The Theatre of Harold Pinter

By BERNARD DUKORE

The so-called avant-garde theatre in the United States and England is generally a case of new wine in old bottles. The plays of most of the young Anglo-American playwrights do not break new ground. Edward Albee's The Zoo Story, to begin with one of the better known examples, is essentially a realistic psychological melodrama. His Sandbox and The American Dream utilize conventions of the traditional non-realistic theatre. Jack Gelber's The Connection explores a segment of society that has been previously unexplored in the theatre except in terms of melodrama, but the manner of presentation goes back to Pirandello. Jack Richardson brings to The Prodigal a unique intelligence and virtuosity but uses familiar techniques. In England as well, there is vitality within traditional forms. Although John Osborne's observations of the temper of postwar England are vividly realistic, he blazes no new paths of dramaturgy. His characters are recognizable, not of the English theatre but of English life. His form is recognizable, and of the theatre. Neither the socially-orientated realism of Arnold Wesker, the flamboyance of Bernard Kops and John Arden, or the mixture of realist and theatricality of Brendan Behan and Shelagh Delaney impose great difficulties upon audiences. The works of these playwrights reflect traditional practices, either of the realistic or the non-realistic variety, rather than radical departures in form.

The theatre of Harold Pinter, however, is quite another matter. Pinter's theatre, to apply what Jacques Lemarchand said of Ionesco's theatre, is one of the strangest types of theatre to have emerged during the atomic age. It is certainly one of the most bizarre and unique to have emerged in the English language. The only other playwright whose plays seem similar in texture is Samuel Beckett, and his major plays were originally written in French.

Pinter's plays are frequently funny. They are also frequently frightening. Their meaning usually seems obscure. They are realistic plays, after a fashion, but not realistic in the sense that Roots or Look Back in Anger is realistic. The characters behave in a "believable" manner, but they are shrouded in a twilight of mystery. We are never precisely sure who they are, why they are there, or what they have come to do. Their motives and backgrounds are vague or unknown. We recognize that there is motiva-
tion, but we are unsure what it is. We recognize that there is a background, but that background is clouded. Each piece of knowledge is a half-knowledge, each answer a springboard to new questions. In *The Room*, it is never completely explained why a blind Negro named Riley comes to visit Rose Hudd, what his message to her means, or even why Bert Hudd, Rose's husband, kills him. In *The Birthday Party*, we never really know why the strange visitors, Goldberg and McCann, intimidate Stanley or why they take him away with them. In *The Caretaker*, we do not know the precise relationship of the brothers or even the reasons for the younger brother's changing attitudes toward their visitor, Davies. In *The Dumb Waiter*, we do not know the reasons Gus and Ben have been hired to do their job. Yet at the same time we accept Riley's need to deliver his message and Bert Hudd's need to kill him; we accept the fact that Goldberg and McCann must do something to Stanley; we accept as logical the younger brother's treatment of Davies; and we accept the fact that Gus and Ben have been hired to do a job. Pinter's plays are not constructed in the familiar Ibsenite fashion, and yet they have a recognizable beginning, middle, and end. His characters are recognizable human beings who seem to behave according to valid psychological and sociological motives, and yet there is something bizarre about their very reality. They seem to be "real" people, for their speech, their concerns, their behavioral patterns, and their rhythms of daily living have the ring of truth to them. But it is the details of living and the individual sections of dialogue which have this ring of truth, not the overall pattern itself. They exist within the given framework of the play, and their overall pattern of reality is the bizarre world of the play. Pinter seems to be making a statement about life and the world we live in, but at the same time he seems to be saying something merely about a grotesque world of his own creation. Pinter's plays are obviously symbolic, but they are unlike other plays which we have come to associate with symbolism. Unlike the plays of, say, Maeterlinck, the characters are part of a recognizable world of social forces and class values. They do not function solely as symbols. Unlike the symbolic elements in the plays of, say, Ibsen, symbol and reality are not fused to the point that each clarifies and reinforces the other. No symbol functions in Pinter's plays as does, for example, the orphanage in *Ghosts* or the pistols in *Hedda Gabler*. In brief, the referents are vague. The objects, the characters, and the behavior of the characters symbolize something, but we are never quite sure what that "something" is. Ibsen carefully and clearly relates his symbols to plot, character, and theme: he methodically crosses his t's and dots his i's. Pinter uses his
symbols in as careful a manner as Ibsen, but he methodically leaves his t’s uncrossed and his i’s undotted.

Pinter’s plays have an unreal reality, or a realistic unreality. His symbols are unclear but pertinent, or pertinent but unclear. This description might make these plays seem dull and pretentious. But they are not: they are engrossing and exciting. A neoclassical critic would have no difficulty judging Pinter’s theatre: “He does not write according to the Rules.” Our currently fashionable phrases—“These aren’t plays: they’re sketches for revues” or “I don’t know what the hell this play is all about”—come to the same thing. Pinter’s plays seem to be products by Maxim Gorky out of Charles Addams with Samuel Beckett as midwife. He has been called an egg-head Hitchcock, and his plays have given rise to a new label, “Comedy of Menace,” a term which is appropriate, which explains little, but which serves as a convenient label for people who need labels.

The plots of Pinter’s plays are straightforward almost to the point of simplicity. A recounting of the plot of The Caretaker leads one to expect the type of treatment found in Kind Lady. Davies, a filthy old bum, is rescued from a fight in a cafe by Aston, who takes him to his house and gives him lodging until he will be able to move on. Aston’s younger brother, Mick, appears, and each—separately—offers Davies a position as caretaker of the house. Davies tries to play one brother against the other, attempting to establish himself permanently in the house. Finally, the tables are turned and both brothers reject him. The stories of Pinter’s other plays are no more complicated, and, in fact, the story lines are, in their barest forms, quite conventional. In The Birthday Party, Goldberg and McCann visit a lodging house in a seaside resort town, where they drive Stanley Webber, a lodger, to a nervous breakdown, and finally abduct him. In The Dumb Waiter, two hired killers, Gus and Ben, arrive in Birmingham to do a job. When Gus leaves to go to the lavatory, Ben receives instructions from someone talking to him on a speaking-tube, and Gus returns to find Ben pointing a gun at him. In The Room, a blind Negro named Riley has been waiting in the basement until Rose Hudd’s husband Bert leaves for work. When Bert leaves, Riley tells Rose that her father wants her to come home. Bert returns and kills him.

These plays are often as frightening as Hitchcock’s film Psycho. The scenes in The Birthday Party wherein Goldberg and McCann intimidate Stanley are horrifying. At the end of The Room, when Bert Hudd strikes the blind Negro, kicks his head against the gas stove until he is dead, and when Rose immediately clutches her eyes and cries out that she cannot see, the result is positively blood-curdling. Pinter does not always rely on
physical violence to produce the sinister. He frequently achieves it in the most chillingly quiet manner, as in The Room:

**ROSE.** You won’t find any rooms vacant in this house....

**MR. SANDS.** The man in the basement said there was one. One room. Number seven he said.

**ROSE.** That’s this room.*

But even more frequently, Pinter’s plays are uproariously funny. Occasionally, the humor is in the form of the simple “gag,” as in the following dialogue from The Birthday Party.

**STANLEY.** How long has that tea been in the pot?

**MEG.** It’s good tea. Good strong tea.

**STANLEY.** This isn’t tea. It’s gravy!

Usually, however, the humor arises from Pinter’s acute perception of the rhythms and nuances of contemporary speech. In The Room, for example, Rose is interrupted while she is talking to her husband.

*A knock at the door. She stands.*

Who is it?
Pause.
Hallo!
*Knock repeated.*
Come in then.
*Knock repeated.*
Who is it?
*Pause. The door opens and MR. KIDD comes in.*

**MR. KIDD.** I knocked.

Pinter has a sharp ear for authentic and flavorful dialogue. The following occurs in The Birthday Party.

**MEG.** Is Stanley up yet?

**PETEY.** I don’t know. Is he?

**MEG.** I don’t know. I haven’t seen him down yet.

**PETEY.** Well then, he can’t be up.

But most important, Pinter’s characters reflect the tensions and the attitudes of present-day England. The playwright moves them through highly inventive and bizarre theatrical patterns, but they unmistakably reflect a recognizable life of the world beyond the stage doors. They are

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not "stage commoners," but are replicas of lower-class Englishmen as they exist today, whose attitudes and values are of the world we live in. When Davies complains that he could not find a seat at the cafe because a pack of foreigners had taken them, when he complains that some Indian neighbors—"them Blacks"—are using the same lavatory that he uses, and when Rose Hudd insults the blind Negro, "I wouldn't know you to spit on, not from a mile off," there is the shock of recognition. This is the England of today, no longer the great colonial power. These are the lower-class Englishmen of today, no longer able to lord it over and relieve their aggressions on minority groups. When Davies complains, "I've eaten my dinner off the best of plates. But I'm not young any more. I remember the days I was as handy as any of them. They didn't take any liberties with me. But I haven't been so well lately. I've had a few attacks," we recognize not only the old man whose powers have failed, but also the old England whose powers have failed. When the two hired killers discuss the events of the day in the newspaper—the "human interest" stories of colorfully ordinary people involved in death—we recognize our neighbors (but certainly not ourselves). When the lodging-house owners discuss whether a titled lady's new child is a boy or a girl, when an unkempt young man is told by an overly-kempt young lady that he should shave, and when such familiar items as the darning of socks, the cleaning of sheets, and the lighting of a stove are discussed with the fervor of a Geneva armaments conference, there is recognition.

But this shock of recognition that we find in Pinter's plays is not only a matter of isolated details. It is not only a matter of realistic dialogue or of idiosyncratic behavior. The very texture and tone of these plays is the texture and tone of the world we live in. Pinter paints a variety of pictures of modern man beaten down by the world around him, of man reduced and of man in the process of being reduced to a cipher in the vast social structure. He shows people reduced to nonentities, and he shows people fighting in vain against being so reduced. It will doubtless be said that Pinter's plays are variations of the familiar theme in modern drama of man's failure to communicate with other men. This is only partially true. Pinter's people do not fail to communicate; they avoid communicating. They are afraid of exposing themselves, afraid of revealing themselves. Some are afraid of revealing their individuality; some are afraid of revealing their loss of individuality.

Pinter's people isolate themselves. They live in a closed, womblike environment. They keep to themselves as if they are afraid to go outside their little world, afraid that their ordinariness, ineptness, or sheer emptiness will be seen and exposed in all of its nakedness. In The Birthday
Party, Stanley tells McCann that all the years he lived at Basingstoke, he never stepped outside the door. When Lulu tries to get him to go outside with her, he hedges until he finally refuses. In The Room, Rose Hudd confesses that she and her husband keep strictly to themselves in their room, and never bother anyone else. They do not even know how many floors there are in the house they live in. The blind Negro who visits Rose, and her sudden blindness, serve as symbols of this apartness and isolation. In The Catetaker, Davies' loss of individual identity is complete. He has forgotten where he was born. Even his label of identification is false, for he is going under an assumed name. His identification papers are elsewhere, and he is lost without them; for he has no identity without them: "They prove who I am! I can't move without them papers. They tell you who I am. You see! I'm stuck without them." He avoids going to Sidcup, where he claims to have left his papers, and makes all sorts of excuses not to go, for he is either afraid of finding that he has no individual identity, or else he does not remember where he lost his identification papers (where he lost his identity) and is lying about Sidcup. Davies tries to find a place for himself in the house of Aston and Mick, but by the end of the play, rejected and alone, he is more isolated than ever. Davies of The Catetaker, Meg Boles of The Birthday Party, Ben of The Dumb Waiter, and Rose and Bert Hudd of The Room have been reduced to ciphers. Their lives are composed of platitudes and stale clichés. They are used to taking orders, of buying the food and cosmetics that are advertised, of evaluating people and ideas as the newspapers tell them to, and of gaining identity by attaching themselves to objects and by taking out their aggressions on "inferior peoples." They avoid coming to terms with themselves, partly because it rarely occurs to them to try to do so, and partly because they are afraid that if they do so they will find no self with whom to come to terms. They are frightened of exposing themselves. Davies, for example, is afraid of revealing himself in his dreams. When Aston tells him that he was making noises in his sleep, he immediately protests that he was not dreaming and that he has never had a dream in his life. And when he suggests that Aston may have been dreaming it, the latter replies curtly, "I don't have dreams." Davies is alone and afraid. He tries to ingratiate himself with Aston and with Mick by assuming the identity he thinks the other wants of him. He accommodates himself to whatever the other may wish. Coming upon a small statue which he has to be told is a Buddha, he is noncommittal until he learns that Aston likes it; at which point he agrees. Davies is ashamed of revealing his ignorance, and attempts to ingratiate himself with the other, to make the other think he has similar knowledge and attitudes.
I think I'll take a stroll down the road. A little... kind of a shop. Man there'd got a jig saw the other day. I quite liked the look of it.

A jig saw, mate?

Yes. Could be very useful.

Yes.

What's that then, exactly, then?

A jig saw? Well, it comes from the same family as the fret saw. But it's an appliance, you see. You have to fix it on to a portable drill.

Ah, that's right. They're very handy.

They are, yes.

What about a hack-saw?

Well, I've got a hack-saw, as a matter of fact.

They're handy.

Yes.

So's a keyhole saw.

Ah.

Yes, there's no getting away from that. I mean, I know that, I know they're very handy. As long as you got the feel how to use it.

On the other hand, they wouldn't... they wouldn't be as handy as a hack-saw, though, would they?

Wouldn't they?

I mean, I'm only saying that from... from what I've come across of them, like.

Pinter carefully but unobtrusively makes his details reinforce this picture of man crushed into nonentity. His people are enveloped by darkness. The room in The Caretaker is dark and womblike. The two hired killers in The Dumb Waiter will not be able to go into the sunshine until they finish their job, at which point they will have to leave town and wait by the telephone until they get another job. In The Birthday Party, Stanley does not venture forth into the light of the sun. He stays inside, in his pyjamas, all day. In The Room, the room itself is dark—even darker than outside, one of the characters points out—but in the basement it is pitch black. Finally, darkness envelops Rose: she becomes blind. These characters are isolated from other human beings. In The Caretaker, the other rooms in the house are out of commission, and the basement is closed. Mr. Kidd, the landlord of The Room, does not know how many floors there are in the house. Moreover, these people are isolated from
their past, for their memories are faulty. They lose track—even, as with Davies, of where they were born. To emphasize the point still further, Pinter's plays abound with symbols of non-connection. Davies is frightened by the unconnected gas stove: frightened because it may be connected. Aston tries to put in workable, connectable order an electric plug—but he cannot fix the plug.

Pinter writes not only about the man who has been crushed by the weight of the social world into a conforming nonentity, but about the man who resists being crushed. This man may be a rebel, an artist, or simply a questioner. But sooner or later, he is either crushed into conformity or else he is killed. Aston, in The Caretaker, has—literally!—been operated on and rendered harmless. At one time, he used to talk to people willingly. Then, he could see things very clearly, and spoke to his fellow-workers about his visions. But this proved to be dangerous. One day he was removed to a hospital outside London, where he was questioned by the authorities and finally told that they had decided to operate on his brain. Once they performed this operation, he was told, he would be able to leave "and live like the others." He struggled, but they overpowered him, put pincers on his skull, and performed the brain operation. Because he resisted while the operation was being performed, his spine may have been damaged. After the operation, he was dismissed from the hospital. He no longer speaks to people. He avoids them, and cannot remember what were the visions he had spoken of before the operation. He regrets the operation, but is unable to do anything about it: "I've often thought of going back and trying to find the man who did that to me. But I want to do something first. I want to build that shed out in the garden." Here is the one-time social rebel whom society has—literally and figuratively—rendered impotent.

The Dumb Waiter presents two people, one who simply—dumbly—accepts, the other who suffers and questions. The latter must be stopped. Gus always questions, always tries to find out "Why." Ben not only does not question, it does not even occur to him to do so. When he reads a newspaper story about a man who crawled under a stationary truck which started and ran over him, Gus asks who advised him to do so. When Ben recounts a newspaper report of a girl of eight killing a cat, Gus inquires how she did it. The surprised Ben returns to the paper to find the answer. He does not find it, but the statement that her brother watched her do it satisfies him completely. Gus wonders about things with which Ben never concerns himself. He wonders why no one ever complains about the noise when they shoot someone, why they never see anyone except their victim, and who cleans up after they leave. Ben is content with
the "explanation" that the organization they work for has other departments which handle this sort of thing. Ben has no identity other than his job, his function. His existence is determined by his function as a non-individualized cog in a larger machine. He takes orders. He accepts the role into which he has been placed. When notes come down on the dumb-waiter demanding various sorts of food, ordinary and exotic, it is Ben who becomes desperate because they do not have the food demanded of them, and it is he who decides to send up some food—any food, all the food they have. He has been given an order, a job to do, and he must do it. When, after numerous requests for food, Gus grabs the speaking-tube near the dumb-waiter and yells, "The larder's bare!" Ben, panic-stricken, grabs it from him and, "Speaking with great deference," apologizes profusely. Ben is annoyed at being questioned about the routine they are caught in.

**BEN.** What's the matter with you? You're always asking me questions. What's the matter with you?

**GUS.** Nothing.

**BEN.** You never used to ask me so many damn questions. What's come over you?

**GUS.** No, I was just wondering.

**BEN.** Stop wondering. You've got a job to do. Why don't you just do it and shut up?

Ben is a dumb waiter. Gus, on the other hand, might rebel. Gus must be put out of the way. When, at the end of the play, Gus returns from the lavatory to be confronted with Ben pointing a gun at him, we see the result of questioning the patterned movements of the orderly scheme of things.

It is the artist, however, who by the very nature of his profession seeks individual self-expression and who is therefore a threat to the society around him. The subjection of the artist by the pressures of conformity is the chief concern of *The Birthday Party*. In this play, Pinter paints a frightening picture of the individual pressurized by the forces of society to the point wherein he loses his individuality and becomes a drugged member of the social machine. In *The Caretaker*, a rebel to the social order was rendered impotent. In *The Dumb Waiter*, a dissatisfied man who questioned his pattern of existence was killed. In *The Birthday Party*, the individualist, the threat to the established social pattern, is an artist. As the rebel in *The Caretaker* was operated on so that he lost his vision of a brave new world, as the hired killer of *The Dumb Waiter* was killed by his fellow killer, so does the artist of *The Birthday Party* receive a similarly appropriate fate: he loses his powers of expression.
Stanley Webber was once a pianist. "I had a unique touch," he tells us. "Absolutely unique." When he gave a concert, this unique touch proved to be disastrous.

They carved me up. Carved me up. It was all arranged, it was all worked out. My next concert. Somewhere else it was. In winter. I went down there to play. Then, when I got there, the hall was closed, the place was shuttered up, not even a caretaker. They'd locked it up. . . . All right, Jack, I can take a tip. They want me to crawl down on my bended knees.

Stanley has hidden out in a lodging house in a seaside resort, attempting to keep in isolation the individuality that remains to him, attempting to escape crawling on his banded knees. Goldberg and McCann, two members of an unidentified organization, find him. The organization is society, and they are organization men who must mold him into the collective pattern. Their dialogue is occasionally a parody of corporate jargon. When McCann asks Goldberg whether the job they have come to do resembles anything they have done previously, the latter replies crisply and efficiently, "The main issue is a singular issue and quite distinct from your previous work. Certain elements, however, might well approximate in points of procedure to some of your other activities." McCann is satisfied by this explanation. Goldberg and McCann are exactly the right people for this particular job, for they are representatives of the two traditional religions of Western civilization, Judaism and Catholicism.

It would be highly inappropriate to send a Protestant to make Stanley conform, but Goldberg and McCann, representatives and symbols of tradition and conformity, demonstrate the use that society makes of the forces of religion to insure the conformity of its members. Each has several given names, and these carry connotations of tradition and religion. McCann is sometimes called Dermot (Diarmaid) and sometimes Seamus (James); Goldberg is now called Nat (Nathan), but his wife used to call him Simey (Simon or Simeon), and his father called him Benny (Benjamin); and Goldberg has a son named Emmanuel whom he calls Timmy. Their names change according to the function they perform. For example, although Goldberg's father called him Benny (Benjamin was Jacob's youngest son and the favorite of his old age), he is in his present capacity called Nat, and just as Nathan the Prophet, commanded directly by God, rebuked King David for having sinned against the Lord, and brought him back to the paths of righteousness, so does Nat, commanded directly by his organization, bring Stanley back to the paths of conformity. While Goldberg supplies the brains, McCann supplies the muscle (the Church Militant), and at one point the latter exhorts a young lady to get down
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on her knees and confess. Goldberg's speeches are filled with the clichés of the ideals of middle-class conformity. "What's happened to the love, the bonhomic, the unashamed expression of affection of the day before yesterday, that our mums taught us in the nursery?" he rhetorically asks. Later in the play, he confides to McCann the secret of his success in life:

Play up, play up, and play the game. Honour thy father and thy mother. All along the line. Follow the line, the line, McCann, and you can't go wrong. What do you think, I'm a self-made man? No! I sat where I was told to sit.... Do your duty and keep your observations. Always bid good morning to the neighbours. Never, never forget your family, for they are the rock, the constitution and the core!

When they go to work on Stanley, they intimidate him in the most frightening manner, attempting to crush the smallest degree of self-respect and dignity that Stanley may have, calling him a leper, a plague, an overthrow, and threatening to sterilize him. They bring all of their forces to crush him.

GOLDBERG. Do you recognise an external force?
MCCANN. That's the question!
GOLDBERG. Do you recognise an external force, responsible for you, suffering for you?
STANLEY. It's late.
GOLDBERG. Late! Late enough! When did you last pray?
MCCANN. He's sweating!
GOLDBERG. When did you last pray?
MCCANN. He's sweating!

Finally, they do crush Stanley and rob him of his individual identity. When Stanley first appears, he is a dirty, unshaven young man dressed in his pyjamas, paying no attention to conventional codes of dress and personal appearance. By the time Goldberg and McCann are through with him, he is stripped of his identity and has become a department store dummy, in a uniform that makes him indistinguishable from others. When he enters in the third act, he "is dressed in striped trousers, black jacket, and white collar. He carries a bowler hat in one hand and his broken glasses in the other. He is clean-shaven." Now that Goldberg and McCann have forced upon him the outward signs of conformity, they can "save" him. Now, Goldberg tells him, "You'll be adjusted.... You'll be integrated." Now, Stanley is totally defeated.

STANLEY concentrates, his mouth opens, he attempts to speak, fails and emits sounds from his throat.

STANLEY. Uh-gug... uh-gug... eeehhh-gag...
He cannot speak. He has lost his power of self-expression, as he has surrendered the self which he had to express. Stanley has had a birthday party: a new Stanley has been born. In order for the new Stanley to be born, the spirit of the old Stanley first had to be killed.

This, then, is the theatre of Harold Pinter. It is a picture of contemporary man beaten down by the social forces around him. It is a picture of man without identity and without individuality, of man crushed into a rigid social mold. It is a horrifying picture of contemporary life. It is a picture of the powerlessness of modern man, and the plays are frightening. It is a picture of the absurdity of the human condition in our world, and the plays are comic. But beneath the laughter and overpowering the laughter, there is a cry of despair from a well of human hopelessness.