American Conservatory Theater

presents

Words on Plays

an educational guide to

The Room and Celebration

by Harold Pinter

directed by Carey Perloff

Geary Theater
September 13–October 14, 2001

Words on Plays prepared by
Elizabeth Brodersen, Publications Editor
Jessica Werner, Associate Publications Editor
Susan Maxwell, Literary and Publications Intern

This production is sponsored in part by

Corporate Sponsor  Lead Media Sponsor  Individual Sponsor
United Airlines  Classical KDFC 102.1  Sandra Lloyd

© 2001 American Conservatory Theatre Foundation, Inc.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

From the Director
  *By Carey Perloff*  
  1

Synopses of *The Room* and *Celebration*  
  3

Perloff on Pinter
  *by Susan Maxwell*  
  7

My Lunches with Harold
  *by Carey Perloff*  
  13

His Genius Is to Find the Drama between the Words
  *by Michael Billington*  
  17

Harold Pinter: A Brief Biography  
  20

A Pinter Chronology  
  21

Giving Us Pause
  *by Michael Feingold*  
  22

Pinterisms  
  24

Confessions of a Theorist
  *by Paul Walsh*  
  28

Memory in *The Room* and *Celebration*
  *by Susan Maxwell*  
  30

Communication in *The Room* and *Celebration*
  *by Susan Maxwell*  
  32

Questions to Consider  
  35

For More Information . . .  
  37
From the Director

by Carey Perloff

With the opening of A.C.T.’s 35th-anniversary season, we celebrate the extraordinary career of one of the 20th century’s greatest writers, Harold Pinter, by presenting the first American production of his new play, Celebration, in repertory with his very first play, The Room, written in 1957.

There is something breathtaking about visiting a writer’s work 44 years later, but in the case of The Room, there is also a true jolt of familiarity: the potent and distinctive Pinter voice, filled with mystery and menace, with buried longing and hilarious non sequiturs, seems to have sprung fully formed from the mind of the then-27-year old writer in the four days it took him to write the play. Pinter was an impoverished, out-of-work actor when he wrote The Room; his friend Henry Woolf encouraged him to write a play for a student drama competition in Bristol and, having nothing to lose, he did. It is a play steeped in the strange aftermath of World War II, set in a seedy London bed-sit with no central heating, inadequate light, and rashers of bacon on the stove. Pinter has said that his plays are always born from a single compelling image, and in this case the image was triggered by an encounter Pinter had at a party, during which he was taken upstairs into a room where a huge man was sitting silently at a table reading a comic while a small, birdlike man ministered to him, chattering incessantly as he sliced bread, poured tea and kept his silent companion satiated. That image became the image of Rose and Bert in The Room, of a woman desperate for intimacy in the haven of her room, terrified that a knock on the door could shatter all her illusions of security.

Pinter grew up as a Jewish boy in Hackney during the war, so it is not surprising that the terror of invasion and the longing for security in his own enclosed space was very real to him during those years. What is fascinating is that, 40 years later, those primal fears and desires are still at the forefront of Pinter’s work. Celebration, a savage farce set in a trendy contemporary restaurant, would at first glance seem light years away from The Room: it revolves around three brash, nouveau-riche couples drinking too much and skewering each other while toasting a wedding anniversary. But the currents that run beneath the two plays are remarkably similar: the longing for intimacy, the fear of being exposed, the distrust of language, the search for home in a hostile world, the sexual tension, the appetite for life. I screamed with laughter the first time I read Celebration, but I was also moved by the image of a group of people who have to pay for attention in a restaurant where the head waiter is obsessed with T. S. Eliot and terrified of being ejected from the “womb” of his employment: “To be brutally honest, I don’t think I’d recover if they did a thing like that. This place is like a womb to me. I prefer to stay in my womb. I strongly prefer that to being born.”

Celebration is Pinter at the top of his game: savage, muscular, precise, witty, and deeply human. He once said, “Writing for me is an act of freedom and celebration. Whatever I’m writing about, it’s a celebration. What you’re celebrating is the ability to write. There’s an excitement about it that certainly transcends anything you might have been doing before. It takes you way out into
another country.” And one can sense in Celebration the joy of a writer in the act of creation. I recently had lunch with Pinter in New York, and once again I was struck by the sheer vitality of his presence, by the potency of his love of language, by his wit and his relish for the theater. Perhaps this is why, as I thought about this season, my tenth at A.C.T., I was drawn to his work.

I have collaborated with Pinter in the past at crucial moments in my own theatrical life. In fact, I first sat in a rehearsal room with him 12 years ago, just after I had given birth to my daughter, Lexie. I was directing the American premiere of his Mountain Language, a play about a political prisoner who has never been allowed to see his own baby. The presence of my own tiny child sleeping in the dressing room added an eerie reality to the proceedings. Pinter never allows you to be sloppy. His work is about being alert to the wonder and terror of each moment of life. It is filled with detail, precision, clarity, and surprise. It is unapologetic and unsentimental. And hugely exhilarating. It is an honor to launch his new play here in San Francisco, and to begin what I hope will be a thrilling season with all of you. Welcome, and thank you for being here!
The Room

Characters

Rose Hudd  Bert’s wife
Bert Hudd  Rose’s husband, employed as a driver
Mr. Kidd  Rose and Bert’s landlord
Mr. & Mrs. Sands  A couple looking for a room in the house where Rose and Bert live
Riley  A blind, black man

Synopsis

A large house in London in the winter of 1957. Inside the drably furnished room of Bert and Rose, Bert sits reading at the table while Rose cooks for him. Rose prattles continuously, as if to make up for Bert’s silence. She comments on the cold, wondering who is living in the basement and how anyone could live down there where it is so damp. She seems to worry that the menacing world outside will invade the limited refuge of their room. Bert has been laid up for a bit but is now preparing to go out to do a job. He is a deliveryman who drives a van. Though Bert is a good driver, Rose frets about him driving on the icy roads. She stresses that she’s quite happy where she is, happy that nobody bothers them.

Mr. Kidd, the property manager and landlord of the building in which they live, knocks and enters the room. He says he is “looking at the pipes.” Rose and Mr. Kidd engage in a series of nervous miscommunications: Rose says she thought Mr. Kidd had a woman to help him, Mr. Kidd denies having a woman and swears that he remembers Rose’s rocking chair, that it was there in the room before the Hudds moved in. He says that this room, “the best room in the house,” used to be his bedroom. Rose asks how many floors there are in the house; Mr. Kidd replies he doesn’t bother to count them anymore. The house is full (“packed out”). Mr. Kidd reminisces about his dead sister, who used to take care of the house, but after he leaves Rose says she doesn’t believe he ever had a sister. Bert, who has said nothing, leaves for work.

Rose opens the door and finds Mr. and Mrs. Sands standing on the landing outside the room. The Sands explain they are looking for the landlord. Rose invites them in to warm up by the fire. Mrs. Sands eventually tells Rose that, in coming through the dark, damp basement looking for the landlord, they ran into a man who told them Room 7 is vacant. Rose is distressed, because Room 7 is her own very-much-occupied room. As the Sands leave to find the landlord, Rose insists that there are no vacant rooms in the house.

Mr. Kidd returns and Rose nervously begins to interrogate him about the room. Mr. Kidd, anxious himself, explains to Rose that a man has been waiting in the basement for days for Mr. Hudd to leave so he could see Rose alone. The man claims to know Rose. She furiously denies knowing the man, but eventually gives in to Mr. Kidd’s pleas that she see the man. A blind black man who claims his name is Riley enters the room and introduces himself. Rose pretends not to know him and is increasingly agitated and insulting with him, asserting that he is a beggar who has ruined her reputation with the landlord.
The man says he has come with a message from Rose’s father, who wants her to return home. He calls her “Sal” and she begs him not to call her that. The man called Riley asks Rose repeatedly to return home with him. Rose begins to soften. She touches the man’s eyes, head, and temples.

At this moment Bert returns. He announces he “got back all right” and describes his drive, in aggressive, sexualized terms, including running a car that got in his way off the road. He then sits down close to the man called Riley, regarding him for some moments. Suddenly Bert knocks over the chair in which the man is sitting. He screams, “Lice!” and kicks the man violently in the head. The man lies still. Rose clutches her eyes and cries out: “Can’t see. I can’t see. I can’t see.”

Celebration

Characters

Lambert  | a wealthy “strategy consultant,” Matt’s brother
Julie    | Lambert’s wife, Prue’s sister
Matt     | Lambert’s brother and business partner
Prue     | Matt’s wife, Julie’s sister
Russell  | a banker
Suki     | Russell’s wife, a schoolteacher and former secretary
Richard  | restaurant owner
Sonia    | maitresse d’hotel
The Waiter
Servers

Synopsis

Celebration takes place in a chic, expensive restaurant in London. Lambert and Julie are celebrating their wedding anniversary with another married couple, Prue and Matt, who were the maid of honor and best man at Lambert and Julie’s wedding. Matt is Lambert’s brother and business partner. Prue is Julie’s sister. Russell and Suki, a third couple, sit at a nearby table.

Table 1: The Waiter brings entrées to the table. Lambert can’t remember what he ordered and tries to take Julie’s duck. Prue tells him he ordered osso bucco, and a series of lewd puns ensues.

Table 2: Russell tries to assure Suki that his recent affair meant nothing to him: the other woman was “just a secretary.” Suki reminds Russell that she knows all about secretaries, telling him that she was once a secretary and has been “behind a few filing cabinets” herself.

Table 1: Matt and Lambert make crude jokes about Julie’s loyalty as a wife and call for more wine.
**Table 2:** Russell asks Suki whether she thinks he has “a nice character.” She tells him that, like herself, he has no character at all. He calls her a whore and she agrees that she is a “whore in the wind.”

**Table 1:** Lambert brags about how much money he made last year, what a classy restaurant they’re in, and how expensive the meal is. Prue and Julie complain about how possessive mothers-in-law are toward their sons, prompting the men to make jokes about men wanting to fuck their mothers. Julie surprises everyone when she says she was not impressed by the meal. Richard, the restaurant owner, comes over to see how everyone at the table is doing. Everyone (but Julie) tells him how much they enjoyed the dinner. Prue then insists on telling Richard that Julie was not impressed by the meal. Prue embroiders upon the situation by telling Richard that Julie said she could make a better sauce “if she pissed into it.” She launches into a strange nursery rhyme from their childhood about “Mummy beating the shit out of Daddy” while the two sisters lay in the nursery. Prue then decides that she wants to thank Richard “in a very personal way” for the meal, by kissing him on the lips. Julie agrees that she also wants to kiss Richard on the lips. Richard escapes, leaving the two unkissed.

**Table 2:** Sonia, the maître d’hotel, comes to the table. Russell asks about her upbringing and she says that she was born in Bethnel Green. When she leaves to place Russell’s order for bread-and-butter pudding, Russell tells Suki about his parents. The Waiter enters to interject with reminiscences about his grandfather’s association with an array of legendary writers from the early 20th century, ending with the assertion that his grandfather was James Joyce’s godmother.

**Table 1:** Lambert remembers falling in love once—“real fucking love”—but it wasn’t with Julie. Julie responds by describing to Prue the day Lambert fell in love with her on a bus.

**Table 2:** Richard comes to the table. Suki and Russell tell him how happy they are in his restaurant: the ambience calms Russell’s “psychopathic tendencies.” Richard reminisces about the village pub of his childhood, which he claims inspired the restaurant.

**Table 1:** Lambert proposes a toast to his wife on their anniversary. Julie wonders why their children aren’t around, since she spent so much time with them when they were young. Prue reminisces about her own children and how they loved her more than they did Matt. Matt asserts that children have no memory. Sonia comes to their table and Matt tells her that they are celebrating a wedding anniversary. Sonia observes that they get all kinds of people in this restaurant, even foreigners. One doesn’t have to speak English to enjoy good food. In this sense, good food is like sex. One doesn’t have to be English to enjoy sex, Sonia says. She then tells of a man from Morocco who was “very interested in sex.” When Julie asked what happened to the man, Sonia says that he died in another woman’s arms and begins to cry. After Sonia leaves, the Waiter enters and interjects with a story about his grandfather, Hollywood film stars, and the Irish Mafia.

Lambert notices Suki returning to the other table. He announces to his own table that he had sex with her when she was 18. He waves Suki over, and she and Russell squeeze into the group at Table 1. Introductions are made and career status exchanged: Matt and Lambert describe themselves enigmatically as “strategy consultants.” Matt observes that Russell is a banker. Richard and Sonia
come to the table with a magnum of champagne for the celebration. The waiter interjects, again, to describe his grandfather as a close friend of Mussolini and Churchill, and of an increasingly strange assemblage of key literary and cultural figures from the early 20th century. Lambert interrupts the Waiter’s interjection to declare the meal finished. He tips Richard extravagantly, dangles bills in front of Sonia’s cleavage, and trumps Russell by paying his and Suki’s bill.

Richard and Sonia wish everyone goodbye with choruses of “see you soon.” Civilities are exchanged and the diners drift off. The Waiter is left alone onstage. He remembers standing on the cliffs at the edge of the sea, looking through his grandfather’s telescope at approaching boats: “My grandfather introduced me to the mystery of life and I’m still in the middle of it. I can’t find the door to get out.” He concludes by expressing his desire to make one further interjection.
Perloff on Pinter
A.C.T. Launches Its 35th-Anniversary Season in San Francisco with the First American Production of Celebration and The Room

by Susan Maxwell

A.C.T. celebrates the opening of the company’s 35th anniversary in San Francisco—and Carey Perloff’s tenth season as artistic director—with a richly entertaining double bill of one-act plays by one of the world’s greatest living playwrights. Written 42 years apart, Harold Pinter’s first play, The Room, and his newest, Celebration, together explore the archetypally Pinteresque terrain of comedy, menace, and the struggle for safety in a hostile world.

An acute observer of life, language, and human relationships, Pinter writes with an economy of language and gesture that has made his work a genre unto itself. Master of the meaningful silence and the well-placed pause, Pinter remade the face of dramatic writing with the playful sexuality, enigmatic silences, and surrealistic settings of his early plays, including The Birthday Party (1957), The Caretaker (1960), and The Homecoming (1965), as well as The Collection (1962), The Lover (1963), and Old Times (1971).

Carey Perloff’s relationship with Pinter began in 1988, when she staged The Birthday Party for Classic Stage Company in New York. Pinter was so impressed by the production that he invited Perloff to direct the American premiere of Mountain Language (1988), and a creative conversation commenced that has included Perloff’s 1990 Mark Taper Forum production of The Collection and 1998 A.C.T. production of Old Times. The collaboration continues with Perloff directing—at Pinter’s invitation—the first American production of Celebration in combination with The Room, which appeared to rave reviews in Dublin and London under Pinter’s direction last year, and were briefly seen at Lincoln Center’s recent Pinter festival in New York. Pinter (accompanied by his wife, historian and novelist Lady Antonia Fraser) will visit San Francisco in October to see Perloff’s production and speak to A.C.T. audiences about his work.

The Room, written in 1957 when Pinter was just 26, tells the story of Rose, a working-class woman isolated within the one room she shares with her silent husband in a boardinghouse in postwar London. Rose’s precious privacy is successively threatened by the intrusion of her talkative landlord, a pair of married apartment hunters, and a blind black man who mysteriously asks her to come “home.” Witty, vicious, and considered Pinter’s funniest work to date, Celebration is by contrast set in a trendy, expensive restaurant where three married couples savagely joust with each other while pretending to toast each other’s health. The diners’ evening of hostile conviviality is hilariously invaded by an intrusive waiter who volunteers increasingly bizarre, name-dropping tales of a grandfather who seems to have known everyone who was anyone in the 20th century.

We spoke with Perloff as she prepared to begin rehearsals at A.C.T.
Q: Why did you select Pinter to open this anniversary season?
A: As we all sat down to begin creating this season’s repertory, I made a list of the artists who have played a significant role in A.C.T.’s history over the last 35 years, as well as the artists who have been most important to me personally. Pinter (and Stoppard) are at the top of that list. Pinter’s work represents so much that I love about the theater; in fact, it was encountering Pinter’s work that propelled me into the professional theater to begin with.

Because this is a celebration year for A.C.T., I thought it would be exciting to produce Pinter’s newest play, which he himself has paired with his very first. We’re not only celebrating A.C.T.’s 35th-anniversary season and my tenth season here; we’re celebrating the 40+-year career of one of the great writers of the 20th century. So this production is a salute to the act of imaginative writing, to a very particular kind of theater artist, and to a collaboration that has been very fruitful for me personally.

These plays also happen to have roles almost tailor-made for all four of our fabulous associate artists. All of the actors in this cast have a delicious sense of language and humor, and are fully capable of playing to the heightened place demanded by the unique poetry of Pinter’s writing.

Another reason I wanted to do Celebration is that San Francisco is the consummate restaurant town. Our set design [by Loy Arcenas, who has designed many productions for A.C.T., including Glengarry Glen Ross, Indian Ink, and The Invention of Love] in fact resulted from our wanderings through some of the city’s great restaurants: Masa’s, The Fifth Floor, Fleur de Lys. We’ve created a design that is a tribute to all of them. I told Pinter this production would be so much fun to create here, because the play will feel familiar to a Bay Area audience savvy about cuisine.

Could you touch on the relationship between the two plays?
It is often said that great writers write the same play from different perspectives, and that’s certainly true of Pinter. His characters’ class backgrounds have changed enormously from the down-and-out East Enders who inhabit The Room to the rich consumerist Londoners of Celebration. Yet all of Pinter’s plays explore a desperate desire for intimacy in a world that consistently feels threatening, mysterious, and unpredictable. In The Room, although there’s little evidence of warmth in her relationship with Bert, Rose is terrified that each knock on the door will bring a violation of the one small room that has become her haven, that she’ll be dragged into the terrors of the outside world. Celebration, too, is a play about the terrors of the real world. Celebration’s three couples, caught in loveless relationships, are desperate to find connection. Because they have enough money, they can purchase sanctuary and a kind of ersatz intimacy for a short period of time in an elegant restaurant, where they’re on a first-name basis with the maitre d’ and have the illusion of being in a private home, where all their wants are cared for. As soon as dinner’s over, however, they’re ejected back into a hostile society. So the plays resonate thematically, although their surface worlds are very different.

Why do you think Pinter so often sets his plays within these hostile and dangerous environments?
The desire of the individual voice to be heard, and the fear of aggression from the culture at large, is always a part of his work. I think that growing up
Jewish in London during the Blitz had to be one of the shaping factors of his consciousness, and that one shouldn’t underestimate the impact the Holocaust had on his work. There has been speculation by some critics that Rose is a Jewish woman hiding out in *The Room*, trying to “pass” by living with a non-Jewish man who brutalizes her but in some ways also protects her. Pinter is fundamentally concerned with the ways in which individuals rebel against the oppression of society, whether it’s an idiosyncratic aspect of personality or a political act against an oppressive government. I think there’s always been a thread of the individual rebel in Pinter.

**One of the things that makes Pinter’s work so powerful is that directly rebellious consciousness combined with a love of ambiguity.**

Pinter has always said that he doesn’t believe that a playwright necessarily knows more about his or her characters than the characters know themselves. He is a playwright of acute observation, not of heavy-handed symbolism or moralization. *The Room* was inspired by Pinter’s intense visual memory of a party where, while passing an open door, he looked in to see a huge man (Quentin Crisp, in fact!) being fed chips by a much smaller man. The large man never said anything; he just kept eating while the little man served him and talked continuously. Much later, when Pinter sat down to write, those two men became Rose and Bert.

Pinter’s characters are as complex as the human beings we meet and wonder about every day. In drama, we tend to simplify characters and their motivations so they can be safely labeled: this is “the battered wife,” this is “the aggressive man,” this is “the nymphomaniac.” As Pinter says, we want to put them on a shelf out of harm’s way. But he finds human experience much more richly ambiguous, because he’s interested in the unverifiable past, whether it’s the past of five hundred years or of five minutes ago. If you ask a group of people in a room to describe what happened five minutes ago, they’ll each tell a different tale, and that’s what he finds fascinating. So memory in Pinter’s plays becomes a weapon, an active tool in staking a claim to the present. His plays are so actable because they’re incredibly, vividly, moment to moment. And the ambiguity comes from the impossible challenge of attempting to understand human behavior.

**Could you talk a little bit about memory in *The Room*?**

We don’t understand or know the details of Rose’s past, what we know is that she’s somehow found a haven, that she’s a fearful, middle-aged woman who’s in danger of losing ground, who lives with a man who is brutal and aggressive and filled with appetite, who talks about his van in far more sexual terms than he ever talks about his wife. The reason the play is so compelling to watch is that one keeps asking the questions: Who is she? What is she doing here? Why is she so scared? In the climactic scene when Riley comes in and says, “Sal, come home,” you think, Who is “Sal”? Is that her real name? What does that mean? It’s been interpreted as being a diminutive of “Sarah” and a clue to Rose’s Judaism. In Europe during the war Jewish women had to put “Sarah” in their passports, while Jewish men had to put “Isaac” in their passports. But clearly she has fled home in some sense: she has either fled her first husband or her father or somebody and is living in a kind of state of imprisonment. She says that beautiful
“The day is a hump, I rarely go out.” And Riley comes to free her. So we can only imagine what her past has been.

*The Room* is certainly a postwar play. It’s a play about impoverishment: Rose can barely afford bacon, she can barely go out. This is London during rationing. She also has certain memories of what the house she’s living in was like before. Mr. Kidd has these bizarre memories of what the house was like before, of his sister who kept it beautiful before she died. What did she die of? You never are told. Does he really live there? Is he really the landlord? All of these questions are unanswered, which makes the play so funny and so disturbing. The ground keeps shifting in every scene.

**How do you go about directing a play in which the ground is continuously shifting?**

You have to make very strong choices. What you can’t do is muddy the waters by laying in biographical detail that isn’t in the text. Although it’s sometimes unnerving to an audience or to actors, you have to accept the fact that a Pinter character only begins to exist the moment he or she hits the stage. Just as, when a new person walks into your life, they only begin to exist for you at that moment. What they tell you about their past is only what they choose to tell you. And what you know of them is only what you can piece together from what they tell you, the way they behave, what they’re afraid of, and the way they respond to you. We try to piece together composites of people to “get to know” them, but in fact, if we were honest with ourselves, we’d have to admit that any human being who walks into our lives is unknowable. We create an inner narrative that changes depending on the outcome. If you ask a young actor about their past, they’ll figure out a narrative that leads them to the conclusion that they had to become an actor. There may be many other things that are simply forgotten or repressed or deliberately omitted until a different path is taken. That is a given in Pinter.

You also have to accept that the stakes are very high. There is nothing casual or low key in a Pinter play. It is a violent act to walk into a room, to knock on a door. That’s why the door in *The Room* has to be center stage, and when that door opens and Mr. and Mrs. Sands are standing there it has to be terrifying to Rose. It’s irrational perhaps, but terrifying. The way a child is terrified when their own territory is invaded.

So you make strong choices about what the characters want: Haven? Dominance? Power? Comfort? The things they want are in explosive conflict with the things desired by the other characters, because there is only one room. Only one person will get it. We don’t know what’s upstairs, we don’t know what’s downstairs. Why is that so frightening? Because if we knew there were five other empty rooms in the house, this particular room wouldn’t have so much currency. But because this room is a cozy and warm haven, it becomes the center of the drama, the territory to be fought over. The more Rose paints the basement as damp, the upstairs as threatening, the stairs as dark, the more this room becomes a war zone. You can’t muddy that down or make it unimportant; you have to actually play the present “I want this” as strongly as you can. The desires are enormous; therefore the actions have to be enormous: I want to colonize. I want to destroy you. I want to make love to you. There is no middle ground in Pinter. You’re either predator or prey. His is not a cozy worldview.

**How do you as a director help the cast gain access to that kind of economy and tension?**
You have to be religious about the language. Pinter is the absolute master of the menacing pause. Of the filled silence. When you first begin to work on a Pinter script, you won’t know why the silence is there. So you simply have to honor that silence and hold it until it begins to fill. It’s in those silences that you realize the depth of the characters’ loneliness, their need for love, their realization that their marriages are over. It takes weeks of rehearsals to fill those silences, but you have to honor the pauses, Pinter’s famous punctuation. Like Beckett, Pinter is a writer of enormous precision; most of his rewrites involve editing, stripping text away so that each moment has incredible resonance. So you have to listen to the soundscape of it very carefully.

And pay attention to the physical landscape. What Pinter has done in *Celebration* is almost Beckettian: there is almost no physical movement in the play; those characters are essentially trapped in their elegant banquettes. It looks very elegant and beautiful, but it’s another kind of imprisonment. The dynamics of six people trapped in that world are very interesting. So you also have to work very precisely. It can drive you mad, rehearsing these plays; the process takes incredible concentration. I remember when we were doing *The Birthday Party* with Peter Riegert, he would just lie down on the floor after three hours and that was it. His mind was completely toast.

**How is the casting going, have those decisions been made yet?**

It’s a fabulous cast. And this is another reason I wanted to open the season with *Celebration* and *The Room*. We’re launching our core acting company this season, and these plays happen to have tailor-made roles for all of them. We have four artists who, in the spirit of the original A.C.T., will be appearing in these shows in addition to teaching and directing in the conservatory and taking a role on the artistic team. Steven Anthony Jones will play Riley, which is a critical role in *The Room*. Gregory Wallace, who’s hilariously funny, will play the existential waiter who walks around in *Celebration* saying, “I happened to notice you were talking about T. S. Eliot.” René Augusen was born to play Suki, the luscious blonde who tries to break up Julie and Lambert’s marriage. And Marco Barricelli will play Matt. So one of the reasons this project is so attractive to me is that we have four company actors for whom this material is ideally suited. And then I wanted to bring together other favorites of mine. The first person I went to is Peter Riegert, because he is in my opinion the consummate Pinter actor. We worked together on Pinter [at Classic Stage Company] in *The Birthday Party* and in *Mountain Language*, and Pinter adored him. He’s a very transformative actor, and because of his experience with Mamet, who’s really America’s heir to Pinter, I felt that his comic sense and attention to language would suit Pinter beautifully. And then I went back to an actress whom I haven’t worked with in ten years, but who acted in the very first play I directed at A.C.T. [Creditors], Joan McMurtrey. Joan is an incredibly complex, funny, and interesting actress. She’ll be paired with an actress I have always wanted to bring here, Diane Venora, who’ll play Prue and Rose. I first saw Diane play the female Hamlet at the Public Theater [in New York] when I was working there. I thought she was magnificent: she’s got great language and dialect skills and real transformability. And [Anthony] Fusco’s coming back, to play Richard the restaurant proprietor, and our own [Conservatory Director] Melissa Smith, who has her first A.C.T. acting assignment in this production, is going to play Sonia. It’s a wonderful combination of actors who are very close to A.C.T. and actors with whom I have
a long history. They’re all actors who have a delicious sense of language and humor. They are not trapped in a certain kind of naturalism, which is essential, because in a way these plays are both poems. They are poetic drama at its highest, and these actors are willing to play to a heightened place.

This is a very special opportunity, to witness the two poles of Pinter’s writing, from his first work to the most recent. Are there tips you can give theatergoers?

People are sometimes intimidated by Pinter’s work because they think they won’t “get” it. Actually, Pinter’s plays are immensely entertaining. He’s a consummate actor so he knows how to capture an audience’s imagination. The plays are hugely theatrical and pleasurably ambiguous—and Celebration is satiric, fast-paced, and filled with lusciously sexy innuendo. You don’t have to try to tease out a single meaning.

Also, watching two one-acts makes for an evening that’s epic and intimate at the same time. Because he’s such a distilled and economic writer, Pinter is the master of the one-act form. And the audience will get to watch our wonderful actors transform in the space of a 20-minute intermission from one particular set of roles to another. That transformation is the essence of theater, and lets the audience in on a wonderful theatrical secret.

It’s a great honor that Pinter gave us Celebration for its first American production. I think in part it’s because the A.C.T. audience has become known as one of the great listening audiences in the country, an audience that relishes language and complexity. So that’s also what we’re celebrating this year.
My Lunches with Harold

by Carey Perloff

“I don’t know what you’d call their particular accent, but I do know they all enjoy words and using words, they love it, and that’s it.” (Pause. He grinned.) “One also has to remember, of course, and this is all a question of balance and degree, that they’re all very drunk.” Harold Pinter was summarizing the crux of his extraordinary new satire Celebration for me over a long lunch in New York during the recent Pinter festival at Lincoln Center. As I sat listening to him revel in the crudity and beauty of his new characters’ speech, I asked him a question about the fantasy-spinning Waiter who interrupts the action in Celebration with wild disquisitions about his grandfather’s exotic life. “Is he making it all up?” I asked. “I think he is,” Pinter replied. “He’s a wonderful improviser, isn’t he? But I think the crucial point is that the Waiter himself is in love with literature.”

We covered a great deal of ground during that lunch, from politics to plays and back, but one thing stayed with me with particular potency as I got up to leave the restaurant. For a man who has built a career out of highly charged silences, Pinter is a man deeply in love with the English language. At the age of 70 he still finds words fascinating, surprising, dangerous, elusive. “I once sat next to Ralph Richardson’s wife at a dinner,” he commented. “She had wonderful stories about Vivien Leigh. At one point she lowered her voice and said to me, ‘You know that Vivien was very interested in sex.’ And I was stopped dead by that use of the word ‘interested.’ Interested in what way? What did it mean? I used the word just as I’d heard it in Celebration.” (Sonia, the hostess, says, “Yes, it’s funny you should say that. I met a man from Morocco once and he was very interested in sex.”)

There are words that lie flat when they come out of the mouths of ordinary people, but that sit up and cry out for attention when they are uttered by Harold Pinter. His plays are filled with moments in which a simple gesture or phrase suddenly detonates and explodes in the silent atmosphere. Perhaps this is why his work has not dated; his very first theatrical expressions feel as startling and muscular today as they did in 1957.

I have been thinking a great deal about the arc of Pinter’s work lately because I am preparing to direct the first American production of Celebration, which is performed in repertory with his earliest play The Room (1957), a heartbreaking work about a woman in a cheap bed-sit terrified by the strange band of individuals who invade her room and threaten to take over her cherished home. As has often been my experience with Pinter, the decision to embark on this venture came about over an astonishingly good lunch. In July 2000 I was in London doing some work and I rang Pinter to see whether we could meet. We have stayed in close touch for many years, ever since I directed The Birthday Party at Classic Stage Company in 1988 with David Strathairn, Jean Stapleton, and Peter Riegert, and then staged the American premiere of Mountain Language the following year with the same cast. Pinter has intersected with my life at crucial moments: he was the writer that first inspired me to choose a career in the theater, and he was the writer with whom I collaborated, two weeks after my daughter was born, on a play about a missing child. So when I think about Pinter,
certain events in my life loom large. In this case, I was wrestling with the fact that the 2001–02 season would be my tenth anniversary at A.C.T. This thought filled me with both pleasure and apprehension, as anniversaries often do. It happens that 2001–02 is also the 35th anniversary of A.C.T.’s first season in San Francisco. So when I had lunch with Harold on a hot summer’s day in London at a chic restaurant called La Caprice, I was agonizing about the problems of the passage of time and how to mark that in some celebratory way.

As it would happen, five minutes after we sat down, Harold said, “I have a play for you, and it’s called Celebration.” I had missed its debut in London under Pinter’s own direction, but as I sat there at lunch and listened to Pinter describing the savagery and vicious wit of three rich couples celebrating a wedding anniversary in a trendy restaurant being catered to by three very intimate, rather bizarre “servers,” I knew that I had found the perfect way to mark the occasion. I took it back to my hotel to read it, and was invigorated as I haven’t been for some time by the toughness and wit of the language, and by the desperate longing for connection underneath. Celebration was yet again a new step for Pinter, fiercer and more satiric than his recent work, and yet unmistakably part of the same landscape as classics like The Homecoming. It was also dangerous, sexy, and mean.

A year later I found myself at lunch with Pinter again, this time in New York, dissecting these two plays. Pinter is absolutely precise about his work, which is an enormous relief to a director. He never theorizes or generalizes. We started with questions about Riley, the mysterious blind black man who arrives at the end of The Room and asks Rose to come home with him. “Who was he?” I asked. I read Pinter something he had said years ago in an interview with Mel Gussow, in which he described Riley as Rose’s savior, arriving to release her from her imprisonment with Bert. “Do you remember saying this?” I asked. “No,” he replied. “I think that’s probably what I did say but it must be about, you know, 50 years ago . . . but actually I understand what I was talking about if that’s what I was talking about. I don’t want to make any great claims about Riley. Riley is Riley. I prefer to keep it on a very concrete level. Riley comes in and says, ‘Your father wants you to come home,’ and calls her by a name that clearly was hers, that strikes a very profound chord in her—you know, ‘Sal’—which she finds irresistible. I think releasing her from imprisonment is right, but it’s an imprisonment she doesn’t know she’s enduring.”

I was struck again by how closely Pinter the actor intersects with Pinter the writer. He talks about his characters with great respect and interest, but without omniscience. He never claims to know what they are thinking or feeling any more than he claims to know what real people he knows and loves are thinking or feeling; he simply observes their behavior, with clarity and acuity, and then gleams some clues. Nor does he use his characters’ behavior as evidence of some larger symbolic or metaphoric gesture. He is interested in conflict that is precise, visceral, and real. “You know, there’s a little moment in Celebration when Lambert [the thuggish “strategy consultant”] asks Russell [a rising young banker] what he wants to drink,” he observed with interest. “When Russell says, ‘A drop of red wine would work wonders,’ Lambert says, ‘What about Suki?’ [Russell’s girlfriend and Lambert’s old flame] and Russell says, ‘She’ll have the same.’ And suddenly the men attack him—there’s something going on—a rivalry—that’s very strong.” He says this with excitement
and interest, almost as if he’s talking about a concrete event that he has witnessed, rather than one he has created in his own imagination.

Memory has always played a central role in Pinter’s work; often it becomes a weapon used in the present moment to control someone else’s hold on the past, or to rewrite the past in order to make sense of the present. In *Old Times*, which I directed at A.C.T. several seasons ago, the teasing impossibility of ever verifying the past becomes the central theme of the play. What has always fascinated me about Pinter, however, is that for someone who is notoriously wary about the truth of any given memory, he has such acute memories of his own, memories that clearly inform his work in precise and vivid ways. When we returned to a conversation about the hilarious Waiter in *Celebration*, he suddenly said, “You know what happened to me when I was a waiter?” “No,” I said, “I knew you were an actor, but I didn’t know you were a waiter.” He laughed and said, “Oh, I was a waiter; this was a long career, you know.” And then he told the following story: “I was out of work as an actor, so I did a bit of waiting at the National Liberal Club—it’s a fitness club in London—this was the early fifties. I actually heard two men having lunch and talking about Kafka and the publication date of *The Trial* and *The Castle*—I stopped at the table and said, ‘No, no, *The Trial* was published in 1922,’ or whenever I said, and they said, ‘Really? Was it? We thought it was later than that!’ and I said, ‘No, you’ll find I am right,’ and then they said, ‘What about *The Castle*?’ and I gave them the date and they said, ‘Thank you very much,’ and I went back into the kitchen and was fired on the spot for talking to customers. That was my experience as a waiter. So in a sense I think the Waiter in *Celebration* might have come from that.” He recounted this event as if it had happened yesterday, and with the same detached fascination that he would recount the events that overtake his own characters. And it occurred to me that he is his most interesting character in many ways, and that he observes the events that happen to him with an objectivity that allows them to retain their mystery in such a way that they become, in his imagination, immediately concrete and dramatic.

Pinter seemed terribly alive and impassioned as he described his experience of directing *Celebration* along with his very first play, *The Room*. He described with glee the decision to put beautiful Lindsay Duncan in *The Room* in a dowdy turban, covering real curlers that came off at intermission to reveal her glorious head of blonde curls in *Celebration*. He loves the devices of theater, the tricks that hold it together, the transformations actors must undergo to travel from one theatrical world to another. Indeed, one of the pleasures of this double bill of one-acts is the opportunity it affords a company of actors to transform utterly from the impoverished denizens of *The Room* to the vicious consumerists of *Celebration*. As such, it provides the perfect vehicle for A.C.T.’s new core company of actors, who appear in contrasting roles in both plays, in a true celebration of the transformative art of acting.

I realized as I listened to Pinter over the course of our lunch that, among other things, the double bill of his first and most recent plays was its own form of celebration, the celebration of a fiercely individual writer who had stayed his course for more than 40 years and was still creating. “Writing for me is an act of freedom and celebration,” he once said. “Whatever I’m writing about, it’s a celebration. What you’re celebrating is the ability to write. There’s an excitement
about it that certainly transcends whatever you might have been doing five minutes before. It takes you way out into another country.” He said at lunch that he thought Celebration would be his last play. “I’ve written 29 plays, for god’s sake. I think it’s enough.” But something in me could see that the writing itch, the urge to celebrate that journey into another country, was still very present. The moment he pronounced his writing career over, his eyes were darting around the room, watching, observing, listening. His energy was coiled. He was ready for the next discovery.

This article was written for American Theatre magazine and will appear in the October issue.
His Genius Is to Find the Drama between the Words

by Michael Billington

Who exactly is Harold Pinter? Obviously one of the best-known playwrights in the Western world. Also, as the recent Pinter Festival at Lincoln Center [in New York] showed, a versatile actor, director, and film writer with more than 20 screenplays to his credit.

Yet words like “enigmatic,” “mysterious,” and “menacing” are routinely applied to his plays, as if they were theatrical cryptograms in urgent need of decoding. Pinter is no less famous for his dramatic silences and for the most astute use of the theatrical pause since the heyday of Jack Benny.

No one would deny that Pinter is a challenging dramatist and that his work often has an unresolved quality—"like a Hitchcock film with the last reel missing," wrote an English critic in 1958—that opens up debate. Yet one thing I learned from writing a critical biography of him in 1996 is that plays like The Birthday Party, The Caretaker, The Homecoming, and Betrayal are not teasing abstractions spun out of thin air; they are highly concrete plays that have their roots in lived experience. It would be limiting to suggest that they are simply about the particularities of Pinter’s own life. But Pinter is essentially an intuitive rather than a conceptual writer, a poet rather than a peddler of theses: his plays are invariably triggered by an image, an incident, or even a phrase from the past that takes obstinate root in his memory. Once the image or incident has become embedded, Pinter then sees where it will lead him creatively.

As with any writer, many of the clues to his artistic identity can be found in the early years. Born in Hackney in the East End of London in 1930, Pinter was the only child of a hard-working tailor and his ebullient wife. All four grandparents were Ashkenazic Jews who had fled from pogroms in Poland and Russia at the turn of the century. Not only was there an ancestral memory of persecution: as a child, Pinter lived through the worst of the London Blitz, where death was a daily reality.

To his horror, he then discovered that fascism was still alive in the postwar East End world in the shape of crudely nationalistic newspapers, bookshops, debating societies, and even itinerant gangs. It would be facile to suggest that Pinter’s sense of menace stems simply from the memory of teenage encounters with roving thugs under Hackney railway arches. What really rankled among Pinter and his Jewish friends was the passive tolerance of a 1945 Labor government that made no attempt to prohibit a resurgent English anti-Semitism.

Pinter’s sense of injustice was also coupled, from an early age, with a defiant, nonconformist individualism. At 13, after his bar mitzvah, he renounced religion. And his hostility to the structures of the state was manifested at 18 in his refusal to do the obligatory two years of peacetime military service—a refusal that could easily have brought him imprisonment but resulted in a heavy fine.

The young Pinter was a bit of a Hackney Hamlet: brooding, skeptical, formidabley well read. From an early age he devoured Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Joyce, Eliot, and Pound, who reinforced his sense of life’s uncertainty. Even in his early years as a jobbing actor in England and Ireland, he wrote reams of poetry.
What changed his career was a sudden request in 1957 from an old Hackney friend, Henry Woolf, to write a one-act play for a group of Bristol drama students. The result was *The Room*, and it offers a vital theatrical template. As would often happen in later years, Pinter’s imagination was sparked by a particular memory: that of meeting at a house in Chelsea a talkative, vividly appareled figure—who he later learned was Quentin Crisp—serving a meal to a lugubriously silent partner. But while *The Room* starts from a recollected image, it also deals with an archetypal Pinter situation: an anxious recluse, here called Rose, resisting the insidious demands of the outside world. You can see the play in social, psychological, or even lit-crit terms as a distant echo of Samuel Beckett’s novel *Murphy*. The real discovery, however, is of a writer staking out his own particular territory: the tension between solitude and society rendered in a vivid vernacular.

After the initial failure in 1958 of his first full-length play, *The Birthday Party*—which deals with the capture of a fugitive seaside recluse by agents of the conformist state—Pinter’s career gradually took off with the help of radio and television commissions. But it was *The Caretaker* in 1960 that catapulted him to fame and spawned a number of low-life imitations. It also offers a classic example of Pinter’s ability to lend a local circumstance universal resonance.

Pinter wrote the play while living in a two-room West London flat with his first wife, the actress Vivien Merchant, and their baby. In these hard-pressed circumstances, Pinter became intrigued by the house’s night-owl owner and his brain-damaged handyman brother who one day brought back a truculent hobo. Passing an open door, Pinter’s eye was suddenly drawn to the sight of the tramp rooting around in a vast bag and the handyman standing with his back to him gazing silently out of a window. From that frozen moment came a dynamic play about power, territory, the tramp’s manipulation of the two brothers, and his eventual expulsion from this squalid Eden.

Over the years, the play has been performed everywhere and subjected to multiple interpretations: one Romanian production began with the Christlike handyman bathing the tramp’s feet to the sound of Bach’s Mass in B Minor, as if the whole play were a religious allegory. Yet it all began from the simple fact of Pinter pausing on the stairs in a Chiswick lodging house. Exactly like *Death of a Salesman* or *American Buffalo*, it is a play that originates domestically and resonates internationally.

That was more than 40 years ago and Pinter’s life and career have undergone profound changes since then. Pinter is now a world-renowned writer who lives with his second wife, the historian Lady Antonia Fraser, in the leafy West London environs of Holland Park. Stylistically, his work also underwent a profound change in the mid 1960s after *The Homecoming*. Dispensing with the impedimenta of realism, his plays became starker, leaner, less cluttered, as if seeking to explore the poetic resonance of a dominant image.

And in the 1980s, starting with *One for the Road*, which deals with the process of interrogation, Pinter began to write more overtly political plays: pungent, imagistic works often dealing with cruelty, torture, abuse of human rights, or what Pinter sees as the double standards of the Western democracies. Having initially been attacked as willfully obscure, he was now accused of overexplicitness.
Pinter’s increasing outspokenness, both in print and public forums, about the multiple faces of tyranny has also led to his being caricatured in the British press as an angry curmudgeon. It has, however, earned him respect in the rest of Europe, where the idea of the committed writer is celebrated rather than mocked.

But although Pinter’s milieu and style have evolved, it would be false to suggest that there are two radically distinct Pinters—that he has simply moved from the world of down-and-outs to the drawing room, from naturalism to symbolism, from unspecified menace to clear-cut message bearing.

What is really significant is the organic unity of Pinter’s career. For a start, by his own admission, the creative process remains precisely the same whether he is writing about sexual tensions in a male-dominated domestic jungle as in The Homecoming or about state totalitarianism as in One for the Road.

Pinter himself claims that, whatever the subject, he needs an igniting image and has no idea of his dramatic destination when he sets out on the journey. Even the idea that Pinter suddenly woke up to politics in the 1980s is inaccurate: one of his best and least-known early plays—The Hothouse, written in 1958—is an oddly prophetic and faintly anarchic black comedy about a state institution that uses electroshock treatments to reduce its inmates to numbed conformity.

The most consistent feature of Pinter’s career, however, has been a preoccupation with language. In the words of Peter Hall, who directed many of his plays, “Pinter made poetry out of demotic speech.” Pre-Pinter, poetry in the British theater was dominated by the bejeweled eloquence of Christopher Fry and the scholarly allusiveness of T. S. Eliot. But Pinter’s achievement was to discover in the repetitive rhythms, the bus-stop banalities, and even the rancid articulateness of common speech a new form of theatrical discourse. He also realized that everyday speech is rarely neutral: it can be a negotiation for advantage, a weapon of attack, a source of evasion, a means of avoiding communication. That—a along with his demolition of the idea of the omniscient dramatist who knows all the answers—is his enduring legacy. And his numerous beneficiaries range, stylistically, from Britain’s Joe Orton, and younger writers—like Patrick Marber in the sexually exploratory Closer and Sarah Kane in the politically explosive Blasted—to America’s David Mamet and Neil LaBute.

More than 40 years separate The Room and Celebration, Pinter’s first and latest works. The former takes place in a dingy lodging-house room whose petrified inhabitant is invited by a visitor to “come home,” the latter in a swank restaurant where the diners’ crude conviviality is interrupted by an intrusive waiter. The two worlds are diametrically different. Yet both plays show us hermetic figures whose safe haven is threatened by territorial invaders.

Both also confirm the truth of G. K. Chesterton’s dictum that at the back of every artist’s mind is “a secret planet” in which he or she chooses to wander. Pinter’s own personal planet may be an unnerving place filled with a dark, scabrous humor as well as insecurity, fear, domestic power battles, and official intimidation. It is a planet Pinter has individually colonized. But judging by the global reach of his plays, what is revealing is that it is a world that many of us not only instantly recognize but also inhabit every day of our lives.

Michael Billington, the theater critic of The Guardian (London), is the author of The Life and Work of Harold Pinter (Faber and Faber, 1996). This article first appeared in the New York Times, July 15, 2001.
Harold Pinter: A Brief Biography

Born in London in 1930, Harold Pinter was once called “the greatest living contemporary playwright” by Tennessee Williams, a view now almost universally shared. Success in school plays and his first positive review (“Master Harold Pinter made a more eloquent, more obviously nerve-racked Macbeth than one or two professional grown-ups I have seen in the part”) directed him towards a stage career. After touring Britain with various repertory companies as an actor, Pinter’s first full-length play, The Birthday Party, was produced in 1958. But his first real breakthrough came two years later with The Caretaker. Pinter’s reputation as a daringly innovative playwright quickly spread to North America. His 1964 play The Homecoming was a huge success in London and New York, where it won both a Tony Award and the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award.

Two new dramatic terms became part of common parlance: the “Pinter pause” (a meaningful silence) and “Pinteresque,” referring to his unique style. Pinter’s plays often deal with themes of nameless menace, erotic fantasy, jealousy, family conflict, and mental disturbance, written in terse dialogue almost as controlled as verse. In total, he has written 29 plays (see chronology, opposite), most recently Celebration. Pinter has also directed 27 theater productions, written 21 screenplays, and continues to perform on stage and screen. Harold Pinter is a Commander of the British Order and has won numerous awards, such as the Pirandello Prize, Shakespeare Prize, and Laurence Olivier Award. Playwright David Hare recently remarked, “Pinter did what Auden said a poet should do. He cleaned the gutters of the English language, so that it ever afterwards flowed more easily and more cleanly.”

In October, Pinter is one of 14 artists honored for his transformational contribution to world culture at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto, Canada, as part of “World Leaders: A Festival of Creative Genius,” presented by American Express.
### A Pinter Chronology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Plays</th>
<th>Screenplays</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td><em>The Room</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Birthday Party</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Dumb Waiter</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td><em>A Slight Ache</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Hothouse</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td><em>The Caretaker</em></td>
<td><em>Sketches: The Black and White;</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Trouble in the Works; Last to</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Go; Request Stop; Special Offer;</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>That’s Your Trouble; That’s All;</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Interview; Applicant; Dialogue for Three</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>A Night Out</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td><em>Night School</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Dwarfs</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td><em>The Collection</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1962</td>
<td><em>The Lover</em></td>
<td><em>The Caretaker</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Pumpkin Eater</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td><em>The Homecoming</em></td>
<td><em>The Quiller Memorandum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>Accident</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td><em>The Basement</em></td>
<td><em>The Birthday Party</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td><em>Landscape</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td><em>Silence</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td><em>Sketch Night</em></td>
<td><em>The Go-Between</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Homecoming</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td><em>Old Times</em></td>
<td><em>Langrishe Go Down</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td><em>Monologue</em></td>
<td><em>A La Recherche du Temps Perdu</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td><em>No Man’s Land</em></td>
<td><em>The Last Tycoon</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td><em>Betrayal</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td><em>Family Voices</em></td>
<td><em>The French Lieutenant’s Woman</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td><em>Betrayal</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td><em>Victoria Station/A Kind of Alaska</em> (under the title <em>Other Places</em>)*</td>
<td><em>Victory</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td><em>Sketch Precisely</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td><em>One for the Road</em></td>
<td><em>Turtle Diary</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Handmaid’s Tale</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td><em>Mountain Language</em></td>
<td><em>Reunion</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Heat of the Day</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Comfort of Strangers</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Trial</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td><em>The New World Order</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Party Time</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><em>Moonlight</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td><em>Ashes to Ashes</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Dreaming Child</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td><em>Celebration</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Tragedy of King Lear</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Giving Us Pause

by Michael Feingold

For a brief time and a lucky affluent elite, the New York theater shrugged off its summer doldrums to become what I can’t resist calling a Pinter ponder-land. Better planned and containing better-executed productions than in previous summers, the theater component of this year’s Lincoln Center Festival actually offered its audiences brain stimulus instead of imported chic. People in the lobbies were really discussing Pinter’s plays, or comparing the productions to those they’d seen earlier. It had, in that sense, the feeling of a festival: Harold Pinter—as playwright, director, and actor—was a source of honor, pleasure, and contemplation, not a cheap excuse to jam a bunch of shows into a short time.

And Pinter proved worthy of the attention. Having been out of town, I caught only the two double bills that closed the festival, but the four pieces they contained showed the playwright’s power, and his supple technique, as well as his remarkably broad tonal range. Political thriller, psychological drama, social satire, tragic ritual—the four works managed to touch among them most of the basic impulses of theater, moving as they did so from low comedy to a transcendent chill and back again. In the little rooms where people say inexplicable things to each other, their remarks shot through with even less explicable pauses, Pinter can evoke vast realms of human experience. For all the repetition and stasis that famously mark his writing, the effect of his work when taken in bulk is exhilaratingly multicolored.

... The Room, his first produced play, demonstrated that Pinter has known the best ways to scare us all along. How amazing that this perfect—and perfectly terrifying—hour of drama is so rarely produced. I missed its New York premiere in 1964—more fool I; the Rose, who won an OBIE, was the superb Frances Sternhagen—and can’t ever remember hearing of any other American production....

Rose is—or maybe isn’t—Mrs. Bert Hudd; the titular room is the one in Mr. Kidd’s house where she and her near silent spouse equivalent reside. In Mr. Kidd’s house there seem to be many mansions: Nobody’s quite sure how many floors there are, and a visiting couple is uncertain whether they’ve come up the stairs or down them. At some point Rose and Bert seem to have lived in the basement, a concept Rose doesn’t relish. The advent of a mysterious figure, a “blind Negro” named Riley who calls Rose “Sal” and says, “Your father wants you to come home,” confirms the suspicion that Rose, who never goes out, has something to hide, and that her past—or maybe her unpleasant future—is catching up with her. The room, the coziness of which everyone praises, is her fool’s paradise.

Wonderful in itself, the clean, breezy assurance with which Pinter strides past all of naturalism’s niggling questions gives the play an astonishing lightness of spirit, for all the dark matters it adumbrates. At the same time, cunningly, he never violates naturalism: Each event we see could happen in an ordinary day; each line we hear could be spoken in its situation. Rose, the embittered expectancy of this unfair state, is a typical banal person; the hidden story that
makes her dull day a living terror is also a touch of grace that makes it transcendent. She’s the working-class housewife as tragic heroine, without the pumped-up, false dramatics that occur when stories about such people are invented and explained. Pinter’s story, left untold, grips the heart.

The splendor turned to glitter and giddiness in The Room’s companion piece, Pinter’s latest play, Celebration, a snaggletoothed comedy set in a luxurious restaurant, where two brothers, apparently upscale gangsters, and the two sisters to whom they’re married are celebrating one couple’s wedding anniversary, though both pairs seem to be bonded only by mutual loathing. At an adjacent table, a young banker, whose business seems to be equally shady but higher class and less violent, is trying to prod his wife, who seems to have a promiscuous past, into soothing his ego, shattered by some business rebuff about which we hear little. We hear a lot, much of it hilarious, about tangled relations and mutual deceits; the barrage of contradictory revelations is set in a framework of eulogies for a civilization that has lost its meaning, in which no one’s role is fixed and culture has no illuminating power. Both parties have been to the opera, which has made no impression; the gangsters think it was the ballet; the banker’s wife recalls “a lot of singing.”

A young waiter . . . continually oversteps his bounds to bore both tables with openly absurd reminiscences of his grandfather, who seems to represent all of world culture, past and present. When the tipsily friendly couples depart, making deals and threats behind each other’s backs, he remains, still interjecting his fictive memories into the empty room—a stand-in for the author, or for the theater itself, still maintaining a pose of civility in an uncivil world. Propriety, one sees, has been to Pinter what apartheid was to Fugard—a beloved enemy that could be counted on to produce dynamic tension in the work of those who internalized but resisted it. Without it, he seems to say, there’s nothing but a violence that no longer shocks and laughter at the absurdity of being sincere in a void. The ominous pause so characteristic of Pinter, you might say, now arrives at the play’s end.

Excerpted from The Village Voice, August 7, 2001.
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 in 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.

... Language ... is a highly ambiguous business. 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. You and I, the characters which grow on a page, most of the time we’re inexpressive, giving little away, unreliable, elusive, evasive, obstructive, unwilling. But it’s out of these attributes that a language arises. A language, I repeat, where under what is said, another thing is being said.

... There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don’t hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished, or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant strategem to cover nakedness.

We have heard many times that tired, grimy phrase: “failure of communication” ... and this phrase has been fixed to my work quite consistently. I believe the contrary. I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is a continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves. Communication is too frightening. To disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility.

I am not suggesting that no character in a play can ever say what he in fact means. Not at all. I have found that there invariably does come a moment when this happens, when he says something, perhaps, which he has never said before. And when this happens, what he says is irrevocable, and can never be taken back.

—Harold Pinter, “Writing for the Theatre”

I don’t know how music can influence writing, but it has been very important for me, both jazz and classical music. I feel a sense of music continually in writing, which is a different matter from having been influenced by it.

—Pinter, Playwrights at Work
I could have gone to prison—I took my toothbrush to the trials—but it so happened that the magistrate was slightly sympathetic, so I was fined instead, 30 pounds in all. Perhaps I’ll be called up again in the next war, but I won’t go.

—Pinter, Playwrights at Work

Pinter’s dialogue is as tightly—perhaps more tightly—controlled than verse. Every syllable, every inflection, the succession of long and short sounds, words, and sentences, is calculated to nicety. And precisely the repetitiousness, the discontinuity, the circularity of ordinary vernacular speech are here used as formal elements with which the poet can compose his linguistic ballet.

—Martin Esslin, The Peopled Wound

Pinter’s practical, prosaic way of reading his characters surprised us initially; so much is written about his metaphoric landscape that it is startling to hear the characters discussed as if they were realer than real. Yet this is what makes Pinter’s work great theater as well as great literature. His insistence on that specificity and on the primacy of the present moment was the most useful guideline Pinter offered us during rehearsals.

. . .

Pinter’s relationship with the cast of The Birthday Party evolved very quickly. He reveled in the “actor talk” that occurred every night over drinks. . . . One story in particular remained with me: Pinter’s description of performing . . . a scene in act one with Patrick McGee. This sequence is particularly difficult to memorize. It goes by at lightning speed and has to build with a series of insane moves. . . . Naturally, one night when performing the role, Pinter went completely blank and couldn’t for the life of him remember the next word. He looked desperately at McGee. McGee sat there smugly, a diabolical grin on his face, as if to say “You wrote this, you think of the next line.”

—Carey Perloff, addressing a Pinter festival in 1991

Pinter’s characters, begun among outcasts in The Room, have steadily risen with his own fortunes; out of the lowest classes to the comfortable middle classes in Betrayal and, beginning with Party Time, to powerbrokers. But as their fortunes continued to rise, here soaring to unimagined heights, the characters have declined in virtue. They increase only in sheer malicious intent. But they have great fun along the way, can make us join them in their laughter. And it might be easy to miss the insidious consequences of such actions that extend far beyond the play. Yet their motive remains the same as that of Pinter’s earliest characters: to maintain status quo—what they possess. These characters cling as fiercely to position and possession as Rose does to her slum room. . . . Like Chaucer’s work, which employs the saving grace of satire to reveal corruption in the guise of courtliness among the holy orders centuries ago, Pinter’s work also wields a comic tone, but [Pinter] unmasks more than hypocrisy, foibles, and corruption. He shows us the faces of outright destructors, laughing at their deals in the name of peacekeeping. He shows us how comedy in our time can be more deadly serious than tragedy. His characters are caught not in the act of overwhelming destruction but of playing. Pinter’s comedy remains in the service of making the terror bearable: to expose evil as annihilation committed by quite ordinary people, despite their extraordinary and delightfully inventive but malicious ribaldry, not
so different from us. How better than through comedy to confront ignorance and inaction, face it boldly before it is too late? We are more likely, the recent plays imply, to cling tenaciously like Rose and these celebrants to our familiar room, restaurant or estate, getting news of the outside world at second hand, or remaining ignorant.

—Penelope Prentice, *The Pinter Ethic (The Erotic Aesthetic)*

PINTER: Funny thing about *Celebration*. I was in the country the summer before last. For three weeks, we rent a house in Dorset. There were a couple of [his wife] Antonia’s children visiting us. Antonia knew I was writing something, but I had already told her I couldn’t get on with it. After dinner one evening she said, “Why don’t you bring in what you’ve written and read it to us?” I got the pages, very few, and I started to read. Suddenly they were laughing and falling off their chairs, all three of them. That opened a door to me. I suddenly realized there was a kind of relish around the play which I didn’t quite understand myself. I went right back to my study—and the play went like that!

GUSSOW: In London and now at Lincoln Center you’ve paired *Celebration* with your first play, *The Room*. The inspiration for *The Room* came from accidentally seeing what you called an “an odd image,” a little man [Quentin Crisp] making bacon and eggs for a big man who was silently reading a comic. At the time, you were an actor. If you had not glimpsed that scene that day, might you not have become a playwright?

PINTER: Well, as Robert Browning said, more or less, you have to ask God and God’s not going to answer. But I always was a writer. I was more or less born with a pen in my hand.

GUSSOW: But this was your first attempt at writing a play.

PINTER: I was writing poems then and I wrote a novel. I wrote a piece of prose called “Kullus” when I was 19, and there was dialogue in it. So I was writing dialogue quite early. But I really considered leaving the theater after *The Birthday Party*.

GUSSOW: You thought about writing more novels and poetry?

PINTER: Yes, yes. I had to write, and I was acting, roughly speaking.

GUSSOW: Acting wouldn’t have fulfilled you at the time?

PINTER: No. Anyway, I couldn’t get a job. It’s one of those moments in my life that I remember very well. My son was born in January 1958. Vivien [Merchant, his first wife] and I had almost nowhere to go. Someone lent us 100 pounds and we managed to find a couple of rooms in Chiswick. *The Birthday Party* was in rehearsal and Vivien and I had an offer to act at the Alexander Theatre, Birmingham. It was a little more than 20 pounds a week between us, fairly good money for an actor in 1958. She said, “Let’s go,” and I said: “I have this play opening in London. I think I must stay. Something’s going to happen.” She said, “What makes you think so?” [He laughs loudly.] I said, “I’m sure something’s going to happen.” So we turned down this job, and the play opened. Something happened all right. The play was a disaster. On the face of it, that was the most catastrophic decision because we were then totally broke.

—“Notes on Pinter, Given by Pinter,” by Mel Gussow, *New York Times* (July 15, 2001)
I can sum up none of my plays. I can describe none of them, except to say: That is what happened. That is what they said. That is what they did.
—Pinter, on being awarded the German Shakespeare Prize in Hamburg in 1970

You can’t easily sum Pinter up in a journalistic phrase, though many have tried with tags such as “Master of the Pause” or “Comedy of Menace”; but if I had to describe him to someone totally unfamiliar with his work it would be as an instinctively radical poet whose chosen medium is drama.
—Michael Billington (1997)
Confessions of a Theorist

by Paul Walsh

The fact is it’s terribly difficult to define what happened at any time. I think it’s terribly difficult to define what happened yesterday. . . . So much is imagined and that imagining is as true as real.

—Harold Pinter

There is nothing enigmatic about Harold Pinter. If anything he is too direct, too acute, almost epigrammatic in the surgical precision with which he wields the scalpel of language in his vivisections of the human heart. We prefer to think he is being arcane, speaking metaphorically, writing in hieroglyphs, because his plays point so explicitly to the violence and desire at the heart of such seemingly simple, everyday things as human relationships. We invent theories to console ourselves over our inability to explain what remains inexplicable. Deep down we know our explanations have more to do with our needs and desires than with some immutable truth about the way things are. I know, because I am most guilty of this myself. I share the desire to call these plays mysterious, impenetrable, enigmatic; but in doing so I am aware of the need to protect myself from the directness of this perverse, observant gaze of unnamed and unnameable desires.

The enviable directness of Pinter’s plays and the sparsely acute loquacity of his characters have contributed greatly to his reputation as perhaps the most important English playwright of the second half of the 20th century. These plays and these characters may strike us as perplexingly cruel, mysteriously unfeeling, or pathetically unforthcoming; but then life, too, strikes us, sometimes in the face, with its mystifying lack of explanations.

“Because ‘reality’ is quite a strong, firm word,” Pinter has said, “we tend to think, or to hope, that the state to which it refers is equally firm, settled, and unequivocal. It doesn’t seem to be, and in my opinion, it’s no worse or better for that.” The tersely menacing language of these plays, their obsessive sexuality and surrealist dislocations, remind me constantly that most of what I know about life I have heard or invented in moments of dismay or dishonor. What I call reality is a disingenuous fiction blended from necessity, desire, and distrust. This is a reality I can live with.

Desire is at the heart of Pinter’s world and desire is always a three-legged stool. If the triangle is the most stable of geometric forms it is also the most dynamic. When Roland Barthes says, “I am jealous of the one I love and of the one who loves the one I love,” he is tracing the triangular nature of desire. “Rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object,” philosopher René Girard observes,

rather, the subject desires the object because the rival desires it. In desiring an object the rival alerts the subject to the desirability of the object. The rival, then, serves as a model for the subject, not only in regard to such secondary matters as style and opinions but also, and more essentially, in regard to desires.
This is the same man who reminds us that “sexuality is one of those primary forces whose sovereignty over man is assured by man’s firm belief in his sovereignty over it.”

Theorist Ann Wilson explains:

*Desire is the recognition of absence which is experienced as yearning. Since recognition is only possible within language then desire can only be recognized in language. But, language is itself an expression of desire because the signifier represents, and thus marks the absence of, the signified. That desire is only experienced through that which is the product of desire is an unresolvable paradox. It is the unending play of this paradox which deems the attempt to satiate desire as always already failed because satiation (that is, satisfaction as it is differentiated from desire) can only be recognized in language. But language is the product of desire and thus it is the very recognition of desire which marks desire as insatiable.*

Such observations move to the heart of the acutely observed geometric landscape constructed in these two early plays of Harold Pinter. In both *The Lover* and *The Collection*, as in Pinter’s later play *Old Times* (1971), Pinter explores that desperate and deeply human urge to try to verify and thereby control a past that is always unrecoverable. Perhaps, we think, if we can gain even a small modicum of control over the past we may be able to ward off, or at least postpone, the looming inevitability of our own demise. As yesterday’s possibilities breed the regrettable regiments that bind us today, we start searching for a new story, or a new way of telling the old story again. There is something touching, something pathetic and also appalling, about the deeply human urge to try to unearth a truth that is ultimately unknowable. It is this, perhaps, that brings us back again and again to the stories Pinter tells and to the stories his characters invent to hide and reveal themselves.

Returning to these plays from early in Pinter’s career reminds us just how remarkable his writing is. Their menacing emotion and playful sexuality speak to us today in new ways, providing new vistas on the mysterious landscape of human relationships. But for me they are also a call to remember and ignore the warning that Thucydides, the great historian of Athens, extends to all of us to guard against the twin culprits of hope and desire that lead all men astray:

*hope and desire in every case—desire leading, hope in attendance; desire thinking out the plan, hope suggesting that luck will provide the means—do most harm, and because they are unseen they are more powerful than dangers that can be seen.*

*Paul Walsh is the resident dramaturg and director of humanities at A.C.T. This essay first appeared in the program for the 1998 A.C.T. Master of Fine Arts Program production of *The Lover* and *The Collection.*
Memory in *The Room* and *Celebration*

by Susan Maxwell

*Given drama’s necessary difficulty with any time but the present—as Thornton Wilder observed, “on the stage it is always now”—this interest surfaces most complexly in memory, specifically... as it constitutes identity, guides perception and structures the characters’ relation with their human and physical environments.*

—A. R. Braunmuller

Both *The Room* and *Celebration*, two plays spanning Pinter’s career as a writer, inquire into the capacity of memory to continually reinvent the present. Pinter has long been fascinated by the unverifiability of the past, even the very recent past, and the idea that each individual will remember the past differently, creating competing versions. If the past is unverifiable, the present is then built on a shifting patchwork of personal projections: I am this kind of person because I did this or he/she hates/loves me because I remember when they did/said that. In a hostile, Pinteresque world, where characters are either predator or prey, where confessional self-expression invites annihilation, we rarely see them making personal statements about what they believe, the state of their marriages, the reasons they are entrapped. What we do see is a battling over the territory of memory. Pinter scholar A. R. Braunmuller in his essay “Harold Pinter: The Metamorphosis of Memory,” has remarked that for Pinter, self-perception requires a constant effort of memory. His characters might well rewrite Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) as *reminiscor ergo sum*, (I remember therefore I am) or in the theater *reminiscor et narro ergo sum* (I remember and speak, therefore I am).

In *The Room* memory is conspicuous in its absence. It is, in fact, the invisible and terrifying partner with whom Rose, the protagonist, must dance. In fact, Rose seems to be attempting to live free from contamination with the past. This attempt deepens her isolation, sealing her into the room she has arranged as a personal safe zone. Her own past remains unknown to us, but her anxiety suggests that the pain of living it and/or the pain of severing herself from it remain overwhelming forces. In *Celebration* narratives of the past become a potent bargaining chip used to convince others of one’s superior status, prowess, or detachment. Going a step further, the characters efface each other by taking hold of their opponents’ most intimate groundwork of self, their memories, and verbally rewriting or deleting them.

*Celebration* opens with a delicate signal of this severance from the past. At Table 1, Lambert is unable to remember what he’s ordered and the waiter is unable to remember who gets what. Julie’s response to her husband’s quandary is, Who cares? In the shifting weave of a Pinter play, Who cares what you can and cannot remember? might translate as, Who cares who you are? At Table 2, Suki picks up where Julie left off. Suki’s husband, Russell, assures her that the affair he had was unimportant as it was with “just a secretary.” In response Suki launches into a reminiscence of her own days as a “naughty, saucy, flirty, giggly” young secretary: “men simply couldn’t keep their hands off me, their demands
were outrageous.” Suki’s reminiscence undercuts Russell by evening the score on promiscuity; she can feign indifference in the present while invoking or inventing a past that hurts her husband. Similarly, Lambert’s later remembrance of having once been in love, though not with Julie—an admittedly audacious topic for conversation at a wedding anniversary dinner—is trumped by Julie’s salacious memory of first meeting Lambert on top of a bus: “It was a short journey, Fulham Broadway to Shepherd’s Bush, but it was enough. He was trembling all over. I remember.”

Throughout *Celebration*, characters use memories not as a means of self-revelation but as a means to construct a particular self-image that will serve as a scaffolding on which to stand in the present power play. Carey Perloff has remarked in her essay “Pinter in Rehearsal” that in the landscape of a Pinter play, “Survival depends on not showing what you feel. Tip your hand once and you leave yourself open to emotional blackmail.” Creating memories of oneself as powerful, aggressive, and happy helps to construct a mask that covers intense alienation, loneliness, and fear.

The Waiter’s mask in *Celebration* contrasts with that of the diners, yet his mode of self-invention also depends heavily on memory. Surprisingly, these memories are not primarily his own. Rather, they are vicariously exaggerated associations of his grandfather: the writers, artists, musicians, movie stars, gangsters, and heads of state his grandfather ostensibly knew. The Waiter seems to be removed from himself, which proves to be a borrowed self. Does the Waiter feel that only memories of historical figures are worthwhile? Are his interjections attempts at self-aggrandizement? Or is he searching for a meaning that is also a way past the confusion and alienation of life? The nameless waiter and Richard, the restaurant owner, are the only characters who register fond memories of their families. And at the end of the play the Waiter’s mask drops completely and he stands before the audience in a kind of naked bewilderment: “When I was a boy my grandfather used to take me to the edge of the cliffs and we’d look out to sea... My grandfather introduced me to the mystery of life and I’m still in the middle of it. I can’t find the door to get out.”

In *The Room*, Rose’s isolation depends partly upon her ability to shut out memory. Her constant chatter lights exclusively on present conditions: the weather, the damp, basement, etc. She seems to have once gone by a different name; the blind man calls her “Sal” at the end of the play. (Martin Esslin has suggested that “Sal” could refer to “Sarah,” a name that all Jewish women were forced to take in Hitler’s Germany. It is possible, Esslin suggests, that Rose is secretly Jewish “passing” in a politically sheltering marriage with a non-Jew.) The shifting codes of memory become the central point in Rose’s first exchange with Mr. Kidd, her landlord. Mr. Kidd comments that Rose’s room used to be his, setting an immediate tone of colonization. He fondly remembers his dead sister and her skill managing the house. When Mr. Kidd leaves, however, Rose says she doesn’t believe Mr. Kidd had a sister. He can’t remember how many floors are in the house, but he does claim to remember a rocking chair that Rose says she brought with her as have been in the room before she arrived. Mr. Kidd also muses on the possibility of his mother being a “Jewess,” a statement that could serve as a muted threat to Rose or indicate his own confusion and severance from his past.
When the blind black man who calls himself Riley appears, Rose insists she doesn’t know him. But the fact that she knows his name is not Riley suggests otherwise. Riley says he has come with a message from Rose’s father, from her home and her past: “Your father wants you to come home.” To a certain extent Riley restores a link to the past and with it a sense of continuous time: “I waited to see you,” he says, and a moment later, “Now I see you.” Riley brings a calming sense of connectedness amidst the fragmented chatter and lack of memory that had preceded him in the room.

In both plays, as in Pinter’s *Old Times*, differing memories often compete, plunging the audience into a world where the past is extremely malleable. Because Pinter’s work hinges on “suppression of motive and absence of self-explication,” as Braunmuller observes, we have only the characters’ interpretations to rely on. These interpretations are, however, largely motivated by fear and/or sadism. What’s real? What actually happened when? The discomfort and the humor of a Pinter play rests in this charged ambiguity of simply not knowing. Recalled events warp and twist under the pressure of power seeking, yet Pinter has never been concerned with flaunting exoticisms onstage. The degree to which power rends and reassembles the fabric of the characters’ selves may be hilariously and/or ominously high, yet the basic psychology itself remains unnervingly familiar to us.

---

**Communication in The Room and Celebration**

*by Susan Maxwell*

It has often been said that Pinter’s dialogue is a form of verbal sparring. The characters struggle for power on a battlefield where the stakes are extremely high. Martin Esslin has observed, “One of the interlocutors will dominate, the other will have difficulty getting a word in edgewise; one will have the wider vocabulary, a quicker response reaction than the other.”

Pinter’s characters, most notably in *The Room*, have several other modes of noncommunication, as well. Rose, the protagonist of *The Room*, speaks largely to fill the void of silence and to obscure her own fears. Many characters in *The Room* communicate in a vague manner, which acts as camouflage for menacing intent and actual confusion. Inattention and half-listening abound in a complex weave with hostility and the desire to colonize. Finally, in both *The Room* and *Celebration* we find rare moments of actual empathetic communication, which stand in contrast to the enormity of conversation in these worlds. All of these modes of dialogue are (sometimes painfully) familiar to us. While Pinter has been labeled an absurdist, the avoidances, silences, rapid-fire insults, and blanket of chatter throughout his plays all reflect the same world that each of us moves in every day.

Sparring lays the groundwork for virtually all exchange in *Celebration*, becoming the norm for these characters’ marital, sibling, and business communications. Sparring requires consistent avoidance of actual communication. For instance, we never see the women in *Celebration* express
hurt after a blow from their husbands. A. R. Braunmuller, in his essay “Harold Pinter: The Metamorphosis of Memory,” suggests that Pinter’s characters do not fail to communicate, but in fact fear and flee communication. Silence and speech are used to deliberately circumvent communication rather than inadvertently hindering it.

Another effective avoidance of communication is the manufacture of speech to obscure fears. In The Room, Rose’s opening monologue fills the void of Bert’s silence, becoming a kind of self-hypnosis. “This is alright for me. Go on Bert, have a bit more bread. . . . No, this room’s alright for me. I mean, you know where you are. . . . We’re quiet, we’re alright, we’re happy up here.” Her speech simultaneously affixes menace to the terrain outside the room. “It’s very cold out. I can tell you, its murder. I don’t know how they live down there [in the basement]. It’s asking for trouble.” Rose’s worldview evokes Braunmuller’s suggestion that Pinter’s characters “see around themselves those conditions and qualities which they fear within themselves and cannot or do not express.” Rose’s primary fear is invasion, which materializes in the constant stream of visitors to her room.

It has been pointed out that Rose’s fear reflects a cultural isolationism and xenophobia that took hold in Britain during the 1950s. Esslin relates Rose’s anxiety to “the cruelty of the post-Holocaust, postnuclear world itself. . . . The frantic search for a territory of one’s own, a safe haven from which the world can be excluded.” Rose’s fear has many layers. There seem to be many reasons why her dialogue with the world has shut down, why she can no longer speak to it or through it.

The only speech we hear from Rose’s husband, Bert, is his description of his drive, awash with violent sexualized projections. He projects an inert world available for his active manipulation. This seems to be the flip side of Rose’s fear of a murderous outside world. What does Bert fear? Anything that might resist or escape his control. We understand this when he screams, “Lice!” at Riley. Seeing Riley as an invader, Bert conjures up a frightening image of the uncontrollable proliferation of vermin to degrade him.

Why is it so difficult to convey information in this room? Sometimes it’s because the speaker is trying to avoid disclosing certain facts. We realize later that Mr. Kidd’s vagueness on his first visit to the room was motivated partly by a wish to avoid telling Bert about Riley, who is waiting in the basement to see Rose. He steers conversation away from the basement, remains vague about the number of floors in the house, and quickly manipulates the discussion into memories of the past that may or may not be true. Rose’s conversation with the Sands is similarly strained. Their speech seems to ride a disorienting line between an inability to process basic information and deliberate menace. The Sands are looking for a room to rent. They have been told that Room 7, Rose’s room, is vacant, and they are there, in some sense, to colonize.

In contrast, the moment Mr. Kidd and Rose desire most eagerly to converse becomes another moment of confusion, suggesting that Pinter’s characters do actually fail at communication in addition to fleeing it. After the Sands leave, Mr. Kidd enters and both Rose and Mr. Kidd exclaim their need to speak to each other. They talk past each other like two vaudevillians: Rose interrogates Mr. Kidd about her room being vacant while Mr. Kidd tries to convince Rose to allow Riley to come upstairs. It takes nine exchanges before
either of them actually hears what the other is saying. Finally Rose asks, “Who?” in response to Mr. Kidd’s, “You’ve got to see him.” Rose and Mr. Kidd are each so wrapped up in their own needs and fears and anxieties that they cannot hear what the other is saying.

Riley in *The Room* and the Waiter in *Celebration* both invoke alternative methods of communication involving empathy. *Celebration* ends with the Waiter describing a memory of himself as a boy looking at ships through a telescope with his grandfather. The Waiter gains no advantage in any power play from this last speech. He is the only one left onstage, speaking to himself, or to the audience, or to no one in particular. He simply tries to speak honestly about his bewilderment. What becomes clear is his crippling inability to understand the meaning of life.

In *The Room*, Riley, who has come to see Rose, seems to be the only character in the play who knows what is going on, what has gone on in the past, and what will help now. Riley is also capable of actual empathy, a rare quality in Pinter’s world. Physically, Riley embodies vulnerability. He is unable to see. He bears an Irish name and black skin, representing two social groups suffering oppression and trauma. He is an easy target for Bert’s violence. Yet he takes the considerable risk of carrying a message of possible emancipation to Rose. He possesses the power to call her by what may be her true name. In response she eventually softens and begins to acknowledge her isolation. “The day is a hump, I never go out.” Soon after, she admits, “I’ve been here,” as if grasping the fact of her own presence for the first time.

In the final scene of *The Room*, Riley is attacked and Rose inexplicably takes on his physical blindness. The quality of blindness seems to be transported from Riley’s body to hers in a kind of direct physical dialogue—a transformative dialogue which contrasts with the sparring and power-wielding exchanges typical of Pinter’s characters. Across the hauntingly blurred borders between their identities and bodies, Rose and Riley are knit together in empathetic communication.
Questions to Consider

On The Room

1. What immediate sense do you get from the set of *The Room*? What is the relationship of the room to the outside world for Rose? For Bert? What kind of shelter does it seem to provide? At what cost?

2. What adjectives would you use to describe Bert and Rose’s relationship? Identify some of the unspoken agreements they seem to have made with each other about their relationship and how to interact with each other.

3. Create a story for each of the characters: Where did they come from? What were they doing an hour before the play began? A year? What do they do for a living? What do they want? How do they go about getting it? What is their relationship to the other characters in the play? How does each character’s past life affect his or her behavior and personality in the present? What was Rose’s life like before she moved into this room? How did she meet Bert?

4. What do you think the rest of the house looks like? What is its history? Who lives there now, and who has lived there in the past? Describe the world outside the house: the historical period, the weather, the surrounding community, social conditions, etc. What information is given to you (e.g., in the characters’ dialogue, the costumes, and the set, sound, and lighting design) that helps you answer these questions? What feelings and descriptions do the basement and upstairs areas seem to evoke in each of the characters?

5. Some critics argue that *The Room* is one long introduction with a decisive climax and no development. Others argue that the introduction consists of Rose’s long monologue, the development consists of the sequence of visitors to the room, and the climax consists of Bert attacking Riley. How would you describe the structure and narrative rhythm of the play?

6. Like many of Pinter’s plays, *The Room* turns on questions of otherness and foreignness. How is the issue of race used as a marker of foreignness in the play? Find the major moments in the play where race becomes an overt issue. How are references to or impressions about race and foreignness used by the various characters in the play?

7. What is Riley’s relationship to Rose? How (and why) does this relationship shift throughout their encounter? What makes Riley’s emotional presence different from that of the other characters?

8. Riley has been described by critics alternately as a figure of death, of Christ, of the oppressive and inescapable demands of family, and as a mythical magic man sent to liberate Rose. Pinter insists that Riley is not a symbol but is a character as real as any other. What about Riley’s character allows for such ambiguity? What is your sense of who he is and what he means when he says he’s come to take Rose “home”? 
On Celebration

1. How do the characters spar with each other? What are they trying to gain? What do they have to lose? What are some 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?

2. Which character do you find most interesting? Why does he or she appeal to you? What more would you like to know about him or her? How does each character’s behavior support or undermine the information revealed in the dialogue? Do you think the dialogue is realistic? Do the characters seem to say what they are really thinking and feeling? If not, how do we begin to understand what the characters are really thinking and feeling?

3. How is sex used in the gender war going on in Celebration? Identify the different ways in which sex is used to gain advantage over the opponent on either side.

4. Lambert says that he and Matt are “strategy consultants.” What do you think they do for a living?

5. Would you want to spend time with these people? Why or why not?

6. It is often said that Pinter’s characters use memory as a weapon against each other. How and why do they do this in Celebration? Do you think the characters are always telling the truth when they recall a past event? Are they misremembering, misrepresenting, or outright lying? If the past is that flexible, what does that say about the present? Can you ever pin down the “truth” about an event? What is the “truth” with respect to memory?

7. Many of Pinter’s plays revolve around a family event or ritual that marks the passage of time (The Birthday Party, The Homecoming, The Tea Party, Celebration). Why do you think this is? How does the pressure and the volatility of these events lend itself to Pinter’s themes? What are Pinter’s themes?

8. Describe the Waiter’s relationship to his grandfather. What are the grandfather’s most striking qualities, as the Waiter describes him? How much of the Waiter’s description of his grandfather’s life do you believe is true? How does the Waiter’s relationship with his grandfather mirror the other relationships in the play?

9. Can you imagine what some versions of the “door to get out of life” (mentioned by the Waiter at the end of the play) would look like? What, in the context of the play, could the “mystery of life” be? Why would the Waiter want to get out of life?

10. How are Celebration and The Room similar? How are they different? Why do you think Pinter chose to present them together in a double bill?
For More Information . . .


Complete Works: One (The Birthday Party; The Room; The Dumb Waiter; A Slight Ache; A Night Out; The Black and White; The Examination). New York: Grove Press, 1977.

Complete Works: Two (The Caretaker; The Dwarfs; The Collection; The Lover; Night School; Revue Sketches). New York: Grove Press, 1977.

Complete Works: Three (Mac; The Homecoming; Tea Party; Landscape; Silence; Old Times; Betrayal). New York: Grove Press, 1977.


Web Sites of Interest


www.odc.edu/academic/pinter/. The Harold Pinter Society Web page.