voice in show business. It's one of those voices you could listen to read the phone book. He also has a prodigious intellect. He and I are just soulmates. I thought, “I can't leave A.C.T. without doing another play with him.” McCann is a great role for him.

What about Tony Award winner Judith Ivey?
In 1983 I directed a show at the Production Company in New York called *Second Lady* by M. Kilburg Reedy. Judy played the wife of a man running for vice president. She's giving a speech and as she falls apart, it becomes clear that not only is her marriage on the rocks but also that he is not to be trusted. Judy is one of our great American actresses. She has a sense of comedy that I'd never encountered before or since. She taught me so much when I was a young director. She would say, “You've just given me six ideas. I cannot play six ideas, so let me try one and hold the rest of that thought.” She was so generous to me and we stayed in touch. Knowing it's your last year is a great trump card to play. I said to Judy, “I think you must do Pinter. And this is the one.”

And Pinter creates such complex characters for actors to play.
Pinter wrote spectacular women. They're amazing, complicated, funny, strong. It's partly because he was in love with Vivien Merchant, who was a great actress, and whom he married. He revered Vivien and he wrote many roles for her: Rose in *The Room*, Lulu in *The Birthday Party*, Ruth in *The Homecoming*. She had enormous sexuality, wisdom, smarts, mystery. Pinter's second wife, the biographer and historian Antonia Fraser, is also an incredibly brilliant woman.

How do the female characters operate in *The Birthday Party*?
Meg is the heartbeat of the play. She's a poor British housewife, an innocent who believes in Stanley's goodness, but she also has some bizarre sexual relationship with him.
She knows he is psychologically fragile, but she’s there to protect him. So the end of the play is heartbreaking, because he is taken from her into this terrifying male world, represented by the unseen Monty and the big black car, and Meg is going to have to survive without him.

Lulu, by contrast, is a figure who comes out of British comedy: a sexy, working-class wit who is totally taken advantage of by Goldberg. She comes downstairs the next morning and throws a fit. It’s a really hard scene to play. “You made use of me by cunning when my defences were down.” She’s not stupid, Lulu. She’s ignorant—she’s a small-town girl who never left the seaside—but she looks evil in the face and she knows what she’s looking at. She says, “I’ve got a pretty shrewd idea.” And she escapes.

What are the challenges facing you and scenic designer Nina Ball?

The set should feel inescapable, claustrophobic, and not too capacious. It’s a challenge in The Geary Theater, which is enormous, to make something enclosed. Nina’s an amazing designer. Her set looks ordinary, but it’s also just skewed and weird enough that you think, “Nothing good is going to come from this.” It was Nina’s thought to build this sand world around the seaside boardinghouse.

But the staircase was our invention at CSC. The first time I did this play was on a thrust stage [a stage that stretches out into the auditorium] and we had a staircase. Pinter had never seen this play with a staircase because he’d always done it in a proscenium theater, where the staircase would have been just offstage, so you could never see the ascent. He loved having the staircase onstage. He even added a line for it, when Goldberg says: “What a lovely flight of stairs.”

How does the production design square with the dramaturgy?

What I said to the designers is that Pinter had an incredibly complex theatrical imagination. He started a play with two people in a room, and he would wait to see what they said. It doesn’t sound theatrical, it sounds boring. But he had a precise sense of action and menace, sexuality and surprise. Nobody ever says anything that isn’t targeted. So when Goldberg threatens Stanley and says sit down and Stanley won’t sit down and then Goldberg stands up, that is a change of landscape as enormous as a bomb going off. The stage directions and the physical relationship of characters to each other is potent.

Having said that, it is not realism. If you do Pinter with a realistic room filled with tchotchkes, that is also a trap. The box of cornflakes coming through the hatch has to pop. It’s so symbolic and so important. If there are too many other things drawing your eye, you’ve lost that. The set needs to be both real and minimal.
While Pinter’s world has been a constant in your career, some of the Geary audience will be encountering him for the first time. Why is Pinter one of the great playwrights?

He brought a liveness and muscle to drama that had been very conversational. If you look at who had come before him—Noël Coward, J. B. Priestley, Terence Rattigan—they’re quite different. Pinter’s plays are like athletic events. All about competition. The drama is very sexual and very active. It’s about moment-to-moment experiences of people caught in a room, trying to either protect or defend themselves.

For Pinter, there are two kinds of language: language that is predatory and language that masks the terror of silence. Silence is what Pinter’s characters are most frightened of—that vulnerable place where people really live. So they talk around that in order to protect themselves. In Pinter’s work, you have to look at where people are vulnerable and where they attack.

Pinter has been depicted as a mysterious figure; he inspired the adjective “Pinteresque.” How accurate is that image?

He took reality as he experienced it and distilled it to reveal the absurdity and terror of human life. His biographer Michael Billington remembered an epithet about Pinter that described him as a mix of Agatha Christie and Franz Kafka. His work is not mysterious in the sense that you can’t follow it but in the way that people really are. You start to think, “Why is that person sitting alone in the corner drinking? Where is that flirtation going to lead? What is Stanley’s secret?” We never find out, but it’s not because the playwright is manipulative. It’s because human beings are infinitely mysterious and they only reveal little bits of themselves along the way.

That’s the respect that Pinter has for his characters. He doesn’t pretend to know their entire biographies. He would talk about the impossibility of verifying the past. If I described what happened and you described it, there will necessarily be two very different versions. That subjectivity is an immensely rich vein for drama. There isn’t a single truth. There is the truth we accept at that moment to survive.

Your cast is complete, your set is nearly finished. As you embark on the production, what are you most looking forward to?

To be in the room; it’s absolutely alive. You can’t analyze it, you have to do it. You have to be incredibly bold. It’s funny and rigorous and uncompromising and delicious. It’s just pure theater. Everything was theatrical for Pinter. He was a real actor. Every show I direct, I think about him—what would Harold have done?
Weaponized Words
How Pinter’s Questions Drive Drama

By Taylor Steinbeck

After ten years as a repertory actor, playwright Harold Pinter knew a thing or two about the use of the question as a dramatic device. Performing in murder mysteries such as Agatha Christie’s *Ten Little Indians* (1954), he saw how questions could help piece together the plot, unfurling a mystery for an audience. In Pinter’s own work, however, questions serve a different purpose: to drive drama. From the very first scene of *The Birthday Party*, he uses questions—689 of them—to control the tone of the play. At first, the questions amuse us, but soon we learn of their threat. In the play’s climactic interrogation scene, Goldberg and McCann assault Stanley not with weapons but with words. “Questions are part of the interrogation system of the play,” says director Carey Perloff. “Any question, when asked directly, can be terrifying to answer. Pinter knew that.” In *The Birthday Party*, Pinter uses questions to generate suspense, divert with comedy, and incite conflict, showing us that language can cut as deep as any knife.

Questions That Reveal

Pinter initially sets a comedic mood for the play by peppering its opening scene with the questions of a humdrum morning routine. Meg, the landlady of the seaside boardinghouse, asks her husband, Petey, about the newspaper he’s reading (“What does it say?”), the cornflakes he’s eating (“Are they nice?”), and whether or not their sole tenant is awake (“Is Stanley up yet?”). The back-and-forth is ordinary, familiar, and sweetly amusing. Pinter uses these trivial queries to lead his audience into hearing questions as an everyday form of call-and-response, rather than a potential tool for interrogation. Meg’s queries neither demand answers, nor threaten. They’re simply used to fill silence.

In Act Three, Pinter returns to these benign questions from Act One, but gives them a newfound sense of terror. When Meg asks Petey the familiar question, “Is Stanley up yet?”—she is unaware that the circumstances are totally changed. Stanley has been tortured and taken away. “The question that had once seemed anodyne is suddenly
totally loaded,” says Perloff. This repetition makes us question what we’ve seen: was the first scene as safe as we thought? This question is not answered—it just triggers more questions.

Questions That Control

Language, as it’s exercised in *The Birthday Party*, is also a means of attaining power. As soon as Goldberg and McCann arrive at the house, they use their words to establish a power dynamic in their favor, charming Petey and Meg. When Stanley senses this danger, he attempts to remove himself, but McCann backs him into a corner with a series of questions: “Where are you going?” “Why don’t you stay here?” As Pinter said in a 1995 speech, his characters use words not just as a means of expression, but “as weapons to undermine or to terrorize.”

No scene in *The Birthday Party* demonstrates this linguistic violence more effectively than the interrogation sequence. In a series of 74 quick-fire questions, Goldberg and McCann verbally assault Stanley, accusing him of everything from betraying the “organization” to defiling his mother to picking his nose. It’s the scope and rhythm of these questions that makes this cross-examination so successful. Perloff recalls that, in rehearsals for her 1989 Classic Stage Company production of *The Birthday Party*, Pinter said, “In any interrogation, if a person is accused of enough things, one of them will turn out to be true.”

If words in Pinter’s world are weapons, then Stanley is quickly stripped of any defense as the questions become more urgent and incriminating.

**Goldberg:** What have you done with your wife?

**McCann:** He’s killed his wife!

**Goldberg:** Why did you kill your wife?

**Stanley:** What wife?

By the time the interrogation spirals into absurdity, Stanley has been rendered tongue-tied.

**Goldberg:** Speak up, Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?

**Stanley:** He wanted to—he wanted to—he wanted to . . .

**McCann:** He doesn’t know!

Shooting off questions like bullets, Goldberg and McCann penetrate Stanley’s mind, leaving him deeply disturbed. Once Goldberg declares Stanley “dead,” he is unable to form words at all. “Stanley is pushed, by these words, to the point where he can no longer retort,” argues scholar Phoebe Wray in her article “Pinter’s Dialogue.” Stanley cannot formulate language of any kind for the rest of the play. Goldberg and McCann’s questions have disarmed Stanley, shifting the power into their hands.
Not all scholars view Stanley’s defeat in the interrogation scene as complete. While he cannot form words after this interrogation, Stanley finds a means of defying Goldberg and McCann in a different way. “Even when he can’t formulate words he doesn’t stay silent,” says A.C.T. Dramaturg Michael Paller. “He makes sounds. He may well be resisting. It’s a choice for the actor and director to make.”

Questions That Evade

Just as some characters in *The Birthday Party* use language as ammunition, others use it as a shield. As Goldberg and McCann are leading Stanley out of the house, Petey stops them, demanding, “Where are you taking him?” He tells them that Stanley can stay with him, that he can take care of him. When Petey continues to press by saying, “Leave him alone!” Goldberg pauses, turns to him, and asks, “Why don’t you come with us, Mr. Boles?” Goldberg’s question elevates him from a defensive position to an offensive one. These eight simple words help him regain the upper hand; Petey can see that if he does go with them, he’ll end up like Stanley—at the mercy of forces larger than himself.
Goldberg adopts a similar tactic when Lulu confronts him, claiming that he is mistreating her after their night together.

LULU: You used me for a night. A passing fancy.

GOLDBERG: Who used who?

LULU: You made use of me by cunning when my defenses were down.

GOLDBERG: Who took them down?

Goldberg’s use of questioning in this scene takes on a sinister quality—his clever command of language not only enables him to avoid blame, but also to transfer the blame onto his accuser. This technique can be seen as a form of manipulation known in psychology as gaslighting. Dr. Robin Stern defines gaslighting as “the systematic attempt by one person to erode another's reality, by telling them that what they are experiencing isn’t so—and, the gradual giving up on the part of the other person.” Lulu is caught in Goldberg’s trap; she is suddenly on the defensive. But, like Stanley, Lulu finds a way to turn the tables. Despite being outwitted by Goldberg, she is undaunted by his mind games and sees his ruse for what it is. She leaves saying, “I've got a pretty shrewd idea.”

Questions That Surprise

There are moments in *The Birthday Party* when it’s uncertain whether we should be laughing or terrified. In one of the play’s most menacing scenes, the tension is shattered by one unexpected question. After accusing Stanley of incest and murder, Goldberg demands, “Why did the chicken cross the road?” To Goldberg, this question is no joke; its delivery is tonally no less serious or severe than his previous questions. But to the audience, this question is the set-up to a gag we all know, and the juxtaposition of the joke with its context—an interrogation—just makes it funnier. The function of this joke, however, is not funny at all—it’s being used as a torture device. We're in on it, and yet we don't truly know what's going on and what our response should be.

Questions Answered?

The 689 questions of *The Birthday Party* are hostile devices that can detonate at any moment, surprising both the characters and audience. These questions are not what they seem on the surface—context is everything. During the interrogation, when Stanley is forced to answer the unsolvable problem, “Chicken? Egg? Which came first?” he lets out a scream. Set in the midst of an aggressive interrogation, this popular philosophical dilemma flips from puzzling to terrifying. Pinter’s loaded language sneaks up on us. Even questions that are familiar—when weaponized by context—have the capacity to
shock the audience. The language lures us into the drama. “This is why communication is so dangerous,” says Perloff. “We are all guilty. We are all hiding. We are all terrified. Just by virtue of living in the world.” Through The Birthday Party’s threatening, shocking, elusive questions, Pinter shines an incriminating flashlight not only on his characters, but also on us.

Visceral Music
Pinter from the Actor’s Perspective

By Elspeth Sweatman

Staccato. Threat-filled. Intelligent. Universal. These are just a few of the words that actors Marco Barricelli, Graham Beckel, Anthony Fusco, and Melissa Smith use to describe Harold Pinter’s work. These four veterans of the Geary stage have been a part of A.C.T.’s most recent Pinter productions: *Old Times* (1998), *Celebration* and *The Room* (2001), and *The Homecoming* (2011). Before rehearsals for *The Birthday Party* began, we sat down to get an inside perspective on their impressions of and approaches to the playwright’s unique aesthetic. We started by asking what first comes to mind when they think of Pinter’s plays.

Marco Barricelli: His writing is very self-assured. The remarkable thing to me is that he seemed to hatch that way. With other playwrights, you look back at the beginning of their careers and you can see that there’s talent there, but they need to develop it, mature it, hone it. There’s a gradual rise to writing incredible work. With Pinter, he was born fully formed. If you took *The Room* [1957] and *Celebration* [1999] and told someone who didn’t know Pinter that he wrote one at the beginning of his career and one at the end, she wouldn’t know the difference from the writing.

Melissa Smith: It’s amazing the way his dialogue falls out. It seems like a series of non sequiturs, but the most innocuous line may be a jibe, a jab. Pinter’s interested in tension, and in sustaining tension and the possibilities inherent in it. What might happen? What might have happened? He’s also interested in contradictions—comedy and terror right next to each other, or intimacy and violence woven together. Those juxtapositions are exciting to watch and exciting to play. His plays keep you on your toes.

Graham Beckel: There’s so much threat inside a Pinter play, because the language is so sparse and so pointed. It’s fraught with conflict, jealousy, anger—a lot of stuff going on under the surface. And you’re not quite sure what the hell is on anybody’s mind. The characters are all using the words to deflect or get closer in some way that’s probably not pleasant.

MS: There are a lot of power plays in Pinter—unstated but felt liaisons, who’s in charge, who’s on top. The female characters are a part of that. They aren’t pawns; they’re players. Pinter creates women who transgress. They’re transgressors. They’re self-possessed. They cut their own path and do what they want. They are enigmas in some way but are also very powerful. In *The Homecoming*, Ruth is incredibly powerful.

Anthony Fusco: Working on a Pinter play, you feel in the grip of a very strong-willed intelligence, a power and mastery of the writing. It’s like there’s a lot of stuff being forced through a very narrow pipe. [Laughs] But it forces you as an actor to be extremely economical and specific with all of your actions. It demands everything an actor has to give.

MS: A Pinter actor needs to have a lot of juice. I think about actors like you, Graham, who have a lot of animal energy onstage and a kind of electricity. And like you, Marco and Anthony, who are so charismatic. Acting in Pinter, you have to be able to be truthful, but you have to dare. You have to have edge, an energy that’s just contained.

GB: What makes Pinter alive is all the unspoken relationships between the characters. And whatever is going on must be allowed to go on. You have to have the confidence as an actor that whatever you’re exchanging underneath—the sensuality, the threat—will be captivating for the audience.
All that contained energy, threat, and subtext simmering underneath such economical dialogue gives Pinter’s work a unique rhythm. It strikes me that Pinter is like a master composer, deftly using all these theatrical elements to create plays that feel alive.

MB: Yes, the script of a Pinter play is like sheet music. There are dashes, ellipses, pauses, and silences. If you follow these notations in the script, then you can play it. In my experience with Pinter, I’ve found that the way to rehearse it is to honor those notations, even if you’re not sure yet what they mean. And by the simple fact of repeating those rhythms and silences, you will see what the moment is about.

MS: You have to find what intentions are at work in a specific moment that cause silence to spring up between two people. How have they interacted so that a silence is the natural thing to happen there?

AF: You’re always trying to do something to the other person in the pause, or something is being done to you. They’re very active, front foot, leaning forward. In the pauses in *The Homecoming*, I remember feeling, “Oh god, what’s going to happen now? I might put my foot wrong and step on a landmine.”

GB: The pauses can also be a beautiful opportunity to bring the audience in. What I love about them is that they suspend the action in a way that is mysterious and
suspenseful and has the audience leaning in, asking, “Now where are we going?” You can literally feel the audience in those pauses, supporting you, energizing the next moment.

AF: The crucial thing is to absolutely not have any pauses where he doesn't specify one, because then you really screw up the rhythm.

MS: If there’s a silence in the middle of the page, you’re probably making a mistake to take pauses anywhere before then. It’s meant to go Bam. Bam. Bam. Bam. Silence.

AF: With Pinter, as with Shakespeare, if you get the rhythm of the thing right, suddenly the emotional and intellectual life of the play makes sense.

MB: You have to play the moment purely for what it is—What do I need? What is getting in the way of my need? What is my strategy to get around it?—and not spell it out for the audience. It’s essential that the actors and the director resist the impulse to explain it. I want them to lean into the material and figure out for themselves what is going on.

AF: With Pinter’s plays, it isn’t necessary that they be about anything. As an actor, you don’t have to come to it thinking, “I’m going to figure out the message of this play, tie it all up in a nice neat package, and deliver it to the audience so that they understand every little thing.” That’s not your job. Your job as an actor is to fulfill your character’s little part of the whole as best you can and trust that the many meanings inherent in the play are inherent in it.

MB: Pinter’s plays are great because they’re universal.

MS: He’s getting at human truths that we don’t like to talk about or admit to: power struggles, domination, sexual attraction, possession, betrayal, survival—our animal drives. And he does it through the compressed language of drama. That heightens it, makes it larger than life.

MB: Part of the joy of Pinter’s work is that you don’t get to have it spelled out. And isn’t it cool to be presented with all the questions and not have any of the answers, to let the answers come to you where they will?

AF: People sometimes come to Pinter thinking, “This is going to be really mysterious and I won’t understand it” or “This is going to be some weird puzzle.” Just trust your experience. Pinter didn’t write plays to be about anything other than the experience of them.
MB: He’s not interested in explaining himself in his plays. And the man was that way too. I once had dinner with him, his wife Lady Antonia Fraser, and Tom Stoppard in London. He leaned into me at one point in the dinner and said, “I’ve written a poem. Would you like to hear it?” Of course I said yes. He stared at me for a few seconds—seemed like an eternity—and then said, “And it goes on. And it goes on, and on it goes . . . And it goes on, and on, and on; and on it goes . . . And it goes on, and on . . .” This was extended for some time and I was unsure what to think. Is this a joke? Is this serious? Finally, Lady Antonia piped in and said, “Oh Harold, I thought you were talking about our marriage.” And everybody laughed. That moment of not being quite sure of what the hell is going on, but at the same time being totally fascinated, is something that is essential in Pinter’s work.

**SOURCES** Marco Barricelli (actor), in conversation with Elspeth Sweatman, October 13, 2017; Graham Beckel (actor), in conversation with Simon Hodgson, October 12, 2017; Anthony Fusco (actor), in conversation with Elspeth Sweatman, October 5, 2017; Melissa Smith (actor), in conversation with Elspeth Sweatman and Simon Hodgson, October 10, 2017
The Bomb in the Garden and the Knock at the Door
How Power Works in *The Birthday Party*

*By Michael Paller*

In Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*, two men called Goldberg and McCann have come to an English seaside boardinghouse in search of a third man, named Stanley. Who they are, whom or what they represent, and why they’ve come for Stanley (and, for that matter, who Stanley is and what he may have done to provoke this visit) are mysteries. Into this expositional vacuum rush uncertainty and unease. What will Goldberg and McCann do to Stanley when the time is right? When that moment arrives in Act Two, they subject him to a fierce and terrifying interrogation, in the middle of which is this exchange:

**Goldberg:** Is the number 846 possible or necessary?

**Stanley:** Neither.

**Goldberg:** Wrong! Is the number 846 possible or necessary?

**Stanley:** Both.

**Goldberg:** Wrong. It’s necessary but not possible.

**Stanley:** Both.

**Goldberg:** Wrong! Why do you think the number is necessarily possible?

**Stanley:** Must be.

**Goldberg:** Wrong! It’s only necessarily necessary!

What’s the meaning of this? Is it code? What about the other seeming non sequiturs that comprise the cross-examination, including this bewildering line of inquiry:

**McCann:** What about the Albigensenist Heresy?

**Goldberg:** Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?

**McCann:** What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?

The answer lies in how Pinter’s characters get and deploy power, a commodity in his plays that is worth more than almost any other. It lies, too, in the reasons why power mattered so much to him in the first place.
A Dangerous World

Pinter was very young when he learned how dangerous the world can be when those with power attempt to bend the powerless to their will. He was born in 1930 to a Jewish family living in London’s East End; in 1939, at the beginning of World War II, he and 1,500,000 other British children were evacuated from the cities to the countryside, where they would be safe from German bombers. On the Cornish coast he felt isolated from the surroundings and people he knew. “There was no fixed sense of being . . . at all,” he said. His disoriented seaside life lasted a year, after which he returned to London in time for the worst of the Blitz. When the garden of the family home was struck by an incendiary bomb and burned to a cinder, Pinter was evacuated again.

Before and even after the war he saw members of the homegrown British Union of Fascists, militaristic and anti-Semitic believers in authoritarian rule, parade through the heavily Jewish East End. The brigades of black-shirted men were a palpable reminder that the nighttime knock on the door could come to England as well as to mainland Europe, and with the same deadly result. For Pinter and his Jewish friends, this display of power was meant as a none-too-subtle threat.

The “Blackshirts” were an ugly minority in Britain, but Pinter ran up against the full power of the state in 1948 when he refused to register for national service (the British equivalent of the draft in America). The war was just over; revelations about the Nazi death camps were still new and shocking; the Soviets had seized Eastern Europe as far as Berlin, and the Allies, led by the United States, were airdropping supplies to keep the western half of the city from starvation. Obligated by world affairs, patriotism, and the
pressure to conform, Pinter’s closest friends obeyed the law and signed up. But Pinter wouldn’t conform and refused to serve. He spent a night in jail and only his father’s willingness to pay the fines, and a change in the way that conscientious objectors were treated, kept him from a lengthy prison sentence. Before he was 20, the ways in which the powerful pressured the powerless had been indelibly implanted in his consciousness and imagination.

Language as Power

When we think of how power is manifested, we’re likely to think of physical violence: the bomb in the garden, the knock at the door, the punch to the solar plexus. Power in Pinter’s plays, however, is more often psychological, and words are the weapons. As theater critic Michael Billington wrote in his excellent biography *Harold Pinter*, “Any conversation between two people conceals a tactical battle for advantage.”

In daily life we use words to refer to the things and concepts that they represent. It’s their meanings that matter. All of the sentences in this article so far (except Pinter’s) are examples of this. So is the statement “I’d like a glass of the red” to the bartender in the lounge before the show. You’re asking for some red wine, the bartender knows what you’re referring to, he pours you a glass. This, however, is only one way of using words. Pinter very often uses words not to relay or discover information but (as Austin E. Quigley describes in *The Pinter Problem*) to define a relationship in terms of power.
A character makes a statement or asks a question and, regardless of the sentence’s literal meaning, the listener understands that he’s being asked to accept lower status in a struggle for power.

When Goldberg asks Stanley, “Is the number 846 possible or necessary?” he isn’t interested in a discussion of modal logic, any more than he suspects that his would-be victim knows who watered down the wicket overnight during a notorious 1955 cricket match. He’s not asking for information. He means, over the course of this frightening interrogation, to dominate, confuse, and terrorize Stanley into submission.

**Resistance**

“Power” in and of itself isn’t a theme. “Power must be resisted” is. The character who is asked to surrender power may choose to resist instead. Stanley resists with words of his own, and when they fail him, one can argue that he still tries to exert his will through sounds. He resists Goldberg and McCann all the way from the interrogation until, arguably, the moment when Petey, Meg’s easygoing husband, urges him, “Stan, don’t let them tell you what to do!”—a line that Pinter said was possibly the most important he ever wrote.

The one thing a Pinter character must never do when confronting power is admit fear or confess vulnerability. When Meg tells Stanley that two gentlemen arrived the night before, looking for a place to stay, we can imagine the hairs on the back of his neck standing at attention. Rather than reveal the true state of his feelings, he boasts about an international concert tour that he’s been invited to undertake (which perhaps he’s making up on the spot). Then he turns the tables on Meg and threatens her with unnamed persons who are approaching in a van and are bringing with them . . . a wheelbarrow. This may be one of those moments that Pinter had in mind when he said, “I find myself laughing at some particular point which has suddenly struck me as being funny . . . more often than not the speech only seems to be funny—the man in question is actually fighting a battle for his life.”

Power is often a slippery thing: whoever has it one moment may be without it the next, and the battle must be played out to the end. No one in a Pinter play succumbs to power until the curtain falls, and even then, there may be no clear-cut victor. This is certainly true in *The Birthday Party*. Goldberg and McCann wield power inside the boarding house, but may very well have none outside it. Although he participates in the terrorizing of Stanley, McCann frets throughout the play, perhaps because he has no idea of why he’s doing the unsavory job he’s been ordered to do. Even Goldberg, with his sleek and confident exterior, reveals in a chilling moment the emptiness at his core. Neither exits the play unscathed by an unseen power, and their fate at the hands of the enigmatic Monty is as unknown as Stanley’s. They too may discover the need to resist.

A Birthday Party Glossary

Abdulla is a brand of cigarettes created by Abdulla & Company, Ltd. during the twentieth century. The company specialized in Egyptian and Turkish blends. Abdulla became part of Philip Morris International in 1968.

The Albigensenist Heresy was a medieval religious movement named after the town in southern France, Albi, where it flourished. The group behind this movement, the Cathars, believed that everything was either good (made of the spirit) or evil (made of matter). They saw life as a battle between these two forces. In 1209 CE, the French government and the Catholic Church launched a bloody crusade against the heretical Cathars that resulted in the deaths of thousands and laid the foundation for the Catholic Inquisition in France.

Anemic, rheumatic, myopic, and epileptic are all adjectives that describe specific medical conditions. Anemic means that a person’s red blood cell levels are low, causing tiredness, dizziness, and shortness of breath. Rheumatic refers to inflammation and pain in the joints. Myopic means being nearsighted. Epileptic refers to epilepsy, a neurological condition that causes seizures and loss of consciousness.

Arsenic is a chemical element used in batteries and preservative compounds. It is also known for its toxic properties; arsenic poisoning leads to heart disease and cancer.

A “little Austin” refers to the Sprite, a small sports car sold by British manufacturer Austin-Healey between 1958 and 1971.

Basingstoke is a town in southern England. Berlin is the capital city of Germany. Stanley lists it as the first stop in a piano-playing job he is considering. Other cities he mentions are Athens (capital of Greece), Constantinople (now known as Istanbul, a major city in Turkey), Zagreb (capital of Croatia), and Vladivostok (a port city in Russia). These are in stark contrast to where Stanley says he has previously performed, in Lower Edmonton (an unglamorous area of northeast London).

“A Black and Tan fact” refers to the British troops sent to quell the Irish resistance in the Irish War of Independence in the 1920s. Their improvised uniforms were black and tan (hence the name) and they were notorious for attacking civilians. When McCann says this phrase, he is comparing Stanley’s actions—the “dirty game” he is playing—to those of these infamous troops.
Blind man’s buff (also known as blind man’s bluff) is a game in which one person is blindfolded and must catch the other players.

Bonhomie means good-natured friendliness.

Boots Library was a circulating library run from 1899 to 1966 by Boots the Chemist Ltd.—the largest pharmacy and healthcare company in the UK.

Brighton, Rottingdean, and Canvey Island are all towns on the southeast coast of England. Brighton and Rottingdean are next to each other, with Canvey Island located further north where the Thames River meets the English Channel. All three were popular seaside resorts during the early twentieth century.

Carrickmacross, Drogheda, Roscrea, and Tullamore are all towns in Ireland that Pinter visited while touring as part of Anew McMaster’s repertory company. Carrickmacross is in northwest Ireland and is known for its lace. Drogheda is famous for a seventeenth-century siege, after which many of the town’s defenders and civilians were massacred by English soldiers under the command of Oliver Cromwell. Roscrea is located in central Ireland. Mother Nolan’s is the name of a pub in this town that Pinter visited. Tullamore is famous for its whiskey distillery, founded in 1829.

“Come Back, Paddy Reilly” is a nineteenth-century Irish folk song by Percy French (1854–1920). Its speaker implores Paddy Reilly, an Irishman who has emigrated in search of work, to return to Ireland.
**British Slang in *The Birthday Party***

The following are all slang words and phrases used in 1950s Britain. Some are still used today.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>British Slang</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A boghouse</td>
<td>an outhouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A boot</td>
<td>the trunk of a car</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coppers</td>
<td>coins, small change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Driving that old lady off her conk</td>
<td>driving that old lady crazy (conk means “head”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting on everybody’s wick</td>
<td>irritating everyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the pudding club</td>
<td>pregnant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride and joy</td>
<td>rhyming slang for “boy”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round the bend</td>
<td>crazy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scuttle a liner</td>
<td>sink a ship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone’s leading you up the garden path</td>
<td>someone’s trying to trick you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone’s taking the Michael</td>
<td>someone’s making fun of you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take liberties</td>
<td>not showing enough respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ta-ta</td>
<td>goodbye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You’re on the wrong horse</td>
<td>you’ve got the wrong idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You’re starting to get on my breasts</td>
<td>you’re starting to annoy me</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A constitutional often refers to a walk or other form of exercise taken for the good of one's health. It can also refer to using the restroom.

A deck-chair attendant is someone who watches over the deck chairs on a beach, ensures that they are clean, and collects money from people who hire the chairs.

Deportment means behavior and manners, particularly relating to the way people carry themselves.

The dog stadium refers to a greyhound racing venue. There were 33 stadiums in London during the 1950s, the most popular being White City in west London. Although greyhound racing declined in popularity during the 1960s, there are still 20 stadiums across Britain and “going to the dogs” remains a working-class pastime.

Draught Guinness is a Guinness (an Irish stout beer) that is poured from a keg rather than from a can or bottle. Named after the Irish company’s founder, Arthur Guinness, the beer is known for its distinctive black color and thick head (layer of foam on top).

Ethical Hall, Bayswater was a church established in the 1890s that avoided overt religious teachings, focusing instead on the principles of morality and goodness. Its services consisted of ethical songs and lectures from various ministers. This church in Bayswater, an area of central London, operated until 1953.

Fried bread is bread that has been fried in oil, butter, or lard. Inexpensive and high in calories, it is part of a traditional English breakfast (also known as a full English breakfast): eggs, tomatoes, mushrooms, beans, bacon, sausage, and black pudding.

Fruit salts are a fizzy compound used for medical purposes and combined with fruit syrups to make drinks. During the early twentieth century, fruit salts were used to treat a variety of ailments, from indigestion to headaches and acne. Today, they are mostly used in the creation of antacids to aid digestion. Eno’s and Andrew’s were the most popular brands of fruit salts during the mid-twentieth century.

Fuller’s was a chain of British teashops in the twentieth century. They were considered to be elegant establishments (their sugar tongs featured little ribbons).

Gefilte fish is a traditional Jewish dish, consisting of poached fish (usually carp, whitefish, or pike). It is a dish that is often eaten on Shabbat (the Sabbath) and holidays such as Passover.

Gesundheit is a German word that means “good health.” Originally, it was a word that was used as part of a toast, to wish everyone good health. Today, it is more commonly heard after someone has sneezed.

A gladiola is a flower in the iris family with sword-shaped leaves. Goldberg compliments Meg’s party dress by comparing it to this flower.

“Glorio, Glorio, to the bold Fenian men” is the refrain of Irish rebel song “Down by the Glenside (Bold Fenian Men)” by Peadar Kearney (1883–1942). Fenian refers to an Irish nationalist during the
Judas Iscariot is a name synonymous with betrayal and evil. One of Jesus’s disciples in the Bible, Iscariot betrayed him, bringing about the series of events that led to Jesus’s crucifixion.

King’s Cross is one of the major railroad stations in central London. The neighborhood around this station is also referred to as King’s Cross.

A leper is someone suffering from leprosy, a bacterial infection that attacks the nerves, skin, respiratory system, and eyes. Because it was believed to be highly contagious, people with this disease were frequently shunned by society. “Leper” has now become a more general term for someone that people avoid.

“The list” that Meg refers to may be a list of boardinghouses in the area.

1800s. Due to tensions between the British and the Irish, this term is sometimes used as an insult.

The high street is the main street in a British town.

A hot poultice is a soft mass (like porridge or bread) inside a cloth that is used to treat aches and inflammation, or to pack wounds. Other medical objects referenced during Goldberg and McCann’s Act Three exchange include a fingerstall—a piece of leather or latex that covers and protects the finger, used to limit the spread of infections and to protect delicate pieces of machinery from the dirt and oils of the skin—and a stomach pump, a procedure during which a tube is put down the throat to remove the contents of the stomach.
Lyon's Corner House, Marble Arch refers to a commercial establishment run by J. Lyons and Co. From 1909 to 1977, corner houses consisted of a food hall on the ground floor, with hairdressers, theater booking agencies, and other restaurants on the upper floors. They were considered to be a step above small, independent tea shops. Marble Arch was a memorial arch located at the entrance to Buckingham Palace until 1847 when it was moved to Hyde Park. It was moved again in the early 1960s to its current location on Oxford Street. The area around the arch is now referred to as Marble Arch.

Maidenhead is a town in southern England.

Mazel Tov is a Hebrew and Yiddish phrase meaning congratulations and good luck.

M.C.C. stands for the Marylebone Cricket Club, an elite London-based club for cricket, a popular British team sport. The club owns Lord's Cricket Ground (the sport’s most prestigious venue). During the twentieth century, this cricket club organized many world tours for the English cricket team (which was referred to as the MCC in non-international matches).

A mensch is a person of integrity. It stems from the German word mensch, meaning human being.

“The Mountains of Mourne” is an Irish song written by Percy French (1854–1920). The song’s speaker tells his sweetheart back in Ireland what he’s seen in nineteenth-century London, and
reveals that nothing can compare to the beauty of the Mourne Mountains in Northern Ireland.

A nightingale is a small bird indigenous to Europe and southwest Asia. It is known for its beautiful song, which the male birds sing to attract mates and to defend their territory.

Oliver Plunkett (1625–81) was a Roman Catholic archbishop in Ireland who was tried and executed as part of the Popish Plot, a fictitious conspiracy to assassinate England’s King Charles II. Plunkett was canonized in 1975.

Plaster of Paris is a soft, wet material made of the minerals gypsum or lime that is known for being quick-setting. It is used in medicine to set broken bones, and by artists to make sculptures or casts of objects.

Pontoon is a card game that is similar to blackjack.

“Pop Goes the Weasel” is an English nursery rhyme that became popular during the nineteenth century. Many jack-in-the-box toys play the melody of this nursery rhyme.

A prayer wheel is a rotating cylinder embossed with prayers. It is thought that spinning the wheel will have the same effect as speaking the prayer out loud. It is traditionally a Buddhist object, but can now be found across many religions.

“Put a shilling in the slot” is a phrase that refers to the electricity meters in many twentieth-century British homes. Residents would need to put coins into the meter to keep the electricity running. A shilling was a coin that was equal to 12 pence or cents. It was used until decimalization—currency based on one pound equaling one hundred pence—was introduced in 1971.

A rock cake is a small fruit cake with an uneven surface, traditionally served at teatime (3:30–5 p.m.) in Britain. These snacks were popular during the 1940s and 1950s—when food supplies were rationed—because they required fewer eggs and less sugar than other cakes.

The Rock of Cashel is a cathedral and stronghold in southern Ireland. It was the traditional seat of the kings of Munster (rulers of the province until the English invaded in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) and is also known as Cashel of the Kings or St. Patrick’s Rock.

Rollmop is a raw, pickled herring fillet that has been rolled around a savory filling. In this instance, the filling is pickled cucumber, a cucumber that has been fermented in vinegar or brine.

Schnorrer is a Yiddish word meaning freeloader, or someone who takes advantage of others.

Sellotape is the name of a British brand of tape. Although it is a brand name, it has become synonymous with tape itself, just like Scotch Tape has in the United States.

Shabbuss refers to the Jewish Sabbath, a day of rest that lasts from Friday evening to Saturday evening.

Simchah is a Hebrew word meaning joy and gladness.
“Somewhere over the rainbow. Where angels fear to tread” contains a reference to the song “Somewhere over the rainbow” from the film The Wizard of Oz (1939), as well as a reference to a line from English writer Alexander Pope’s An Essay on Criticism (1709).

Traitor to the cloth refers to someone who has betrayed their religion or another organization of which he or she is a part.

Tuppence is a variant of the word twopence, a British coin that is worth two pence or pennies.

“Watered the wicket in Melbourne” refers to an incident during the 1955 Ashes, a cricket match between England and Australia. It’s rumored that someone watered the grass field (the wicket) in order to gain an advantage—wet grass can reduce the bounce of the cricket ball, making it easier to hit. Pinter was an avid cricket fan, and references to the sport can often be found in his plays.

Unfrocked is an adjective that refers to a member of the clergy who has left the church, usually because of some disgraceful behavior.

An unlicensed premises refers to a commercial location such as a hotel or restaurant that does not have a permit to sell alcohol.
Questions to Consider

1. What strategies do Goldberg and McCann employ to interrogate Stanley?
2. Do the actions of the characters match their words? Do the characters say what they are thinking and feeling? If not, how do you understand what they are really thinking and feeling?
3. What impact does the set design—particularly the mound of sand—have on your experience of the play?
4. How does Pinter use language to create suspense, terror, and comedy?
5. What dramatic effect does the rhythm of Pinter’s language have?
6. Carey Perloff first directed *The Birthday Party* in 1988. This production will be different, she says, because we’ve lived through the terror of 9/11. How do the themes of surveillance and paranoia permeate this production?
7. Pinter was a deeply political person, a man who was interested in power and control. How are these ideas explored in *The Birthday Party*?
8. Throughout the play, we are presented with uncertainties—what has Stanley done? What is Goldberg’s real name? Who is Monty? What effect does this have on your understanding of the play?

For Further Information


