

Observer newspaper targets playwright Harold Pinter for his criticism of NATO

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Over the past three months, Britain's "liberal" media has proved to be NATO's most vociferous champion. Most notably, the *Guardian* and the *Observer* never tire of promoting the aerial bombardment of Serbia and the Labour government's demand for ground troops. Following Prime Minister Blair's lead, they justify their support on the grounds of "humanitarian principles".

Maintaining this moral posture has become increasingly difficult, however. Daily NATO airstrikes have obliterated three times more civilians than the number of Kosovans estimated killed each day in the months prior to the bombing. TV stations, hospitals, clinics, nurseries and schools have all been strafed and bombed, in some cases repeatedly. Even Kosovan refugees have been targeted by NATO's military planners.

As Blair's "hawkish" strategy becomes stuck in the quagmire of conflicting US-European interests, and public criticism of NATO's action mounts, the liberal media is rounding against left-wing opponents of the war with undisguised venom.

Observer columnist Jay Rayner singled out one such critic, the playwright Harold Pinter, for a particularly spiteful comment last Sunday. Rayner's pen poured out her scorn: "Hated Pinochet; loathed Thatcher; doesn't like America; deploras NATO; is disgusted when his play doesn't get a West End run. Good old Harold—he's always bitching about something."

Rayner began her piece by commenting on the playwright's objection to the decision by Gielgud Theatre in London's West End not to run the play *The Late Middle Classes* that he directed, despite its successful regional tour. Pinter has protested that the decision is "a disgrace to me, the production and to the English theatre".

Almost exactly 26 years ago, Pinter had "made

headlines" for protesting against a local production of his play, *Old Times*, at Italy's Teatro di Roma, Rayner noted. Then he had been complaining that the production contained "grave and shocking distortions". "Now he makes headlines for raging against the way a play isn't produced. The sound and the fury, rather than the work, is what grabs our attention. Late Pinter is all about sound and fury."

Rayner's article did not explore the reasons for the Gielgud Theatre's actions. Instead her allusion to Shakespeare implies that Pinter's "sound and fury" signifies nothing. The remainder of her comment consists of an extended diatribe against Pinter's record of political activism. She wrote, "In the last few months, we have been treated to Pinter on Newsnight growling dark and furious at judicial hold-ups over the proposed extradition to Spain of General Pinochet. Then there have been those outraged letters to the press. 'US foreign policy can be defined as follows,' he wrote recently to the *Guardian*, subtly framing his analysis of Clinton: 'Kiss my arse or I'll kick your head in.' A few days ago, he presented Counterblast on BBC2, once more attacking NATO's bombing of Serbia."

In his well-researched and powerful "Counterblast" presentation, Pinter showed how the media were functioning as an essential part of the NATO war drive, and exposed the fraudulent character of its "humanitarianism". Jake Lynch of Sky News detailed how NATO had withheld the cockpit video evidence of its bombing of a refugee convoy, in order to create the maximum confusion. Pinter explained that whilst NATO had, rightly, described the murder of an anti-Milosovic journalist as a brutal action of repression, they had never expressed any regret for the killing of civilians working in the Serbian TV station they bombed. "Both are ugly murders of human beings who

propagate words or images that somebody else doesn't like," Pinter argued.

NATO's "moral authority" was based on "bombs and power", he went on. Whilst the US claims its intervention into the Balkans is dictated by humanitarian concerns, it had supplied Turkey with the jets used to bomb Kurdish villages. "1.4 million Kurds fled Turkish repression from 1990 to 1994. Yet Turkey is invited to the top of the table at NATO's birthday party." The US had also been complicit in greatest single act of displacement and ethnic cleansing in the entire Yugoslav war—the expulsion of 200,000 Serbs from Croatia in 1995. The war had also exposed Blair's real character, he went on, "There's nothing like a missile, there's nothing like power, it was really worth waiting for!"

Rayner implied that the playwright encountered difficulties in the dramatic field due to his political stance. Pinter's basic problem was not only that he had not discarded the principles of his youth, but that he was still prepared to defend them publicly, she opined. In 1948, Pinter declared himself a conscientious objector and refused to do National Service. He ended up in court for his beliefs and was fined £80, which his father had to pay. "The dust had hardly settled on the last war," he has said, "It seemed preposterous that they should be preparing us for the next." He has also described how he knocked a man out for making virulently anti-Semitic remarks in a bar, when he was 28.

Things would have been fine if these "episodes of dissent" had been "reserved for the private world", Rayner concludes. But Pinter, "the professional activist", is only too ready to pick a public "fight for his beliefs, as he did in that bar so long ago. His writing has faded into the background .. replaced by the causes to which he has been eager to dedicate himself".

What accounts for such cynicism? In the first instance, Rayner's allegation that "late" Pinter is a triumph of "form" over "style"; an "activist" who has forgotten his art, simply does not hold water. Pinter remains, as she admits, one of the most respected post-war playwrights in Britain. His dramas are a serious study of various social mores in Britain.

Many of his plays were regarded as breaking new ground in the 1960s. Since then, Pinter has also written a number of screenplays, including, *The French*

Lieutenant's Woman (1981), *Betrayal* (1982), *Turtle Diary* (1985), *Reunion* (1989), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1990), *The Comfort of Strangers* (1990), and *The Trial* (1990).

His direction of *The Late Middle Classes* won critical acclaim, as has his own play *The Birthday Party*, which is currently showing in the West End. Indeed Rayner's comment infers that the decision not to run *The Late Middle Classes* was taken on political, not artistic grounds. In the past the *Observer* would have reacted with outrage against even the hint of such censorship.

Not today, however. Rayner's bile is reserved for those who have not learnt the lesson that in order to get ahead, one should keep quiet. Pinter's problem, she concludes, is that criticism "is unlikely to shut" him up. "If past form is anything to go by, he'll just start shouting louder."

Rayner articulates the social outlook of the former liberal and pacifist milieu that has done precisely that: jettisoned the ideological baggage of their youth in return for the trappings of "success". In their editorial offices, lecture halls and various policy centres they justify their accommodation to imperialist aggression and social inequality on the grounds of their new-found "realism". To these layers, Pinter represents an uncomfortable living reminder of their own moral and political turpitude. But that is Rayner's problem—not Pinter's.



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