

**REMY BUMPPO**

*think theatre*

# ***Old Times***

by Harold Pinter

STUDY GUIDE



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# HAROLD PINTER: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY



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Harold Pinter was born on October 10, 1930 in Hackney, a Jewish sect of East London. As a youth during World War II, Pinter was enrolled in a Hackney Downs School during which time he witnessed two German air raids which he says had a profound impact on his life. Throughout his schooling, Pinter wrote stories and poems for magazines which earned him a grant to attend the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, but finding the Academy unsuitable to his aspirations, Pinter feigned a nervous breakdown and dropped out. In his twenties, Pinter worked as a radio and stage actor, touring Ireland and England under the name David Baron. In 1956, Pinter married actress Vivien Merchant

(best known for her work in the 1966 film *Alfie*) who would later star in the stage and film versions of *The Homecoming*. In 1957, Pinter's first play, *The Room*, was "commissioned" by Henry Woolf and produced at the University of Bristol. This also marked the year that Pinter began writing what would scholars would call the "comedies of menace," or plays with seemingly innocent situations that become threatening and "absurd" as the characters behave inexplicably. His second play, *The Birthday Party* was a commercial and critical disaster, almost ending Pinter's playwriting career. Pinter's next play, *The Caretaker* (1960), earned him personal and commercial success. This play about power and the desire for domination also yielded observations about the human need for illusions, a theme common in his "memory plays."

In the late 1960s through 1980s, Pinter's "memory plays" (*Landscape* (1968), *Silence* (1969), *Old Times* (1971), *No Man's Land* (1975), *The Proust Screenplay* (1977), *Betrayal* (1978), *Family Voices* (1981), and *A Kind of Alaska* (1982)) dramatized the ambiguities of memory and focused on the blurred lines between past and present. Pinter's 1960s films - *The Servant*, *Accident* and *The Go-Between* - directed by Joseph Losey gained Pinter celebrity, but it was during these successes that his marriage to Vivien Merchant began disintegrating. Pinter entered into a seven year affair with Joan Bakewell which most likely informed his 1978 play *Betrayal*.

When Merchant filed for divorce in 1975, Pinter began living with Lady Antonia Fraser, a historian then-married to Sir Hugh Fraser. Merchant and Pinter finalized their divorce in 1977. Due to extreme unhappiness after the marriage and divorce, Merchant died from acute alcoholism in 1980. Pinter describes the time after Merchant's death as a "three year period of creative blankness." After this period, Pinter reemerged increasingly politically active, writing *Precisely*, *One for the Road*, *Party Time*, *Moonlight*, and *Ashes to Ashes*. His political plays critiqued oppression, torture, and other human rights abuses, playing into metaphors and realities for power and powerlessness. Pinter has been active in human rights issues, opposing 1991's Gulf

War, condemning NATO's intervention in the 1999 Kosovo War, and vehemently speaking out about his disgust with America's War in Afghanistan and Invasion of Iraq.

In 2001, Pinter was diagnosed with cancer of the esophagus. In 2005, Pinter announced his retirement: "I think I've written 29 plays. I think it's enough for me. I think I've found other forms now." On October 13, 2005, The Swedish Academy announced that Pinter was to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. They described his plays as such: "his plays uncover the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms." Due to his ailing health, Pinter could not receive his Nobel Prize in person, but his Nobel Lecture: *Art, Truth & Politics* provoked controversy and a surge in revivals of his works.

In October 2006, Pinter returned to the stage as an actor for nine performances in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* at the Royal Court Theatre for which he was critically and publicly acclaimed. Harold Pinter died this past year on December 24, 2008. His funeral was small and friends and family read selected works personally picked by Pinter for such an occasion.

## **HAROLD PINTER'S WORKS**

### **PLAYS**

*The Room* (1957)

*The Birthday Party* (1957)

*The Dumb Waiter* (1957)

*A Slight Ache* (1958)

*The Hothouse* (1958)

*The Caretaker* (1959)

*A Night Out* (1959)

*Night School* (1960)

*The Dwarfs* (1960)

*The Collection* (1961)

*The Lover* (1962)

*Tea Party* (1964)

*The Homecoming* (1964)

*The Basement* (1966)

*Landscape* (1967)

*Silence* (1968)

*Old Times* (1970)

*Monologue* (1972)

*No Man's Land* (1974)

*Betrayal* (1978)

*Family Voices* (1980)

*Other Places* (1982)

*A Kind of Alaska* (1982)

*Victoria Station* (1982)

*One For The Road* (1984)

*Mountain Language* (1988)

*The New World Order* (1991)

*Party Time* (1991)

*Moonlight* (1993)

*Ashes to Ashes* (1996)

*Celebration* (1999)

*Remembrance of Things Past* (2000)

### **SKETCHES**

*The Black and White* (1959)

*Interview* (1959)

*Trouble in the Works* (1959)

*Applicant* (1959)

*Last to Go* (1959)

*Dialogue Three* (1959)

*Request Stop* (1959)

*Night* (1969)

*Special Offer* (1959)

*Precisely* (1983)

*That's Your Trouble* (1959)

*Press Conference* (2002)

*That's All* (1959)

## **SCREENPLAYS**

*The Caretaker* (1963)  
*The Servant* (1963)  
*The Pumpkin Eater* (1963)  
*The Quiller Memorandum* (1965)  
*Accident* (1966)  
*The Birthday Party* (1967)  
*The Go-Between* (1969)  
*The Homecoming* (1969)  
*Langrishe Go Down* (1970) (adapted for TV 1978)  
*The Proust Screenplay* (1972)  
*The Last Tycoon* (1974)

*The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1980)  
*Betrayal* (1981)  
*Victory* (1982)  
*Turtle Diary* (1984)  
*The Handmaid's Tale* (1987)  
*Reunion* (1988)  
*Heat of the Day* (1988)  
*Comfort of Strangers* (1989)  
*The Trial* (1989)  
*The Dreaming Child* (1997)  
*The Tragedy of King Lear* (2000)

## **STAGE PRODUCTIONS DIRECTED BY HAROLD PINTER**

*The Collection* (1962)  
*The Lover and The Dwarfs* (1963)  
*The Birthday Party* (1964)  
*The Man in the Glass Booth* (1967)  
*Exiles* (1970)  
*Butley* (1971)  
*Next of Kin* (1974)  
*Otherwise Engaged* (1975) and *New York* (1977)  
*Blithe Spirit* (1976)  
*The Innocents* (1976)  
*The Rear Column* (1978)  
*Close of Play* (1979)  
*The Hothouse* (1980)  
*Quartermaine's Terms* (1981)  
*Incident at Tulse Hill* (1982)  
*The Trojan War Will Not Take Place* (1983)  
*One for the road* (1984)  
*Victoria Station* (1984)

*The Common Pursuit* (1984)  
*Sweet Bird of Youth* (1985)  
*Circe and Bravo* (1986)  
*Vanilla* (1990)  
*Party Time and Mountain Language* (1991)  
*The New World Order* (1991)  
*Oleanna* (1993)  
*Landscape* (1994)  
*Taking Sides* (1995)  
*Twelve Angry Men* (1996)  
*Ashes to Ashes* (1996)  
*Life Support* (1997)  
*Ashes to Ashes, Italy* (1997)  
*Ashes to Ashes, France* (1998)  
*The Late Middle Classes* (1999)  
*Celebration and The Room* (2000)  
*No Man's Land* (2001)  
*Old Masters* (2004)

## **FILMS AND TV DIRECTED BY HAROLD PINTER**

Simon Gray's *Butley* (1974)  
Simon Gray's *The Rear Column* (1980)  
*The Hothouse* (1982)  
*Mountain Language* (1988)

*Party Time* (1992)  
*Landscape* (1995)  
*Ashes to Ashes (Italy)* (1998)

## **HONORS, AWARDS, AND PRIZES**

Pinter declined a British knighthood in 1996, when it was offered to him on behalf of Queen Elizabeth II by British Prime Minister John Major.

In December 2007, the British Library announced it had acquired Pinter's literary archive for over £1.1 million (approx. \$2.24 million) on behalf of the British nation.

Italia Prize for *The Lover*, 1962

Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE), 1966

Shakespeare Prize (Hamburg, Germany), 1970

European Prize for Literature (Vienna, Austria), 1973

Laurence Olivier/BBC Award for Best new Play, *Betrayal*, 1979

Pirandello Prize (Palermo), 1980

Donatello Prize, 1982

Gile Cooper Award for *Family Voices*, 1982

Elmer Holmes Bobst Award for Arts and Letters, 1984

Companion of Literature (Royal Society of Literature), 1990

Chilean Order of Merit, 1992

The David Cohen British Literature Prize, 1995

Honorary fellow of Queen Mary, University of London

Laurence Olivier Special Award, 1996

Moliere d'honneur, Paris, in recognition of his life's work, 1997

Sunday Times Award for Literary Excellence, 1997

BAFTA Fellowship, 1997

Companion of Literature, RSL, 1998

The Critics' Circle Award for Distinguished Service to the Arts, 2000

Brianza Poetry Prize (Italy), 2000

South Bank Show Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Arts, 2001

ST Dupont Golden Pen Award, 2001 for a Lifetime's Distinguished Service to Literature  
"Premio Fiesole ai Maestri del Cinema", Italy, 2001

World Leaders Award (World Leaders: A Festival of Creative Genius, Toronto), 2001

Hermann Kesten Medallion for outstanding commitment on behalf of persecuted and imprisoned writers, awarded by German PEN (Berlin), 2001

Companion of Honour (CH) for services to Literature, 2002

Diploma *ad Honorem*, Teatro Filodrammatici (Milan), 2004

Evening Standard Awards, 50th Anniversary - Special Award, 2004

Wilfred Owen Poetry Prize, 2005

Franz Kafka Prize, 2005

Nobel Prize in Literature, 2005

Europe Theatre Prize, 2006

Serbian Foundation Prize, 2006

St. George Plaque of the City of Kragujevac, 2006

Legion d'honneur, France, 2007

## HONORARY DEGREES

University of Reading, 1970  
University of Birmingham, 1971  
University of Glasgow, 1974  
University of East Anglia, 1974  
University of Stirling, 1979  
Brown University, 1982  
University of Hull, 1986  
University of Sussex, 1990  
University of East London, 1994  
University of Sofia, 1995  
University of Bristol, 1998

Goldsmiths, University of London, 1999  
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki,  
2000  
University of Florence, 2001  
University of Turin, 2002  
National University of Ireland, 2004  
University of Leeds, 2007  
University of Kragujevac, 2008  
University of Cambridge, 2008  
Central School of Speech and Drama,  
2008

## CHARLIE ROSE INTERVIEW: AN APPRECIATION OF HAROLD PINTER

(January 2, 2009)

*On January 2, 2009, after Pinter's passing, fame interviewer Charlie Rose broadcasted a special tribute to the writer, including segments from previous interviews with Pinter as well as others who commented on his work and legacy. This is a transcription of excerpts from that tribute.*

Harold Pinter has been called Britain's greatest living playwright. He has written 29 plays, 24 screen plays, and innumerable essays and poems. He has written for radio and for television. It is difficult to measure this man's contribution to modern drama, but we know this: he revolutionized the theatrical experience. His mastery of the written word, of paring down the English language to its most essential and powerful components has been recognized by all. His eloquent, insightful confrontation of some of the darkest themes of modern existence has rarely been matched. He has been, as well, an aggressive citizen participating in the great public debates of his time, never more engaged as in his strong opposition to the Iraq War.

**Harold Pinter:** Well there are one or two words left to be said as a matter of fact. One is resistance, which is embodied today in this magnificent gathering. And the other I direct precisely to Tony Blair, which is, "resign, resign, resign."

He has received numerous awards for his work, most notably the Nobel Prize in Literature. Because of a battle with cancer of the esophagus, he delivered his acceptance speech from London. The lecture was devoted to the creative act, his political passion, and the intersection of the two.

**HP:** I believe that despite the enormous odds which exist, unflinching, unswerving, fierce intellectual determination, as citizens to define the real truth of our lives and our societies, is a crucial obligation which devolves upon us all, it is in fact mandatory.

In January, 2006, the Prime Minister of France, Dominique de Villepin, came to London to present Pinter with one more honor, the Légion d'honneur.

Harold Pinter, who began his career as an actor using the name David Baron, performed often on the stage. In October 2006, despite his age and battle with cancer, he made a triumphant return in Samuel Beckett's one man play *Krapp's Last Tape*. His performance was called "Beyond acting...a coming together that is more than just a performance...a moment of theater history." [Alan Cowell, *The New York Times*].

In a previous Interview, 3/1/07 (the subsequent indented blocks are from the same interview in 2007):

**CR:** *Krapp's Last Tape*. You came back to the theatre. Why did you do that?

**HP:** Well I finally couldn't resist it. I'd been quite ill and I said I didn't think I'd have the energy to do it. But Ian Rickson, the director of the Royal Court, who is retiring now from that position, and my wife, kept going at me, very gently, and said "don't say no." So finally I said yes.

**CR:** It is said to be made for you. A. It's your friend Samuel Beckett. B It's an older man looking back when he was 39 from voices on tape. Did you feel natural in those words?

**HP:** Yes, it seemed to fit me pretty well actually.

**CR:** How so?

**HP:** Well I'm 76. In fact I am older than Krapp. He is 69, but I can pretend to be 69. And I had my memories of this. And I did indeed know Samuel Beckett pretty well. I was very...we were close friends. And so I was very excited to do acting in one of his plays, which I had never done.

Indeed, it is intriguing that this performance was the first ever collaboration between two of the greatest playwrights of the second half of the twentieth century. Good friends and fellow cricket lovers. Both recipients of the Nobel Prize in Literature: Beckett in 1969, and Pinter in 2005. Both known for their mastery of language, both coming from the absurdist tradition, and both considered to have had profound impact. In *Krapp's Last Tape*, they are joined for the first time, and perhaps the last. [...]

Here is what the Nobel committee said of his achievement: "Pinter restored theater to its basic elements: an enclosed space and unpredictable dialogue, where people are at the mercy of one another and pretense crumbles" (from the announcement of the Nobel Prize in literature by the permanent secretary Horace Engdahl, Oct. 13, 2005)

**CR:** Do you feel like you brought something to the theatre that was not there, [...].

**HP:** No, I would make no claims for of my work on any such basis. But such achievement, I have literally no idea whether I have brought something new to the theater. Other people have said something to that effect.

Pinter himself is reticent when it comes to his place in modern theatre; not so his contemporaries. To many of them, Harold Pinter remains one of the most significant dramatists of our time.

**Tom Stoppard:** He has made his own way of seeing the world, seeing drama actually, and seeing human relationships. He has made an awful lot of people come around and see things the way he sees them. There's also Harold Pinter the polemicist, something else too. I am very fond of him. After many many years, literally in awe of him.

**David Hare:** Harold has been hugely influential. You could say to a fault. It's not his fault, but you could say that every young writer who writes now, writes with Harold's ear. They write dialogue that sounds like Harold's dialogue. They write plays that people trap, not able to communicate. You know Harold has been massively influential.

**David Mamet:** He and Beckett in 20<sup>th</sup> century English literature took the narration out of drama and they put the poetry back. [...]

**John Patrick Shanley:** Pinter infused his love into poetry, into the poetry of the theatre. And his sense of humor and his bitterness, and his sexual outrageousness and perversity, he all put into these strangely bright colors in the theatre.

**Sam Mendes:** For me he stands alone. He is the great 20<sup>th</sup> century European playwright alongside Samuel Beckett. I can't think of anyone else that has actually changed the way we speak and the way we write and the way understand dialogue the way Pinter has. [...]

**CR:** What, of the things that have been said, resonated most with you?

**HP:** [...] that there is a sense of excitement of my work on the stage; I hope that is the case and I hope that remains the case. When it's good, it's good. I mean when the acting is good and the directing is good, I do derive a great sense of excitement about the whole thing.

**CR:** Have you watched a play that you have written and the production of it was better than what you had in your mind?

**HP:** No.

**CR:** The other thing that people say about you is that there is a direct line from Beckett to Pinter and from Pinter to Stoppard and others.

**HP:** Well you don't live in a vacuum as a writer. I have read a great deal in my life. One of the people I certainly read way back about fifty years ago was Beckett, and he left a great impression on me. I was writing at the time myself, but nevertheless, I wouldn't dream of denying that people like Beckett, Kafka, Joyce, Dostoyevsky left great imprints on one's very being.

**CR:** Was it the power of language that did it?

**HP:** Well you get sucked into the power of language, but also vision. A certain vision of life on earth, which I thought, in all those cases, was singular. And very, very personal. I think I probably got some kind of vision myself. [...]

**CR:** I don't know how you can write what you write and not have a very realistic sense of who you are and what you have done and what talents you have. Is it just modesty?

**HP:** I can't make any such judgment of my own work. The one thing I do know of my own work is that it makes me laugh. I really do get a lot of laughs out of it. When I hear other actors saying the lines, I join in their own relish.

**CR:** You would rather write a line that generates a laugh than some piercing insight?

**HP:** No, I believe in two things. One is get a laugh if it's a natural laugh. And the other is stop it, dead, by shutting the audience up. I have always found myself in a contest with the audience, and I have enjoyed that contest. And there is only one winner.

**CR:** Either the audience wins or you win.

**HP:** It has to be me. [...]

**CR:** There are times on stage when you can feel the contest.

**HP:** Very much so. I had this memorable, unforgettable night in New York with *The Homecoming*. When the lights went up on the first night, the opening, the audience hated it immediately. They saw the set, they saw the actors dressed in an unappealing way, and they audience hated it. And there was a tremendous contest that night, in which the actors detested the audience as much as the audience detested them. And finally, the actors won, and the audience, in their bowties, slumped in their seats, defeated.

**CR:** And was that performance, that night, better than it had been before?

**HP:** Yes, it was a great performance. [...]

**CR:** The writing of a play, how do you approach it? Do you look for an incident? You look for what to get you going?

**HP:** Just an image or word gets me going. [...]

**CR:** And the characters take over. And you have said it's almost like a dog on a leash, you have to let them do their thing, but you always have to be in control and be able to call on them and pull them back.

**HP:** If you can manage it, yeah. It's quite a task sometimes.

**CR:** The joy is you don't know where they are going to go.

**HP:** That is true. [...]

# PINTERESQUE

*"I think what I try to do in my plays is to get to this recognizable reality of the absurdity of what we do and how we behave and how we speak."*<sup>1</sup>

Pinter's plays can be categorized threefold: Comedies of Menace, Memory plays, and Political plays. In all three forms of Pinter's plays, the thematic through line is that the characters are in a constant struggle for power or domination over a particular situation or person. For the purposes of this study guide, this section will briefly outline the characteristics of the Comedies of Menace and the Memory plays (of which *Old Times* is part), and then define the techniques and styles common to Pinter's plays.

Pinter's earliest plays, the Comedies of Menace, started with *The Birthday Party* in 1957 through *The Basement* in 1966. In these plays, Pinter uses "seemingly recognizable characters and locales" that possess a "quietly menacing atmosphere"<sup>2</sup>. The characters and places are common, recognizable to audiences (a trend in Pinter's work), but there is a mystery to the characters and locales as well. The place is confined and the characters are thus confined within. At first there is no sense of urgency in this room, but as the play continues and the characters increasingly battle for dominance of the space and of each other. "An undefinable danger and violence lurking just below the surface" or outside of the room is amplified by the characters' "sparse and oblique dialogue." (1107). Pinter's use of recognizable elements allows audiences to identify themselves with the situations and characters, but Pinter also creates a barrier between his plays and audience, an uncertain world beyond the recognizable that sparks and undeniable fear.

'There is comedy in life and there is menace in life, and I think the two things certainly go together—to a certain extent.' Importantly, [Pinter] cautions, 'there comes a point where things cease to be funny.' (Tynan, n.p.)

Pinter acknowledges that his comedy, informed by terror, links the comic and tragic through the horror and absurdity beneath:

'I think what I try to do in my plays is get to this recognisable reality of the absurdity of what we do and how we behave and how we speak. The point is people laugh at absurdity, because it is recognisable and secondly it verges on the unknown. We don't quite know where this absurdity is fixed. Of course it isn't fixed anywhere. The fact that it's verging on the unknown leads us to the next step which seems to occur in my plays; there's a kind of horror about it and I think that this horror and absurdity go together.'

(Wildman, n.p.)"<sup>3</sup>

These characteristics of "recognizable reality," the unknown, absurdity and laughter are not subject only to Pinter's Comedies of Menace, in fact they are just the beginnings of their full development. Simply put, the Comedies of Menace seem to imply *violence* from either within the room or outside the room, more so than his later plays.

In the Memory plays, dating from *Landscape* in 1968 to *A Kind of Alaska* in 1982, Pinter explores the power of the past and memory. In these plays, characters disagree about their reminiscences, contradicting themselves, remembering events one way and then forgetting it ever happened; memory becomes a weapon. The past plays a very active role in the relationships of the characters as well as the action of the present situation.

1. Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. 1st ed. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961. p. 205.

2. "Harold Pinter." *Drama: Classical to Contemporary*. Ed. John C. Coldewey and W. R. Streitberger. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001. 1107-8.

3. Prentice, Penelope. *The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic*. New York: Garland, 2000. p. xxxix-xl.

The memory plays “introduce as equally important the force of memory, the past's ability to encroach upon the present with an attendant role in the future. What is remembered often threatens to engulf and overtake what is currently happening [...]. *Old Times*, *No Man's Land* and *Betrayal* all focus on loves past and present, where when memory threatens to invalidate past well-being it may destroy present happiness. By questioning what characters believe they remember, the conflict dismantles the illusions which sustain characters' lives no less nakedly than in the early plays. All three full-length plays of the period also explore the more elusive aspects of the powerplays among private levels of the comfortable, publicly visible middle class, where any hidden threat from a larger organization or society is almost entirely internalized, even seemingly absent, and where the conflict for power turns on who remembers what correctly—a conflict which is, however, no less deadly.

Although the conflict may not actually threaten characters' lives or even public position in the outer world, almost all, once stripped of illusion, lose some portion of the self that makes life worth living. Moreover, when the conflict, now couched in the subtlety of middle-class courtesy, re-emerges in the full-length liminal plays, it does so with a fierce vengeance as unrelenting as in the early plays.<sup>4</sup>

Here, the characters muse over the past, truthfully or not, and the audience is unlikely to know who is telling the truthful past and who is not. By recreating the past to win what is currently at stake, whether that is a person, an event, or a simple need for dominance in a room, the characters become completely engulfed in their “memories” and at some point completely lose the past and the battle for dominance in the present. Through these reminiscences of the characters' memories, as they falsify or accurately recount the events, the original experience, the recollection, and the reality in which they are currently living all become part of their memory, thus Anna's line, “There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened. There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place”

For Pinter, subtext is the most important aspect of his plays and characters. According to Penelope Prentice, author of *The Pinter Ethic*, “[H]e trusts his audiences to understand his text and subtext without road signs”<sup>5</sup>. Prentice continues to assert that Pinter has challenged contemporary dramatic structure through his exploration of presence and non-presence, beginnings and ends, and reality and fiction that questions “the nature of time, memory, and perhaps most important, the nature of love”<sup>6</sup>. This desire for love is what propels his characters to strive for dominance over each other; it becomes a “struggle for survival”<sup>7</sup>. It is also Pinter's use of conflict through the dominant/subservient relationship that drives character choices and consequences, resulting in an ultimate question of human power or powerlessness. Prentice finds that “the central conflict for power [...] drives his work across scale to propel each beat, each scene, [and] each act,” while each character choice “may have resounding but identical consequences within the larger arc of the whole play's action”<sup>8</sup>. The characters' choices to dominate can destroy relationships on various levels: the characters' personal world, the world of the audience, and the world beyond the audience.

4. Prentice, Penelope. *The Pinter Ethic: The Erotic Aesthetic*. New York: Garland, 2000. p. xxxix-xl.

5. *ibid.* p. 3

6. *ibid.* p. 3-4

7. *ibid.* p. 7

8. *ibid.* p. 4-5

Pinter himself has indicated that his purpose is to observe what happens to people. In order to do this, he usually chooses as his central image a room—any ordinary room where people live—to serve as a microcosm of the world. In the room people feel safe. Outside are only alien forces; inside there is warmth and light. It is a womb in which people can feel secure. The conflict in Pinter's plays occurs when one of the outside forces penetrates into the room and disrupts the security of its occupants. Pinter's role is that of dispassionate observer, and much of the apparent difficulty of his plays stems from the fact that he writes them as if he were eavesdropping on his characters and recording their often pointless stream of consciousness...

[To] Pinter human beings are simply inscrutable, to themselves as well as to others. They may be emptiness surrounded by illusion, but they may also, without knowing it, possess a solid center of reality. The point is that they do not know and are too frightened to find out....<sup>9</sup>

It is "the brutality of [Pinter's] characters to one another, their lack of sympathy for one another, and their demands for dominance [which] have all become hallmarks of late-twentieth century life".<sup>10</sup> Pinter has unveiled the truth and language of people through his drama and that is what is considered Pinteresque.

## **PINTER'S DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES AND STYLE**

(from Monarch Notes p. 54-66 and *Pinter: The Playwright* by Martin Esslin)<sup>11</sup>

For the most part, Pinter's dramatic techniques are very simple, and much of his success as a dramatist is based on this simplicity. [...]

Quite often several of these elements are used in conjunction with one another, either as the means of carrying the meaning or as the actual statement of meaning. Humor, for example, is used for specific reasons, just as language is, but the special use of language is also a source of humor, so that both elements fulfill Pinter's purpose of, say, exposing problems in communication and the resultant situation. They function simultaneously as the statement and the means of expressing the statement. The tightness and economy of the resulting play, together with a reconciliation and balancing of diverse elements creates a harmonic effect, a sense of orchestration so tangible that critics recognize the poetic, musical nature not only of the dialogue, but also of the piece in its entirety with its thematic overtones and resonant elements.

**STRUCTURE**: The basic structural device in the play is the framework of the power struggle, in which sex turns out to be the deciding agent. In a series of skirmishes throughout the drama, the characters meet, compete, and attempt to gain dominance over one another [...]. There is a tension set up by the alternating tonalities (humor versus horror, for example) of the continuing confrontations.

Through the form of verbal fencing, the weaponry of the power struggle, Pinter exposes the characters and their beliefs, thus providing the meaning of the play.

9. Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Carolyn Riley Vol. 3 Detroit: Gale Research, 1975. p. 385-8.

10. "Harold Pinter." *The Bedford Introduction to Drama*. Ed. Lee A. Jacobus. 2nd ed. Boston: St. Martin's, 1993. p. 1158

11. "Pinter's Dramatic Techniques and Style." *Harold Pinter's The Homecoming and Other Works*. Ed. Steven H. Gale. New York: Monarch, 1971. 54-66. & Esslin, Martin. *Pinter: The Playwright*. 6th ed. London: Methuen, 2000.

**VERIFICATION**: As mentioned above, Pinter's technique for dramatically expressing his concept of verification is extremely simple. He merely juxtaposes mutually-contradictory statements of fact. [...]

**HUMOR**: Pinter's humor contains many of the normal elements of humor, mostly verbal in nature: puns, non sequiturs, jokes, wit, and even a Yiddish phrasing. These are included for the common reasons: plain humorous effects, characterization, contrast, relief, and so forth. [...]

**LANGUAGE**: Pinter's use of language is the most distinctive device in his collection of dramatic tools. The dialogue in the author's plays has been called musical because of the sounds of the words, the phrasing, the rhythm, and the measured pauses and silences. It has also been called rhapsodic because of the partial statements, and near repetitions which form sub-themes throughout the individual pieces and the non sequiturs which indicate, as counterpoints, where the individual speaker's attention is really focused, Pinter has repeatedly explained that language and the non-use of language can both be utilized for either communication or non-communication, either consciously or unintentionally. His ability to reproduce human speech more faithfully than a tape-recorder has led to his dialogue being called realistic or even superrealistic, the term superrealistic meaning that although he does not reproduce common speech exactly he has captured its essence so perfectly that it seems more real than actual speech.

The reason that Pinter's dialogues sound so real is that he has realized that traditional stage conversations are too stylized, too logical in structure as well as content. In real life people do not or cannot impart the amount of information as they are pictured as doing in the average stage play. Furthermore, as Pinter points out, expression under the influence of the emotions is not likely to be especially logical and may in fact become unintelligible. An Iago finds it much easier to express himself clearly and effectively than does an emotionally involved Cassio. As a dramatist, Pinter has put this recognition into practice.

Besides merely reproducing natural-sounding word-patterns on stage and appealing to the audience by having his characters speak in the same way his audience does, Pinter also uses realistic language to contrast with, and emphasize, events which take place on the stage. Typically in Pinter there is always a current of realistic speech which runs through his plays. Typically there is also a current of absurdity. [...]he absurdity is magnified when seen only as an end product, that a careful tracing of the movement from event to event shows a fairly logical progression. Everything which happens is a bit more absurd than whatever preceded it, but is logically derived from the preceding circumstances. The progression of Pinter's plays, then, appears to be a *movement from reality* (reading a newspaper) *to absurdity* (a wife staying behind with her husband's family in order to become a prostitute, with no real objection on the part of the abandoned husband—or abandoning husband). The underlying current of realistic language all the while contrasts with the "unrealistic" context of events in which it is uttered. In addition this contrast emphasizes the absurdity of the context so that it seems even more absurd than it might otherwise appear. The fact that the characters speak as though engaged in everyday

conversation in the midst of these outrageous happenings underscores the non-normal aspects involved. This is one of the prime functions of Pinter's realistic dialogue.

**THE TECHNIQUES:** Pinter employs the following techniques to create his realistic dialogue: (A) clichés, (B) jargon, (C) imagery, (D) repetition, (E) non sequiturs, and (F) pauses and silences, as well as the use of common words and the rhythms and patterns of everyday conversation.

(A) **CLICHES:** Pinter sprinkles' clichés through his work as though to give a homey flavor, and they are usually related to the home and family or doing a good job – nice middle-class pronouncements. Occasionally, however, the very familiarity of the cliché gives it a whole new meaning because of its context.

(B) **JARGON:** Jargon also serves several purposes in Pinter's writing. The use of technical words is sometimes an attempt to cover an inability to communicate. In trying to find the right words to express a meaning, a character often hits upon a set of words which allow him to get sidetracked and therefore postpones his need to continue in the attempt to communicate, at least for a while. It works as a defense mechanism in much the same way. [...]

(C) **IMAGERY:** Imagery is a poetic device used to give writing life by appealing to the senses.

(D) **REPETITION:** Repetition is one of Pinter's most versatile linguistic devices. [...] [Martin] Esslin [in his book *Pinter: The Playwright*] notes that Pinter uses repetition in eight ways:

- (1) As a means of conveying dramatic information or given circumstances of a situation or relationship;

From *The Birthday Party* (Meg has served Petey cornflakes)  
MEG: Are they nice?  
PETEY: Very nice.  
MEG: I thought they'd be nice.

While there is little substance to this conversation, the linguistic sparseness and the characters' determination to make a friendly conversation tells much about their vain attempts at friendship.

- (2) With characters who are struggling to find a specific word

From *The Caretaker* (Davies speaks about finding his wives clothing in...)  
DAVIES: The pan for vegetables, it was. The vegetable pan...  
Here, Pinter's use of repetition is articulating man's struggle to find the correct word, and thus audiences are able to see a man struggling to communicate.

- (3) Because of the enjoyment with the sound of a word once it has been found;
- (4) As a form of hysteria
- (5) To indicate the process of absorbing a fact;

From *The Caretaker*

DAVIES: Who was that feller?

ASTON: He's my brother.

DAVIES: Is he? He's a bit of a joker, en'he?

ASTON: Uh.

DAVIES: Yes...he's a real joker.

ASTON: He's got a sense of humour.

DAVIES: Yes, I noticed.

*Pause*

He's a real joker, that lad, you can see that.

*Pause*

ASTON: Yes, he tends...he tends to see the funny side of things.

DAVIES: Well, he's got a sense of humour, en'he?

ASTON: Yes

DAVIES: Yes, you could tell that.

*Pause*

(6) As a refrain; (a) to show preoccupation with an idea, or (b) as an assertion

From *The Collection*

HARRY: Bill's a slum boy, you see, he's got a slum sense of humour. That's why I never take him along with me to parties. Because he's got a slum mind. I have nothing against slum minds, *per se*, you understand, nothing at all. There's a certain kind of slum mind which is perfectly all right in a slum, but when this kind of slum minds gets out of the slum it sometimes persists, you see, it rots everything. That's what Bill is. There's something faintly putrid about him, don't you find? Like a slug.

(7) To indicate a lack of emotion, which can produce a train of associations of nonsensicality

From *The Caretaker*

MICK: You know, believe it nor not, you've got a funny kind of resemblance to a bloke I once knew in Shoreditch. Actually he lived in Aldgate. I was staying with a cousin in Camden Town. This chap, he used to have a pitch in Finsbury Park, just by the bus depot. When I got to know him I found out he was brought up in Putney. That didn't make any difference to me. I know quite a few people who were born in Putney. Even if they weren't born in Putney, they were born in Fulham.

(8) When a character is lying

(E) **NON SEQUITURS**: A non sequitur is an inference which does not follow from the preceding premise. In ordinary conversation this generally takes the form of a statement or answer which is unrelated to the dialogue which went before, and suggests that the

speaker either cannot or will not follow the train of thought being expressed in the conversation, or that the speaker is so preoccupied with his own thoughts that he has not heard what went before or he must intrude his subject into the discussion whether it fits or not. In a play where the characters are avoiding communication and are completely involved with their personal worries they talk around rather than at or to, one another. They may be talking about the same things, but they skirt around actually admitting their subject. Besides mirroring normal speech patterns, non sequiturs can be humorous and/or convey information about their speakers.

(F) **PAUSES AND SILENCES:** Pinter's attention to pauses and silences is, along with repetition, his most distinctive linguistic element.

The importance of non-language is apparent to Pinter, too, as demonstrated by his statements in "Between the Lines." Realizing the relevance of Pinter's breaks in conversation, director Peter Hall is said to have held a "dot and pause" rehearsal, for the members of the original *The Homecoming* cast, which was "apparently very valuable," according to Pinter.

Pauses in the dialogue serve many purposes [...], from actual lapses in the conversation to indications of extreme emotional involvement. However they are used, they tend to emphasize the subject matter or convey action.

From *The Collection*. James confronts his wife.

JAMES: You didn't do anything, did you?

*Pause*

He wasn't in your room. You just talked about it, in the lounge.

*Pause*

That's the truth, isn't it?

*Pause*

You just sat and talked about what you would do if you went to your room. That's what you did.

*Pause*

Didn't you?

*Pause*

That's the truth... isn't it?

*Stella looks at him, neither confirming nor denying. Her face is friendly, sympathetic.*

"Stella's silence, her refusal to confirm or deny the story, is, in the true dramatic sense, an action, the pause which echoes each of James's questions is a line of dialogue, it is also a poetic image of one human being's mystery and impenetrability for another."<sup>12</sup>

Esslin notes that there is a distinct difference intended when Pinter indicates a pause, as opposed to a silence. Pauses, Esslin contends, demonstrate that the through-process is continuing, and contribute to a developing of tension by exposing the intensity of the thought which has not yet broken into a verbally communicable pattern. Silences, on the other hand, serve to signal the conclusion of one line of thinking and the beginning of a new subject of conversation.

## BECKETT AND PINTER



As noted before in Pinter's interview with Charlie Rose, Pinter does not deny that the works of Samuel Beckett heavily influenced him as a writer.

**From Prentice's *The Pinter Ethic***<sup>13</sup>

I was one of the very first people, believe it or not, in England who came across Beckett. I was in Ireland at the time with Mac and I picked up a copy of *Irish Writing* a little magazine—the editor was there before me, I must admit. And there was a piece of Beckett's, a fragment from *Watt*, and I'd never heard of him. It really rang in my head. (Bakewell, 631)

Pinter's amazement was immediate:

I looked at this and went cross-eyed and really saw double and I was amazed ... How do we put it? The top ten and all that. He's the boy all right. He can write everyone else under the table. But what can I say, Beckett was an absolute knockout for me. It wasn't a matter of saying I see. This is something quite new. This is something I must attend to. It was the most ... terrible chord struck in me at the time. I was about nineteen I think. It was terrible, terrible business to read that fragment but I went on to read Beckett a great deal. (Kitchen and Mayersberg, n.p.)

When he returned to London no one had heard of Beckett, and no library possessed a copy of his work. 'When he finally found a copy of *Murphy* in the Battersea Public Reserve Library in 1949, last signed out in 1939, he took it. 'I still have that particular copy. No one missed it.' (631)''

Later in Paris during the run of *The Caretaker* Roger Blin introduced Pinter to Beckett. Pinter says he had written Beckett in 1959 "and got an extremely nice letter back. So then I was in a position of meeting him. The longshot of it is I came into his hotel and he was very vigorous and chatty and extremely affable and extremely friendly and we spent the whole night together. And that was really ... very good. And since then, we've really seen quite a lot of one another." (Gussow, "A Conversation...", 18). During plans to collaborate on a film with Beckett and Ionesco, Pinter said: "He's a wonderful writer, but a very generous man too. Splendid chap. I'm privileged to be working with him on a film." (Kitchen and Mayersberg, n.p.) Beginning with *The Homecoming*, Pinter began to send his work to Beckett, who occasionally made suggestions. Like Beckett, one of the rare playwrights whom made few or no changes after writing or during rehearsal, Pinter says he cut only one speech in *Silence*—at Beckett's suggestion but not until he himself heard it in rehearsal.

## **THE BECKETT STYLE**

*“Language in Beckett’s plays serves to express the breakdown, the disintegration of language. Where there is no creativity, there can be no definite meanings—and the impossibility of ever attaining certainty is one of the main themes of Beckett’s plays.”*<sup>14</sup>

It seems that to understand Pinter, one must have a general knowledge of Beckett’s themes and techniques. I will attempt to briefly outline those here.

One of the key writers in Absurdist Theatre, Samuel Beckett’s plays attack the realist tradition. His focus on the human condition and search for the answer to the question “Who am I?” has resulted in Beckett as one of the most widely discussed playwrights of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Scholars tend to say that Beckett’s plays lack plot, character, and meaningful dialogue.

“[his plays] reveal his experience of temporality and evanescence; his sense of the tragic difficulty of becoming aware of one’s own self in the merciless process of renovation and destruction that occurs with change in time; of the difficulty of communication between human beings; of the unending quest for reality in a world in which everything is uncertain and the borderline between dream and reality is ever shifting; of the tragic nature of all love relationships and the self deception of friendship, and so on.”<sup>15</sup>

It is these characteristics, that of miscommunication, blurred lines of dream and actuality and inevitable destruction, that many point to as the direct lineage from Beckett to Pinter. But Beckett also had a mentor who influenced his writing greatly.

Important to Beckett’s writing style is his friendship with Irish author James Joyce and the Paris literary circle. Esslin notes that Beckett and Joyce were addicted to silences. “They engaged in conversations which consisted often in silences directed towards each other, both suffused with sadness, Beckett mostly for the world, Joyce mostly for himself.”<sup>16</sup> Eventually, Beckett’s desire for individuality and minimalism lead him away from Joyce as a writing mentor. At this point, Beckett’s work turned toward themes of impoverishment, loss, and exile.

Through his characters minimal dialogue, Beckett devalues “language as an instrument for the communication of ultimate truths” and allows it to speak to various meanings and associations. “But, if Beckett’s use of language is designed to devalue language as a vehicle of conceptual thought or as an instrument of the communication of ready-made answers to the problems of the human condition, his continued use of language must, paradoxically, be regarded as an attempt to communicate on his own part, to communicate the incommunicable.”<sup>17</sup> Mauriac Claude, in *L’Alitterature Contemporaine*, adds to Esslin’s conclusion: “Thus the writer who pits himself against the unsayable must use all his cunning so as not to say what the words make him say against his will, but to express instead what by their very nature they are designed to cover up: the uncertain, the contradictory, the unthinkable”<sup>18</sup>. Like Beckett, Pinter’s language communicates the subtext. In very few words Pinter can communicate a plethora of

14. Esslin, Martin. The Theatre of the Absurd. 1st ed. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961. p. 44-5.

15. *ibid.* p. 34

16. *ibid.* p. 5

17. *ibid.* p. 45-6

18. Paris: Albin Michel, 1958, p. 83 qtd in The Theatre of the Absurd. p. 9.

thoughts and emotions, and through his repetition, imagery, and pauses/silences, Pinter communicates the unsayable thoughts that ordinary people scarcely say.

Adding to Beckett's self imposed European exile from the English Isles, Beckett also exiled his writings from the English language. In attempts to reach a world audience and disassociate himself and his works from the politics or cultural relevancies that writers often fall prey to, Beckett wrote his works in French. "[H]e felt that he needed the discipline that the use of an acquired language would impose upon him [and] to avoid the tendency of English toward allusion and evocation. [...] By writing in a foreign language, Beckett insures that his writing remains a constant struggle, a painful wrestling with the spirit of language itself."<sup>19</sup> While Pinter did not write in another language, like Beckett, Pinter artistically pares down the English language to something simple and extremely logical.

"Beckett's entire work can be seen as a search for the reality that lies behind mere reasoning in conceptual terms. [...] In the theatre he has been able to add a new dimension to language—the counterpoint of action, concrete, many faceted, not to be explained away, but making a direct impact on an audience."<sup>20</sup> It seems most important to look for the *Question* that Beckett asks, and not always the *Answer*.

19. Esslin, Martin. The Theatre of the Absurd. 1st ed. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961. p. 8-9.

20. *ibid.* p. 46

## CAROL REED'S FILM *ODD MAN OUT* (1947)

DEELEY: What happened to me was this. I popped into a fleapit to see *Odd Man Out*. [...] ...so I marched in on this excruciatingly hot summer afternoon in the middle of nowhere and watch *Odd Man Out* and thought Robert Newton was fantastic. And I still think he was fantastic. [...] And I left when the film was over, noticing, even though James Mason was dead, that the first usherette appeared to be utterly exhausted, and I stood for a moment in the sun, thinking I suppose about something and then this girl came out and I think looked about her and I said wasn't Robert Newton fantastic, and she said something or other, Christ knows what, but looked at me, and I thought Jesus this is it, I've made a catch, this is a trueblue pickup, and when we had sat down in the café with tea she looked into her cup and then up at me and told me she thought Robert Newton was remarkable. So it was Robert Newton who brought us together and it is only Robert Newton who can tear us apart.

*Pause*

ANNA: F.J. McCormick was good too.

DEELEY: I know F.J. McCormick was good too. But he didn't bring us together.



*Odd Man Out* serves an interesting purpose in *Old Times*. While the film is not the play's inspiration, the title alone suggests a wealth of possibilities to its purpose. One could speculate that knowledge of *Odd Man Out* deepens the audiences' level of engagement, but knowing the film is not necessary to fully experience *Old Times*. As with much of Pinter's work, your opinion of *Odd Man Out*'s role in *Old Times* will be uniquely your own; there is no single answer. The following is a synopsis of *Odd Man Out*.

### PLOT

The film's opening reads:

"This story is told against a background of political unrest in a city of Northern Ireland. It is not concerned with the struggle between the law and an illegal organisation, but only with the conflict in the hearts of the people when they become unexpectedly involved."

Johnny McQueen (James Mason) is an I.R.A. leader who has recently escaped from jail. In the beginning, he and his comrades plot to rob a Belfast bank to replenish their organization's funds. In the midst of the robbery, McQueen is injured while accidentally killing a man. Scared for their lives, McQueen's partners leave him in the streets. McQueen becomes increasingly disoriented and forced to hide from authorities. He takes shelter in various places and encounters strangers who battle between helping him and turning him into the police. Shell (F.J. McCormick), a beggard finds McQueen and takes him into his boarding house where he meets Lukey (Robert Newton), an artist obsessed with painting people in a state of depression or death. McQueen is finally found by Kathleen, the woman who loves him. As she attempts to help McQueen escape the police they find themselves trapped; Kathleen provides a gun as their final escape, but the police get to them first.



1946: James Mason (1909 - 1984), Robert Newton (1905 - 1956), Elwyn Brook Jones and F J McCormick star in the GFD/Two Cities film 'Odd Man Out' (aka 'Gang War'), about a wounded IRA gunman. (Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

*Odd Man Out* is the film that supposedly brought Kate and Deeley together, yet this movie, and even more so Deeley's fascination with it, serves as a parallel for Deeley's lack of presence within his house while Kate and Anna reminisce, thus he seems to be the odd man out. A.R. Braunmuller's article "Pinter's *Old Times*"<sup>21</sup> notes that "The [movie's] title, perhaps a little coarsely, refers to Deeley's sexual isolation, and the subject—the Irish rebels, informing, and the flight of a wounded man—explicates the characters' search for emotional freedom and their constant interrogation of themselves, each other, and their individual and joint memories (62). *Odd Man Out* plays an interesting role as Deeley and Anna use the film and its characters' stories to redesign their pasts and present with Kate. Deeley picks Robert Newton as his favorite character, while Anna picks F.J. McCormick as hers. But what if Deeley is not the intended *Odd Man Out*? What if it is Anna, the outsider who intrudes on the sanctity of Kate and Deeley's home? Anna's outsider presence can literally be viewed as the odd man out. Or, is the odd man out, Kate? Kate is the least present on stage and remains virtually silent when it comes to the battle for power. When Kate chooses to speak, she is the winner over Anna and Deeley's ongoing battle of possession. In choosing to be the odd man out, Kate holds the power that the other two adamantly try so hard to attain.

21. Braunmuller, A. R. "A World of Words in Pinter's *Old Times*." *Modern Language Quarterly* 40 (1979): 53-74.  
Additional Information: Homan, Sidney. *Pinter's Odd Man Out: Staging and Filming Old Times*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP. 1993.

# MEMORY

As in the other of Pinter's Memory plays, memory is a weapon used by *Old Times*' characters to gain power and diminish their opponents. Pinter relishes contradiction, and *Old Times* is built on specific, shared memories that seem to contradict. The past determines present behavior and events, and the characters who create and re-create the past find themselves "re-living" the past in the present, or actively living the past they are making up on the spot.

Memory can be quiet and controlling, especially in *Old Times*. If someone has told me a story many times and then I retell the story to others, I might begin telling the story as if it were my own. But then a time might come where I would claim the story as my own, but always *think* that it really belonged to someone else. In my memory, I would be unsure, but no one else would know. That memory becomes someone else's reality. As Anna, Kate, and Deeley play the memory game, the strength of memory's power is ever present, whether there is truth to their claims and games, or not.

While Pinter's early plays, including *Old Times*, are not overtly political, the plays' underlying tones on "memory" parallel the manner in which political information or fact is told to citizens, altered, and then retold, therefore changing history and the memory of a nation and people. The following excerpt describes an interesting and pivotal moment in history where memory has been altered, both for those present and those in the future.

## From Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

translated from the French by Aaron Asher

In February 1948, the Communist leader Klement Gottwald stepped out on the balcony of a baroque palace in Prague to harangue hundreds of thousands of citizens massed in Old Town Square. That was a great turning point in the history of Bohemia. A fateful moment.

Gottwald was flanked by his comrades, with Clementis standing close to him. It was snowing and cold, and Gottwald was bareheaded. Bursting with solicitude, Clementis took off his fur hat and set it on Gottwald's head.

The propaganda section made hundreds of thousands of copies of the photograph taken on the balcony where Gottwald, in a fur hat and surrounded by his comrades, spoke to the people. On that balcony the history of communist Bohemia began. Every child knew that photograph, from seeing it on posters and in schoolbooks and museums.

Four years later, Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately made him vanish from history and, of course, from all photographs. Ever since, Gottwald has been alone on the balcony. Where Clementis stood, there is only the balcony. Where Clementis stood there is only the bare palace wall. Nothing remains of Clementis but the fur hat on Gottwald's head.

**Note on Clementis:** Vladimir Clementis was a Slovak politician and a member of Czechoslovak Communist Party. In 1950, he was forced to resign his role as Foreign Minister of Czechoslovakia as he was accused of being a "deviationist." He was arrested and charged for an illegal attempt to cross the state boundaries and participating in the Trotskyite-Titoite-Zionist conspiracy. After being officially convicted, Clementis was hanged on December 3, 1952.

## **EXCERPTS FROM HAROLD PINTER**

**BY MICHAEL BILLINGTON**

Faber & Faber, London: 2007. 211-20.

David Caute [British author, journalist, and historian] claims that the idea for *Old Times* came to Pinter during the shooting of *The Go-Between* in the summer of 1970. Pinter himself told Mel Gussow that the play was conceived on a sofa in his house in Regent's Park one afternoon that winter while he was reading the paper. "I rushed upstairs to my room. I live in a very tall house. I usually find some difficulty getting to the top. But, like lightning, I was up." What, asked Gussow, was the thought that got him going? "I think it was the first couple of lines in the play. I don't know if they were actually the *first* lines. Two people talking about someone else. But then I really went at it." So much so that within three days he had completed a rough first draft which he then reworked over the next few months. And although the final version is very tight and contained, it has a lyrical fluency and imaginative consistency that suggests it was written in a great creative burst. Like most good plays, the action has the seeming inevitability of a guided dream; but also a dream that, as I discovered, has its roots in Pinter's own memory.

There is certainly something mysterious about the structure of *Old Times*. It starts in a dim light with three figures discerned:

DEELEY *slumped in armchair, still.*

KATE *curled on a sofa, still.*

ANNA *standing at the window, looking out.*

*Silence.*

*Lights up on DEELEY and KATE, smoking cigarettes.*

ANNA *'s figure remains still in dim light at the window.*

It is as if the characters are being plucked out of time. Indeed, the opening conversation between Deeley and his wife Kate about the latter's old friend Anna, whose arrival is clearly expected at any moment, starts *in medias res*. And the play ends some 100 minutes later in a blaze of bright light with Deeley slumped once more in the armchair, Anna lying on one divan and Kate sitting on another. The hallucinatory framework, the contradictory statements the characters make about each other, the oddly varying descriptions of past encounters have led to endless speculation among commentators. Is Anna really present or is she simply a figment of Deeley's and Kate's imaginations? Are Kate and Anna – who worked as secretaries and shared a London flat together twenty years ago – separate characters or dual aspects of the same woman? Are all three characters dead and simply re-experiencing some past meeting? You can understand why the questions arise. At the same time, the moment you see the play on stage you realise their sublime irrelevance: the whole impetus of this haunting work depends upon the vitality of the contest between Deeley and Anna for superior knowledge and ultimate possession of Kate; and also upon Kate's final triumph over the disintegrating Deeley and the vanquished Anna. Whatever larger meaning arises from the action about the provisional nature of memory or the essential solitude of human existence, the dramatic action proves the point made by Robert Hand in *Exiles*

that "All life's a conquest". When Mel Gussow suggested to Pinter that New York audiences would inevitably argue about the reality of the events, Pinter succinctly replied, "I'll tell you one thing about *Old Times*. It happens. It all happens."

Yes, but what happens exactly? Is the whole play – like all Pinter's work, according to Nigel Dennis in a devastating critique in the *New York Review of Books* in 1971 – simply an exercise for actors? Or is there something serious going on? It seems to me there are two main movements in the play, subtly intertwined. On one level, Deeley and Anna are clearly engaged in a verbal, musical and physical battle over Kate, who emerges victorious partly through her chilling incuriosity. But the play is also a sustained meditation on time and memory in which Pinter suggests the past is no more fixed or certain than the present or the future. *All three characters create the past according to the psychological or tactical needs of the moment and, as they do so, it acquires a tangible reality.* [...] In Pinter [...] we are never quite sure at what point vivid memory shades into spontaneous creation.

Pinter sets out the basic motifs very clearly in the opening exchange where Kate and Deeley discuss Anna even as she stands upstage in semi-darkness. She is clearly present in their imaginations even before she appears:

KATE (*reflectively*): Dark.

(*Pause.*)

DEELEY: Fat or thin?

KATE: Fuller than me. I think.

(*Pause.*)

DEELEY: She was then?

KATE: I think so.

DEELEY: She may not be now.

(*Pause.*)

Was she your best friend?

KATE: Oh, what does that mean?

DEELEY: What?

KATE: The word friend . . . when you look back . . . all that time.

DEELEY: Can't you remember what you felt?

(*Pause.*)

KATE: It is a very long time.

Instantly you get a sense of Deeley's fretful insecurity, of Kate's deceptive passivity, of their joint preoccupation with Anna, of the obsession with semantics that runs through the play, and of the idea that one's memories of the past are always provisional, subject to the inaudible process of time and therefore capable of being reinvented. Even the seeming facts established in the opening scene are subsequently shown to be capable of contradiction. Kate observes that she herself had no friends; later, she and Anna launch into a communal riff about their male chums. Kate also says of Anna that 'She was a thief. She used to steal things', including her underwear; later, Anna specifically says that Kate lent her her underwear. In a world where memory is hazy or subjective, the past can be used to gain leverage over other people: one of the key points of the play. Pinter also gives you a strong sense of male exclusion from female intimacy with

Deeley's shocked discovery that Kate and Anna once lived together. And when he concludes "Anyway, none of this matters", it could mean one of several things: that *he* now has possession of Kate, that these hazy memories are irrelevant when set against the fact of Anna's imminent arrival, or that any attempt to recover the past is ultimately futile. [...]

Pinter uses a variety of techniques in the play both to depict the battle between Deeley and Anna, and to denote the subjectivity of memory: songs and movies, for instance, enrich the texture of the play. At one point, Anna and Deeley engage in a competitive recollection of popular standards from the 1930s and '40s. On one level, it's a lightly nostalgic riff; on another, an acquisitive contest in which Deeley constantly caps each of Anna's quotations. But the songs themselves are also calculatedly chosen to reinforce the play's basic theme of remembrance. One of them is Eric Maschwitz's "These Foolish Things", which first appeared in a 1936 revue, *Spread It Abroad*, and of which Maschwitz said he was inspired by Cole Porter's "You're the Top" to write a catalogue-type lyric made up "of small fleeting memories of young love". The song, in fact, is pop-Proust in that it shows how a smell, a sound or an image from the past ("The smile of Garbo and the scent of roses") unlocks a whole set of emotional experiences.

Carol Reed's *Odd Man Out* is also very exactly chosen as the occasion for Deeley's alleged first meeting with Kate. The title could refer to Deeley himself: he is the odd man out in this peculiar triangle. And the film, in which an Irish revolutionary is hunted down after a raid on a Belfast factory, is not only one of the supreme poetic tragedies of post-war cinema, but also a reminder of how Pinter throughout his work uses Ireland, in Harry White's phrase, as 'a vital trope for the past'. Like Anna's earlier description of London life, Deeley's account of his cinematic encounter with Kate is circumstantially detailed. But does that make it true? Or is it simply an invention dictated by the needs of the moment? In dramatic terms, it is undercut by Anna in two ways. First, Deeley's paean to Robert Newton's performance is punctured by Anna's "F. J. McCormick was good too": one of those classic undercutting Pinter lines on which Vivien Merchant got a big laugh in Peter Hall's original production. Anna also extrapolates from Deeley's story a statement that seems to stand as an epigraph for the whole play: "There are some things one remembers even though they may never have happened. There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place." Everyone quotes the first sentence to pin down the play, but Anna's second statement is just as crucial: the idea that the recreation, even of a fictive past, can be so vivid as to seem to be taking place. As Pinter himself said to Mel Gussow: "So much is imagined and that imagining is as true as real." Or, as Shakespeare's Theseus put it to Hippolyta: "Imagination bodies forth The form of things unknown."

Memory, Pinter shows, can operate on a variety of levels. It can offer a fiction that takes on the reality of a fact, as when Anna describes the improbably artsy London life she led with the deeply incurious Kate. In the process of recollecting the past, one can also create the future: witness Anna's description of a man crying in the room she once shared with Kate which exactly anticipates the final moments of the play. In a world where nothing is verifiable, memory can also be a weapon of psychological domination:

in her description of rushing off with Kate to some obscure, unfamiliar district to see *Odd Man Out*, Anna strikes a blow at Deeley and reinvents the past to suit her own purposes.

The lingering silence that follows Anna's recollection of the Reed film shifts the play on to another level: one where Deeley, seeing his proprietary claim to Kate under threat, battles to re-establish his identity. He does this by vainglorious boasts about his movie-making career, by assuming a knowledge of Anna's home territory in Sicily, and by presenting himself as a genuine artist in a world of commercial prostitutes (not unlike Newton's painter in *Odd Man Out*). "I had a great crew in Sicily", he brags: "A marvellous cameraman. Irving Shultz. Best in the business. We took a pretty austere look at the women in black. The little old women in black. I wrote the film and directed it. My name is Orson Welles." In his very astute essay, Steven H. Gale seizes on this last line as a turning point. Its palpable untruth leads us to regard every other statement on the past as suspect. I think the line bears a wholly different weight. Its parodic braggadocio is a sign of Deeley's mounting panic and knowledge that the game is slipping away from him. [...]

In Act Two, set in the bedroom, the battle lines are clearly drawn: Deeley and Anna are now engaged in an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation. The gloves are off and the pretence at cool insouciance is gradually dropped. While Kate bathes, Deeley brings in the coffee and launches into a precise reminiscence of meeting Anna twenty years ago in a pub called the Wayfarer, and later at a party in Westbourne Grove where he stared up her skirt at her white thighs. True or false? It's unprovable, either way, but there are plenty of hints to suggest that Deeley is creating the past to suit his own needs. There is a conscious irony about his evocation of the Wayfarer's clientele: "poets, stuntmen, jockeys, stand-up comedians, that kind of set up." He says of his upskirt-peering that "You didn't object, you found my gaze perfectly acceptable", mockingly deploying the very noun Anna earlier used to describe her rhapsodic attention to Kate. Deeley is also deflating Anna's pretension to have been a metropolitan culture-vulture by reducing her to the level, quite literally, of a bit of skirt. The contest becomes even more blatant when Deeley, in a gesture of provocative deference, suggests Anna might like to dry Kate in her bath towel. And when Deeley and Anna reiterate their song-snatch of the first act, it is now with an audible undercurrent of malice [...].

The play now moves into its last phase: what David Jones accurately calls 'the final shoot-out between the two women'. Increasingly, in fact, Kate stirs herself from her exquisite sloth. In her first long speech, she expresses her preference for the country over London – so much for Anna's hymns to the metropolis. It is Kate who now initiates the switch into time-past which Anna obediently has to follow. And it is she who cuts Deeley short when, visibly agitated by evidence of the women's past friendship, he is about to accuse them of being lovers. As Peter Hall says, "It is not a play about lesbians. Categorically no." If it were a play about two women using their sexual intimacy to drive a man to distraction, it would simply be coarse melodrama. Pinter is much subtler than that. In effect, he shows Kate preserving her mask of silence as Anna undermines Deeley's superior claims of possession; and once Deeley is floored, she moves in to demolish Anna's own proprietorial arrogance. Kate's long final speech

is, in fact, a ruthless demolition of Anna: of her supposedly inviolate memories, of her sexual sophistication, of her possessive claim to have “found” Kate. The Sphinx-like Kate goes for the jugular: she picks out Anna's conscious imitation of her own smile, of the skull beneath the skin, of the suffocating effect of close female companionship. But she saves the *coup de grâce* for the end of the speech, describing how she and Deeley violated Anna's bed, and how she plastered Deeley's face with dirt from her window box:

. . . He was bemused aghast, resisted, resisted with force. He would not let me dirty his face or smudge it, he wouldn't let me. He suggested a wedding instead and a change of environment.

*(Slight pause.)*

Neither mattered.

*(Pause.)*

He asked me once, at about that time, who had slept in that bed before him. I told him no one. No one at all.

These are the last chilling words spoken (words that demolish both Anna's friendship and the whole history of Kate's marriage to Deeley) before the final graphic image which contains a re-enactment of the bedroom scene described in Act One: the sobbing Deeley goes to Anna's divan and looks down at her, moves to the door and returns, goes towards Kate's divan and lies on her lap, and walks to the armchair where he sits slumped. The final tableau in “very bright” light is of Deeley in armchair, Anna lying on divan, Kate sitting on divan. Some critics take this to symbolise a return to reality and enlightenment; others to mean that the characters are all dead. I take it to signify that although Kate has triumphed on the temporal level and proved her own ultimate unpossessability, all three characters are locked, like the rest of humanity, into a condition of frozen, permanent solitude.

However, like a great poem, the play has multiple layers of meaning. The least noticed aspect of it is Pinter's delighted evocation of the London – his London – of the late 1940s and early 1950s: the pubs, the parties, the caffs, the cinemas, the Bohemian variety of the city before it turned into a hard-nosed tourist toytown. We have it on the authority of early girlfriends like Jennifer Mortimer and Pauline Flanagan that Pinter 'loved London' and, in part, *Old Times* is a recreation of his own old times. Very much so, according to Dilys Hamlett, with whom Pinter had a tempestuous affair in 1950 that ended abruptly in her throwing him over. She recalls that Pinter sent her a copy of the original script in 1971 with a note saying: 'This will ring bells.' Indeed it did. Very loud ones. “When I read it,” says Hamlett, “it seemed to me to be about our whole milieu in the London of 1950: the Queen's Elm pub in Fulham Road where we used to drink, the flat in Chelsea I shared with another girl, even the window boxes on the ledge outside the flat. But there is something else as well. I started the affair with Harold while my flatmate was away in Switzerland. She was very possessive of me – though there was nothing sexual about it – and she deeply resented Harold. She didn't like it and it was partly because of her influence that Harold and I didn't go and live together ... I remember another occasion when a group of us, including Harold, went to a dance at Hampstead Town Hall and then came back to the Chelsea flat. I had a French female friend with me, who actually was bisexual, and we had to sleep in the same bed, which

meant nothing but I always remember Harold raging in the corner . . . Ironically, I ended up playing Kate at York Rep in 1976 and I remember the director Gerald Chapman suggesting we improvise. I said, "I've no need to – I know quite a lot about it actually!" I don't think any of this is just my imagination, otherwise Harold wouldn't have sent me that card."

Once again, Pinter's life feeds directly into his plays. *Old Times* may not be a literal transcription of reality, but clearly the memory of the Walpole Street flat in Chelsea shared by Dilys Hamlett and her friend, with Pinter as the intruding third party resented by the female companion, provides the emotional context for much of the action. Through the character of Deeley, who gradually disintegrates from a suave inquisitor into someone who is coarse, brutal and terrified, it also becomes a play about the pathos of male insecurity and the fragility of the concept of bourgeois ownership. It would be stretching it to describe it as a "political" play, but there is a sense in which the cool, Cowardly façade is stripped away to reveal the naked ugliness of the battle for possession. It also moves effortlessly from the particular to the universal by suggesting, in contrast to John Donne, that each man *is* an island, and that while we make necessary gestures towards each other of love and friendship, we are all in the end trapped inside our own skins and live in a state of inviolable loneliness. That seems to me the meaning of the final image with the characters all occupying their own space: what Octavio Paz, describing the miniaturist collages of the artist Joseph Cornell, once called "cages for infinity". And running through it all is the idea that linear time is an artificial construct, and that we create the past in response to the needs of the present and in order to shape the future. Many people consider it Pinter's best play. It is certainly his most elusive and mysterious; one that yields up new meanings on each viewing depending on the inflexion it is given by particular performers and directors. [...]

*Old Times* is a play that constantly renews itself, partly because of the extraordinary tension between what is said and what is felt, partly because of its mixture of exact social observation and emblematic imagery, and partly because so much depends on the chemistry of the casting. It is a work of beautiful elegiac obliquity and one that touches some chord in all of us. But its personal significance for Pinter in 1971 was that, after a prolonged period of self-doubt and creative uncertainty, he was once more in command of his talent. And his preoccupation with time and memory, which had been present since his first stirrings as a dramatist, was also leading him inexorably towards one of the most satisfying, if ultimately unfulfilled, projects of his whole career.