

British playwright Harold Pinter awarded Nobel Prize in literature

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14 October 2005

Harold Pinter, widely viewed as the most influential and accomplished playwright in postwar Britain, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature Thursday. The announcement by the Swedish Academy came as a surprise to media circles that speculate on the recipients of the Academy's annual peace award and its awards for achievement in the fields of physics, chemistry, medicine, economics and literature.

The 75-year-old playwright, screenwriter, poet, actor and antiwar activist was himself stunned by the honor, relating in an email that he learned of it only 20 minutes before the public announcement. "The chair of the Nobel committee phoned and said, 'You have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.' I remained silent, and then said, 'I'm speechless.'"

Pinter, the son of a Jewish immigrant dressmaker, has carved out a towering position in the theater, both in Britain and internationally, on the basis of 29 plays, including such modern classics as *The Caretaker*, *The Dumb Waiter*, and *The Homecoming*. He has written 21 screenplays, including *The Servant*, *The Go-Between* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. He is also a poet, whose body of work includes a collection of antiwar poems, entitled *War*, published in 2003 in response to the invasion of Iraq.

Pinter has a long and principled record as a defender of human rights, a foe of social reaction, and an outspoken opponent of imperialist war. He denounced the Gulf War of 1991 and the attack on Serbia in 1999, and has shown great courage in vehemently opposing the invasion and occupation of Iraq, bluntly accusing both George Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair of war crimes.

His selection by the Swedish Academy, well deserved on the basis of his artistic achievement, undeniably has a political significance as well. Last Friday the

Academy awarded the Nobel Peace Prize to the International Atomic Energy Agency and its head, Mohamed El-Baradei, who in the weeks before the 2003 US-British invasion of Iraq openly refuted the claims of Washington that Saddam Hussein was developing nuclear weapons.

Last March, accepting the Wilfred Owen Award for his anti-war poetry, Pinter said, "We have brought torture, cluster bombs, depleted uranium, innumerable acts of random murder, misery and degradation to the Iraqi people and call it 'bringing freedom and democracy to the Middle East.' But, as we all know, we have not been welcomed with the predicted flowers. What we have unleashed is a ferocious and unremitting resistance, mayhem and chaos."

He has polemicized against "the nightmare of American hysteria, ignorance, arrogance, stupidity and belligerence," compared US foreign policy to that of the Nazis, and joined a group of celebrity campaigners calling for Blair to be impeached.

Pinter, who was born in East London in 1930, has said that his encounters with anti-Semitism as a youth had a lasting impact and led him in the direction of the theater. As a young man he refused to enroll in the national military service and once engaged in a fight with fascists in London's East End.

He was a vocal critic of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s and turned down an offer of knighthood from Thatcher's Tory successor, John Major. During that period he publicly opposed US policy in Latin America.

While his early, and perhaps greatest, works did not deal overtly with political themes, his work became more directly political during the late 1980s, when he said he had a responsibility to act as "a citizen of the world in which I live, [and] insist upon taking

responsibility.”

Interviewed by reporters outside his London home on Thursday, Pinter, who was recently treated for cancer of the esophagus and walks with the aid of a cane, said he did not intend to write more plays, but added, “I think I shall certainly be writing more poetry and certainly remain deeply engaged in the question of political structures in this world.” He took the opportunity to reassert his opposition to the Iraq war and imperialism, saying, “Iraq is just a symbol of the attitude of the Western democracies to the rest of the world and how they choose to exert their own power.”

In its citation awarding the Nobel Prize to Pinter, the Swedish Academy wrote: “Harold Pinter is generally seen as the foremost representative of British drama in the second half of the 20th century. That he occupies a position as a modern classic is illustrated by his name entering the language as an adjective used to describe a particular atmosphere and environment in drama: ‘Pinteresque’...

“Pinter restored theater to its basic elements: an enclosed space and unpredictable dialogue, where people are at the mercy of each other and pretense crumbles. With a minimum of plot, drama emerges from the power struggle and hide-and-seek of interlocation. Pinter’s drama was first perceived as a variation of absurd theater, but has later more aptly been characterized as ‘comedy of menace,’ a genre where the writer allows us to eavesdrop on the play of domination and submission hidden in the most mundane of conversations...

“In fact, the continuity in his work is remarkable, and his political themes can be seen as a development of the early Pinter’s analyzing of threat and injustice.”

The Academy’s announcement evoked an enthusiastic response from Pinter’s colleagues in the British theatrical world. Playwright Sir Tom Stoppard said the award was “wholly deserved and I’m completely thrilled.” He added, “As a writer, Harold has been unswerving for 50 years.”

British playwright David Hare said, “This is a brilliant choice. Not only has Harold Pinter written some of the outstanding plays of his time, he has also blown fresh air into the musty attic of conventional English literature, by insisting that everything he does has a public and political dimension. He’s been both an example and an inspiration to us all.”



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