
THEATRE

Pinter's Progress

By Roger Scruton



IMPORTANT PLAY-WRIGHTS do not just interpret the world; they also change it. Since their invention the Shakespearean types have dominated both life and literature, and there is

scarcely a suburban residence in modern England that could not be adapted to the dramatic requirements of a Falstaff, a Lear, or a Hamlet. Jonson, Sheridan, and Congreve added their quota of charlatans and fops, while Beaumarchais and Goldoni taught the lower orders to share the limelight with their masters. The theatrical moulding of human personality continued until the novel—that secret weapon of the bourgeoisie—captured the market in manners. Under the impact of Smollett and Dickens the theatre dwindled into melodrama. The swan-songs of Oscar Wilde and Noël Coward provided splendid caricatures; but it was soon perceived that they are of limited utility. Lady Bracknell may hack her way through social undergrowth; but what does she do at the breakfast table, and what does she do in bed? You can be Hamlet anywhere, and at any time, but Lady Bracknell only in company, and at most once a day. Roles which have such circumscribed application are of little service to the modern person, whose life is mainly conducted in private, and who seeks guidance in the most intimate predicaments.

Ibsen's characters announced this new state of being to the world. They came on to the stage clad in roles which hampered them and which they were visibly impatient to discard. They sought for a tone of voice adapted to the solitude to which fate had consigned them. Out of desire to be deeper than appearances, they harboured private, even anti-social, intentions. By a miracle Ibsen transformed their lives into drama. He forced communication from creatures too stark and self-

preoccupied to measure their words by any public standard of decorum. As a result, they were destroyed by the enormity of their own language, driven to tragic finality by the rash exaggeration of their speech. In Ibsen's drama it is the very failure of the characters to become characteristic that constitutes the success and meaning of the play. Hence there is no theatre less theatrical, no theatre less able to renew our wardrobe of worn-out social roles.

THE 20TH-CENTURY STAGE has shown a remarkable reversion to type. Habituated to the monstrosities of Ibsen, critics did not at first understand the language of Samuel Beckett's tramps, or Pinter's proles. What is in fact pure, distilled, social utterance, was passed off as "Theatre of the Absurd", whose merits were no different from those of Eugène Ionesco. It seemed impossible that people, real people, should speak like this, that they should walk about the stage without once mentioning some weight of moral isolation, some individual suffering or tragic destiny. Slowly, however, the public began to accept the new tones of voice.

Of course, it was a long chalk from Shakespeare. Nevertheless, here were styles, manners, qualities of experience, that could be taken from the sparse situations on the stage and applied repeatedly, from day to day. The idioms of Beckett and Pinter were as adaptable as Falstaff's bluster or Hamlet's grief. You could use them at parties, at meals, in the factory, on the bus. You could pick up girls with them, nor did they let you down in bed. To be a Beckett tramp or a Pinter prole gave you a handle on experience. It filled the voice with meaning, endowed hesitations with a kind of integrity, and lent authority equally to words and to silences. Although Beckett and Pinter have less in common than meets the eye, nevertheless they share a fundamental premise: their characters are raw, vulnerable, dangerously exposed to one another. They speak words care-

fully, with painful consideration, as though every excess of communication puts their existence at risk. Words are swords to them, but also shields. The characters are ill at ease in company, but alert to language. Hence their utility for the modern theatre-goer, who lives, eats, drinks and breathes embarrassment, and who is never more embarrassed than by his recognition that he has no great message, and no private destiny, to convey.

SINCE his majestic attempt to “eff the ineffable” in the trilogy of novels, Beckett’s literary career has involved a paring away, a steady elimination of all embellishments to his central theme. Although Beckett defines social sentiments, in social language, he has, in the end, only one character, and that character is a living (“if you call that living”) contradiction: the self who struggles vainly to be the object of its own regard, the ghost which flits before every aspiration. To present this theme, Beckett originally required hallucinatory details, aborted stories, quarrelsome observations, narrated by subjects who fade first into each other, and then into the page. Beckett’s subsequent minimalism is a stylistic achievement, an emancipation from redundancies.

Pinter’s career has been in a way comparable. The new triptych of short tableaux, *Other Places* (premiered in London this autumn at the Cottesloe Theatre), when seen in relation to *The Birthday Party*, or *The Caretaker*, represents a considerable economy and condensation. But Pinter’s minimalism, while influenced by Beckett, is quite unrelated to the style or meaning of Beckett’s recent playlets and pamphlets. It proceeds, not from the attempt to whittle down a single experience to its metaphysical pith, but rather from a constant venturing into new realms of experience, so that hesitation and silence take on increasingly masterful forms. Beckett’s tone of voice is tetchy, disappointed, a kind of *gran rifiuto*, in the face of the perpetual elusiveness both of the “thou” and the “I.” Pinter’s voice has no such universal meaning. While it grows always from the impossible confrontation of human beings and their arbitrary desires, it varies minutely with the situation to which it is applied. Pinter’s scenarios are carefully observed and ultra-realistic representations of English society. There has been a marked “upward mobility” over time; but even the most recent pieces remain wedded to actual situations, studied by an author whose ear for ordinary speech is preternaturally fine.

Family Voices (the first of the three tableaux) tells of a house in which characters from all periods of Pinter’s career are assembled: a sluttish, good-for-nothing Mrs Withers; an old proletarian Mr Withers; another Mr Withers whose insane

theatricality allows Pinter to recapture the set-piece style of the early plays; even a Lady Withers, whose title, however, proves baffling to the adolescent narrator. In this play, as in *Landscape*, there is no dialogue, only interlocking speech, as one character’s voice flows into the silence vacated by the other’s. A mother and a son write to each other letters which are never sent, or which, if sent, never arrive at their destination. To their lonely, reaching voices, a third is added, that of the man, husband of the one, father of the other, who has died since contact was lost. The situation deprives Pinter of the device with which he established his tone of voice, the familiar English repartee. The tense atmosphere of *The Caretaker* depends upon a to-ing and fro-ing of question and answer, from which the set speeches emerge as declarations of a longing comic in its ordinariness, and pathetic in its inability to elicit a response. *Family Voices* consists of questions which cannot be answered, and answers that wing off into the void in hopeless search for questions that would explain them. Were the mother and son actually to make contact, one feels, the intensity of their communication would be unbearable. But their non-communication is the source of a new comedy and pathos, as each slowly adjusts to the absence of the other.

The connection which is feared and longed for in *Family Voices* is granted in the sequel, *Victoria Station*. A cab-driver is contacted by his controller, who speaks from an office upstage, while the driver answers from the illuminated car below. Brilliant acting from Paul Rogers and Martin Jarvis turns this little *jeu d’esprit* into high comedy, although again with a note of pathos. The controller, who obtains only bizarre, vacant-seeming responses, is at first exasperated, then angry, and then filled with loathing for this 274 who lies like a barrier across the stream of ordinary experience. But the loathing turns to need, and finally to a kind of tenderness; the driver likewise develops a need for the controller, imploring him not to seek the services of any rival. “Don’t have anything to do with 135”, he cries, “He’s not your man. He’ll lead you into blind alleys by the dozen. They all will. Don’t leave me. I’m your man. I’m the only one you can trust. . . .” And strangely, despite 274’s inability to understand the simplest order, his words ring true.

The two characters are in the original Pinter mould: ordinary people suddenly thrown out of orbit by an arbitrary act of communication. But words, cast across the distance between the office and the cab, acquire unpredictable meanings. The characters become increasingly vulnerable with every verbal impact. By the time the scene fades it is clear that their lives have been irreversibly transformed. The controller leaves his office in search of the driver, like a man who turns his back on home and family for the sake of some catastrophic love.

A *KIND OF ALASKA* the final tableau, continues the theme of distance. However, the distance is not of space but of time.

A victim of sleeping sickness (such as described by Oliver Sacks in *Awakenings*) is brought to life by an injection of *L-Dopa*, after 29 years of comatose inertia. The play describes her bewildered reaction, a child's soul in a middle-aged body, the fallen face of a ruined aunt, who listens to a voice, her own voice, describing birthdays, boy-friends, and parties. Judi Dench's stunning performance conveys both the fear of the woman, and the forthright, virtuous cheekiness of the child, as they contend for possession of a body which has lain vacant for a generation. The woman, Deborah, is attended by a doctor, and by the doctor's wife, Deborah's younger sister. The effect of Deborah's illness is captured by the doctor's words: "Your sister was twelve when you were left for dead. When she was twenty I married her. She is a widow. I have lived with you. . . ." The words of the bystanders are succinct, hesitant, overcome, while the sufferer herself rushes into speech, stumbles, retreats, and then impetuously rushes again.

The scene is realistic, and uncompromisingly painful. It perfectly illustrates Pinter's boldness, and his appetite for new material, in which he shows a scrupulous attention to an actual, but uncanny, predicament. Beckett's Cartesian observer could never sustain such concentrated interest. The Beckettian subject lives only in the dark, the limedark of his ruminations. While filled with compassion, it is a compassion inspired by failure, itself born of metaphysical impossibility, to relate to the world or to himself. It is, in Malone's words, the "foul feeling of pity that I have often felt in the presence of things, especially little portable things in wood or stone, and which made me wish to have them about me and keep them always, so that I stooped and picked them up and put them in my pocket, often with tears, for I wept up to a great age, never having really evolved in the fields of affection and passion in spite of everything. . . ."

This is nothing like the fellow-feeling which Pinter carries into all predicaments, and which underlies his repeated disclosure that communication, far from being impossible, is in fact too much with us, a constant threat to our half-established natures. Words assail us with the inescapable fact of other people, and we try in vain to escape their accusations. "What do you mean by that?" asks Emma, in *Betrayal*. "I don't mean anything by it", replies Jerry. "But what are you trying to say by that?" she persists. "Jesus. I'm not trying to say anything. I've said precisely what I wanted to say." But the implication is firmly established that, merely by speaking, Jerry has said too much, or at least far more than he intended.

One feature of Deborah's situation might have appealed to Beckett: she is beyond the world,

lodged in her body like a pilot in a sinking ship. Unlike Beckett, however, Pinter cannot accept the situation as anything other than abnormal. For him, as for Deborah herself, it is a terrible falling away from the life that is to be desired. Hence the situation becomes urgent; Deborah disconcerts us, like someone in an epileptic fit. The threat that lurks in language concentrates in her; we can pierce her in a thousand ways with knowledge; we can make her squirm. But because she is not in control of her experience, it is we who squirm, fearing our own aggression. Alone among Pinter's characters she is utterly alone. Her voice cries from an unreachable ultimacy of human experience, across an unbridgeable gulf of time. While we pity her, we do not know whether it is she, the child, or she, the woman, who evokes our sorrow.

THE CRITICS have been lavish in praise of *A Kind of Alaska*. But surely, whatever its merits, it cannot really be described as theatre. Deborah's unmanageable experience obliterates the drama. In the face of it, the subsidiary characters become gauche and frozen. None of the three can obtain a consistent tone of voice; in the nature of the case, every voice is suspect.

When Davies, the caretaker, describes his shoes, saying, "You see, they're gone, they're no good, the good's gone out of them", the idiom leaps out at us, joining us to the cheerful spirit of survival. In *Victoria Station*, the controller veneers his sentiments with idiom, saving us again from sharing his perplexity. In *A Kind of Alaska*, however, everything is stark, raw, absolute. The spectator, sensing the impossibility of response, suffers a growing discomfort. The Pinter voice no longer operates. . . . There is no consolation, no idiom, no normality. The spectator, outraged by sufferings which are without resolution, withdraws his futile sympathy.

Oliver Sacks was deeply disturbed by the effects of the drug *L-Dopa*. His description of the new miseries that were to confront his patients as they struggled, often in vain, to come to terms with the imperfect consciousness which their illness had left them, is heart-rending. It is hard to imagine a clearer refutation of the myth upon which Beckett has relied in all his writings—the myth of the transcendental spectator who lurks, untouched and untouchable, within the arbitrary folds of human flesh. Pinter has never given twopence for that myth. He rightly perceives that a nothing would do as well as this transcendental something about which nothing can be said. It is the writer's responsibility to study words; human beings exist, not behind, but within their utterance. Deborah is neither more nor less than the words which come from her. The theatre of embarrassment perpetually forces us to discard the illusion that there

is an ego hiding behind our words. But this refutation of the ego creates a need for its opposite, for community, for idiom, for the consoling tone of voice which turns the individual into a type, and disaster into comedy.

ONCE, ON THE ROAD to Notting Hill, Pinter came across a tramp, a familiar of those parts, who sometimes wheels his pram-load of rags and newspapers beneath my window, muttering through a beard clotted with drying slobber.

On this occasion the tramp had set up his newspapers in a pile before him. The bundle was detached, immobile, outside the sphere of his possessions. He berated it in an angry voice; under the impact of his insults, the bundle acquired an ego, or at least, as much of an ego as the rest of us. Crime upon crime was laid at its feet. As the frenzy of denunciation increased, the passers-by began to steer further and further away from him, until stepping precariously in line, along the edge of the curb. The tramp was bathed in sweat, his face red and swollen, as though from the discomfort that he caused.

Pinter had joined the line, and then duly swerved away. But as he did so the ranting stopped, and the voice cried "*Hello, Harold Pinter!*"

The playwright froze; the cursing was resumed at once, more loudly than before, and the eyes of the blushing tramp remained fixed on the pile of offending newspapers. Pinter hurried on, away from the street theatre in which he had been type-cast.

The tramp had recognised his author, but then turned from him towards the comfort of abusive words, refusing further contact. It was as though a choice had been made: Beckett or Pinter. The first gives you peace of a kind, but also immobility and isolation. The second gives you audience, meaning, social identity, but also a terrible consciousness of others. The tramp had chosen Pinter as his author, and then, in the very choice, regretted it, throwing himself with a renewed fervour into curses and insults. Deborah had made the same mistake, for she too could not survive the perception that she does not belong. She too was made untouchable by her rash and sudden contact; and she too, having no idiom to save her, blushing suffered in the centre of the stage.

One's People

My people, by whom I mean those curious sets
Of non-relations in provincial towns.
Sit ripening brightly in the Weltanschauung
Of other poets. Here is one who follows
A second-hand pair of shoes into the Courts
Of Social History. Another ransacks
His late unlettered father's bedside drawer
And finds dead ukeleles littered there.
What heraldic yet surreal landscapes!
To lie in the bed of your ancestors
And feel the fit. To hear the neighbourhood
Stirring in its ancient sleep and rhyme
The dead into their regiments of pain.
The poverty of old shoes runs away
With its own eloquence. And yet they write good books.

But I think of an England where the ghosts
Are restless solitaires or assassins.
They cannot speak but run about in sunlight
Demanding restoration of the birch
And death as public as the crime is private.
They have lost time. The Russians on Burns night
Celebrate their history of combustions.
Their people lie in complete unity
In graves as large as Europe and as lonely.

George Szirtes