



## THE EARLY RECEPTION OF HAROLD PINTER'S *THE CARETAKER*

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The present paper is not intent on analyzing either the complex universe of Harold Pinter's theatre, nor *The Caretaker*, his first commercially and critically successful play. Much has been written and is still being written about both playwright and his productions, while varied labels and interpretations have been attached to them for the last forty years or so. Among them, those most often invoked have been their associations with the Angry Young Men's movement, with absurdist Beckettian theatre, with the comic tradition of English farce, with misogynist Freudian themes, with non-committed or even with political theatre. It is by far our intention to further a discussion on these diverse and often conflicting interpretations, born but naturally around one of the central figures of the post-war British stage. Instead, our aim would be to try and recreate the critical atmosphere surrounding the opening night of Pinter's *The Caretaker*, the starting point for a succession of mixed reviews which not only made much ink flow from the pens of drama critics and historians, but also imposed the playwright as one of the leading voices in contemporary theatre.

In May 1958, Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, staged at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, had to be closed after less than a week, due both to disastrous box-office takings, and to almost unanimous critical hostility or dismissal. Playwright and play had thus failed to pass the traditional test provided by the West End, the heart of the British commercial theatre. It was two years after Osborne's premier of *Look Back In Anger* had set the tone and fashion of the new British drama, and three years after Beckett's English production of *Waiting for Godot* had faced the English audience with the new image of the continental theatre. As Pinter's style was clearly not in the vein of Osborne, the playwright was then seen as an English exponent of the "avant-garde drama" and dismissed by the influential drama critic Kenneth Tynan as "a poorer Beckett, a pale imitation of Ionesco, and a less humorous N. F. Simpson" (Evans, 1985: 98-9)

Two years later, in 1960, the story was to take a different course. After a month's run at the "Arts' Theatre Club", Pinter's *The Caretaker* was being transferred to the "Duchess Theatre", in the West End, where it was to last for nearly a year, running 415 performances and making the producer, Michael Codron (the same person who had staged *The Birthday Party*) comment that public tastes were surprisingly volatile. It is most probable that his change in public taste had been influenced by Harold Hobson's (one of the most influential critics of *The Sunday Times*) rare review of *The Birthday Party* which had appeared just after the cutting of its run. Here Hobson had asserted that he was deliberately willing to risk "whatever reputation I have as a judge of plays by saying that *The Birthday Party* is not a Fourth, not even a Second, but a First; and that Mr. Pinter, on the evidence of his work, possesses the most original, disturbing, and arresting talent in theatrical London" (*Sunday Times*, 1958). Also important in this respect had been the fact that the BBC had in the meantime commissioned some of Pinter's plays, such as *A Slight Ache* and *A Night Out*, first for radio and then for television, while *The Birthday Party*

itself had enjoyed an amateur revival by the Tavistock Rep at the Tower Theatre, as well as one by the West End Revels, which had been presented by Codron and also included some of Pinter's sketches.

Set in 1959 in West London, Pinter's new play was a three-hander, involving the interaction of a tramp, Davies, with the two brothers, Aston and Mick, who offer him shelter and a caretaker's job in their flat. While the elder brother, Aston, seems more sympathetic towards the tramp, though he is revealed to have suffered from mental illness and undergone electric shock treatment, Mick, a more sadistic type who, at the same time, has difficulties in communicating with his brother, appears to resent Davies's intrusion, playing psychological games on the hapless tramp, whom he views with a complete lack of respect. Tolerated at first as harmless and in need of help, Davies not only behaves selfishly and inconsiderately towards Aston, his benefactor, but also tries to acquire the upper hand by playing one brother against the other. In the end, the two brothers unite and show Davies the door, and the curtain falls as the tramp makes a last appeal to Aston, urging to be allowed to stay, which, nevertheless, seems doomed to fail. As in the earlier *The Birthday Party*, the dialogue proves inconsequential, random and at times surreal, while the play deliberately advances no real story or structure. Nevertheless, the basic situation whereby conflict is created by an outsider figure who gains entrance and tries to establish himself into another's home to be eventually cast off will become a standard one for many of the playwright's subsequent dramas.

As such, with few exceptions, Harold Pinter's first commercial success was met now with enthusiastic critical reviews, which praised both playwright and production, which was directed by Donald McWhinnie and cast Alan Bates as Mick, Peter Woodthorpe as Aston, and Donald Pleasance as Davies.

"A wholly successful production!", wrote J. W. Lambert in *The Sunday Times* (1960). "An unmistakable hit!", commended John Rosselli in *The Guardian* (1960). "A kind of masterpiece!" – added Charles Marowitz in *The Village Voice* (1960).

And yet, the issues raised by almost all the critics reflected from this very starting point the same difficulty of attaching labels to Pinter and his plays which was to persist ever since. At the same time, this could also account for the extraordinary impact of a play which had an exceptionally simple plot, memorably summarized by Pleasance as "boy meets tramp, boy loses tramp." (Roberts, 1988: 115)

Four main areas of interest can be distinguished in relation to the issues raised by critics when reviewing *The Caretaker*:

- How close was one to draw the link between the Pinter play and Beckett's or Ionesco's theatre?
- How did the meaning of the play operate? Should one discuss it at the symbolic or the naturalistic level? What did the characters stand for: allegories or real people?
- How was theatricality achieved? How to assert the quality of language? How to explain the special blend of pause and silence with tense dialogue or long monologue?
- And, finally, how did the dramatic structure move the play? Was it a farce, or a tragedy, absurdity or menace?

And here are the critics themselves trying to argument and explain one or another stance.

With regard to the first problem, John Roselli placed *The Caretaker* on a very high position within "the group of anti-plays now in vogue", with "non-communication" being "the world of the play". Following this line of argument, the critic favourably compared Pinter's play with Ionesco's *The Chairs*, due to the former's being "knit with the people and the action" (*Guardian*, 1960). Nevertheless, Beckett and his *Waiting for Godot* were the central points of reference for most of the reviewers. As such, the play was seen as

either “excessively derivative of Godot”( as Patrick Gibbs commented in *The Daily Telegraph*), or, in a more skeptical view, Pinter was “mining a vein of Beckett’s”, the trouble being that he “repeats himself from play to play ... and I don’t believe Beckett ... is rich enough to stand so extensive a working” (A. Alvarez, *The New Statesman*’s critic). Other views linked Pinter to the Irishman up to a point: “In the same way that the works of Shakespeare affirmed the innovations of Christopher Marlowe, the plays of Harold Pinter solidify the gains of Samuel Beckett”, but “the mark of Beckett on Pinter is dominantly stylistic; as for the subject matter, it may have a Beckettian tang to it, but the recipe is original” (Charles Marowitz in *The Village Voice*, 1960). Quite similarly, T.C. Worsley, the *Financial Times* drama critic, remarked that: “Certainly we seem to be in the Godot country [...] We are in the Beckett climate, but not in the Beckett fog where everything means something else” (Scott, 1986: 161-3).

As to the issue related to the meaning(s) of the play, the reviewers also differed in their assessment. If Charles Marowitz considered it “a play about everything” (*Village Voice*, 1960), Kenneth Tynan noted that “it may very well be that there are symbols here. The two brothers may represent the bifurcated halves of a schizoid personality; alternatively, the landlord may stand for the Super-ego, the tenant for the Ego, and the tramp for the Id.” (Evans, 1985: 98-9). Contrary to this, in the *New Theatre Magazine* which appeared on 5 July 1960, John Arden pleaded for a rethinking of the realist conventions so as to make room in it for “the inconsequences of Life” and considered Pinter’s “orchestration of observed life” as sufficient for the play to stand up perfectly well without looking for any allegorical interpretations: “Taken purely at its face value this play is a study of the unexpected strength of family ties against an intruder. That in itself is a subject deep enough to carry many layers of meaning, without our having to superimpose any extra scheme of symbols” (Scott, 1986: 117-8). Worsley also pinpointed to the realistic motivation lying behind the absurdity of situation: “Mr. Pinter’s vision begins with the disposed and the disconnected” and this fact explained why “the hold each of them has on life is too tenuous, a weak cotton thread of never-to-be-fulfilled intentions. And hence the pent-up violence in each of them which keeps erupting into impotent gestures of attack” (Scott, 1986: 161-3.) The specificity of social contextualization also seemed the central issue for Marowitz, who felt confident to assert at the end of his review that: “This is a British play about a British sub-society rendered in the tart language of the regions from which the three characters hail” (*Village Voice*, 1960.)

To the question of how the play achieved its theatricality, Kenneth Tynan’s answer was to link it closely with “Mr. Pinter’s bizarre use of *dramatic technique* – Mr. Pinter forces our wonder on what is happening *now* – his skill in evoking atmosphere – there is a special belt of English suburbia, spectral in its dusty shabbiness, that exists in no other Anglo-Saxon country”. At the same time, Tynan also noticed Pinter’s encyclopedic command of contemporary idiom, characterizing the playwright as “a superb manipulator of language” (Evans, 1985: 98-9) John Arden commented on the play in the same register, also acknowledging the role played by language in the play, becoming thus among the first to refer to what later came to be labeled as the “Pinteresque idiom”. To cite the critic himself, Pinter excelled in his “expert use of casual language and broken trains of thought”, because “the verbal patterns alone tell us a great deal that is uncomfortable for the workings of the English mind today” (Scott, 1986: 117-8). As Tynan noted, it was due to this very mastery of language, able to render “the vague, repetitive silliness of lower-class conversation [to which] one laughs in recognition”, while Marowitz stressed the way in which “the dazzlingly colloquial authenticities carries to hilarious extremes”, able to keep, in Worsley words, the audience “for three quarters of the time ... in fits of laughter” (Scott, 1986: 161-3).

With laughter, the issue of the dramatic genre to which the play was to be assigned was brought to the fore. Mostly all reviewers seemed to find it difficult to pigeonhole *The Caretaker*, as the play managed to constantly mix the comic and the tragic modes. As John Rosselli noticed: "We are on the farcical side of no man's land: jokes based on the repetition of common words can be pure music-hall ... Yet, all the time, we keep touching the edge of the shadowed side" (*Guardian*, 1960.) Worsley's comment also acknowledged the play's pendulating between farce and tragedy: "*The Caretaker* is both a wonderful piece of theatre, immensely funny, rich in observation, and below that level a disturbing and moving experience" (Scott, 1986: 161-3.)

Viewed on the whole, the critical voice of the moment was unanimously on the side of both playwright and play, weaving, in different shades and motifs, their story of success.

It was but a logical outcome of this first storm of praise that *The Caretaker* was nominated and eventually won "The Evening Standard Award" for "The Best Play of the Year". The arguments used in favour of this nomination echoed much of the opinions of its first reviewers. As A.P. Hinchliffe records in his *British Theatre: 1950-1970*, Philip Hope-Wallace, the influential critic of drama from *The Manchester Guardian*, considered the play to be "a strange and enlarging experience", while Peter Hall, at that time director at the Stratford Memorial Theatre, embraced the same opinion, describing *The Caretaker* as "a most disturbing, original, personal, unique piece of playwriting". Such arguments managed to counter any opposition to the play's nomination, such as that voiced by Milton Shulman, the drama critic of *The Evening Standard*, who labeled *The Caretaker* not as a play, but simply an actor's exercise, which, to make matters worse, was also completely derivative of Ionesco" (Hinchliffe, 1974).

The first part of the play's success story was concluded by Alan Dent, at the beginning of the following year, who confidently reported in the January issue of *Plays and Players* that *The Caretaker* had been "triumphant with the critics as well as with the public", and summarized it as a play about "nothing" as well as a play about "everything", a "strange, fascinating, bizarre business ... full of grisly wit and still more full of pregnant pauses." To which Pinter's comment was: "It is just a play" (Roberts, 1988: 145.)

With the second part of this story we move outside the confines of the English stage. In 1961 *The Caretaker* opened in New York, at the Lyceum Theatre, with a single change in the initial cast: Robert Shaw having replaced Peter Woodthorpe in the part of Aston. America was also to acclaim the play, and *The Caretaker* won the "Page One Award" of the Newspaper Guild of New York, being, in Harold Taubman's words, "a play of strangely compelling beauty and passion" (*New York Times*, 1961).

In 1962 Pinter wrote the screenplay for the film of *The Caretaker*, renamed as *The Guest* in America where it was released in 1963, featuring Donald Pleasance, Alan Bates and Robert Shaw and being directed by Clive Donner. The film was acknowledged as another triumph, being awarded the Edinburgh Festival Certificate of Merit, the Berlin Film Festival Silver Bear and also the Screenwriters' Guild Award (Gale, 1997: 113-124).

From screen to television was but one step, and in 1966 *The Caretaker* was televised and broadcasted by the BBC.

But the competition did not end here, as the stage also reclaimed the play which was revived in 1981 in the production of Kenneth Ives at the National Theatre, but featuring a completely different cast: Jonathan Price played the part of Mick, Kenneth Cranham appeared as Aston and Warren Mitchell played Davies.

*The Caretaker's* story so far is not complete. One last mention is worth making of the play's reception in France, the bedrock of absurdist theatre as represented by Beckett's and Ionesco's work with which Pinter was so often associated. Ironically, the first French production of *The Caretaker* was a complete failure, and one outraged critic exclaimed

that: “Either [the play] is an imposture, or the British have gone completely mad!”(Quingley, 1975: 214.) Nevertheless, in 1969, a second production of Pinter’s play on the French stage confirmed the greatness of *Le Gardien*, in the same way in which its most recent stagings – undertaken by the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre then Théâtre de Paris (2006-2007), directed by Didier Long and starring Robert Hirsch, Samuel Labarthe and Cyrille Thouvenin – have once more reconfirmed it.

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### Rezumat

Această lucrare discută reacțiile declanșate de piesa *The Caretaker* a lui Harold Pinter, a cărei reprezentare a fost un mare succes și se ocupă de câteva articole semnate de diverși critici de artă teatrală privind spectacolul de premieră. Autorii urmăresc scoaterea în evidență a impactului produs de autorul piesei, ținând cont de faptul că textul pare să refuze orice fel de clasificare netă și includerea sa într-o anumită categorie conform majorității opțiunilor dramatice specifice perioadei în care s-a publicat piesa în discuție.

### Résumé

Cet ouvrage discute les réactions à la pièce *The Caretaker* de Harold Pinter, dont la représentation a été un grand succès, et se concentre sur quelques articles écrits par de divers critiques de théâtre sur la première de cette pièce pour mettre en évidence son impact étant donné le fait que le texte semble se dérober à toute classification nette selon les choix dramatiques principaux spécifiques à l’époque.

### Abstract

The paper focuses on the early reception of Harold Pinter’s *The Caretaker*, his first commercially successful play, charting the varied critical reviews which met its premiere in order to account for the impact of the play in terms of the text’s refusal to lend itself to a neat pigeonholing according to the majority of the period’s dramatic options.