

Harold Pinter and Eartha Kitt, artists and opponents of imperialist war

27 December 2008

British playwright Harold Pinter died Wednesday at the age of 78, and American singer and actress Eartha Kitt died Thursday, Christmas day, at 81.

Both were known for the seriousness with which they pursued their respective artistic activities, and both will be remembered as well for speaking out against imperialist war—in Kitt's case, the war in Vietnam, in Pinter's, the US-British invasion of Iraq in particular.

It would be artificial to find many obvious commonalities. Pinter worked primarily in the theater, carving out a space for himself as a playwright conveying the menace and tension beneath the complacent surface of everyday life. Kitt was a dancer, an actress, a singer, one of the first African-American "sex symbols." Orson Welles cast her as Helen of Troy in his adaptation of the Faust legend in 1950, calling her "the most exciting woman in the world."

However, at critical moments, each stuck his or her neck out, enraging the authorities and speaking for millions who had no voice. Their artistic achievements will always be associated with their commitment to the truth.

Kitt was born into poverty in South Carolina in 1927, the daughter of a black-Indian mother and a white father she never knew. Passed about between different and unsympathetic families, she eventually went to live with an aunt in Harlem, who also abused her. After working in factories and occasionally sleeping on rooftops and in doorways, Kitt became a dancer and found fame in the postwar period, when the stereotypes of blacks in American popular culture began to break down.

Famed for her renditions of songs such as *C'est si bon*, *Love for Sale*, *Monotonous* and *Santa Baby* and appearances in cabaret, films and television (including a slinky Catwoman in the *Batman* series), Eartha Kitt burst into the headlines for her courageous criticism of American policy in Vietnam during a visit to the White House in January 1968.

Kitt once explained: "I was sent an invitation by Lady Bird Johnson [the president's wife] that said, 'What Citizens Can Do to Help Insure Safe Streets.' A car was sent for me and I walked into the White House by myself. The ushers at the door were in white gloves, and that made me feel like I was in the South again, which wasn't a good feeling.... I remember the ladies at the table with me were more curious about the china we were eating off of than what we were there to talk about...."

"After dessert the question was asked: what can be done about the beautification of America? And they went around the room, calling on people to give their opinion. It was mostly about planting trees and flowers and such. I raised my hand several times and Lady Bird kept saying, 'You'll get your turn, Eartha.' When I finally did I repeated the question that was supposed to be the topic, and everything got quiet.... When I got outside, suddenly I didn't have a car anymore. I had to take a taxi back to the hotel. That about said it."

According to a UPI reporter present, this is what Kitt told Mrs. Johnson at the luncheon: "You send the best of this country off to be shot and maimed. They rebel in the street. They will take pot and they will get high. They don't want to go to school because they're going to be snatched off from their mothers to be shot in Vietnam."

Kitt told the media later that day: "I see nothing wrong with the way I handled myself. I can only hope it will do some good."

Of the president's wife, she said: "I'm afraid she became a little flustered." Kitt, "her eyes flashing while she puffed on a cigarette and jabbed a finger at her startled audience," according to a reporter, said that American youths were "angry because their parents are angry, because there is a war going on that they don't understand, that they don't know why."

As a result of her outspoken opposition to the Vietnam War, Kitt suffered a virtual blacklisting in the US. Lyndon Johnson was furious and reportedly asked the FBI to dig up dirt on her. Kitt's offers in the US dried up and she was forced to work in Europe for nearly a decade, before returning home in triumph.

It speaks volumes about the American media that Kitt's comment at the White House is generally treated as something foolhardy and self-destructive. Risking your career—perhaps even seeing your income go down!—for a principle is hardly conceivable to the timid souls who write for the US media. Back in 2001, George Wayne of *Vanity Fair*, in an interview with the singer, referred to the January 1968 luncheon at the White House as an event "you probably wish you had never gone to."

To her credit, Kitt replied, "I'm glad I did go to it."

Wayne continued, "You expressed your opposition to the war, which upset the FBI and CIA and got you blacklisted for years. Where did you gather the strength and courage to move on, knowing that you didn't do anything wrong?"

The singer-actress replied, "That I didn't do anything wrong—*that* gave me the strength. Parents still thank me for helping to stop the war."

Rob Hoerburger, in the *New York Times* obituary December 26 couldn't help himself either. He writes: "But she [Kitt] took the steeliness with her, in a willful, outspoken manner that mostly served her career, except once," referring to the White House episode. This is sheer philistinism.

Harold Pinter, who spent the last 15 or so years of his life in particular as a conscious opponent of imperialist war and especially US policy, was born in 1930 in modest circumstances also, the son of a Jewish immigrant tailor in Hackney, northeast London. Pinter early on experienced anti-Semitism and street fights with fascists. After the war, he refused to do compulsory national service and was fined.

Pinter came to prominence in the theater in the late 1950s and early 1960s, for a series of concise, elliptical, sometimes frightening plays, including *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*. He also collaborated with Joseph Losey on *The Servant* (1963) and *Accident* (1967). Something about the submerged contradictions and stresses of postwar life, all the more malignant because they were denied and submerged, comes out in the plays and screenplays.

Pinter spoke out publicly against the 1991 Gulf War and denounced the US-NATO war against Serbia in 1999. But his outrage and eloquence in response to the criminal US-British invasion of Iraq in March 2003 perhaps brought him the greatest notoriety and international admiration.

In March 2005, accepting the Wilfred Owen Award for his anti-war poetry, Pinter described the attack on Iraq as "A bandit act, an act of blatant state terrorism, demonstrating absolute contempt for the concept of International Law. An arbitrary military action inspired by a series of lies upon lies and gross manipulation of the media and therefore of the public...."

"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."

Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in October of the same year (See "Harold Pinter's Nobel Prize speech: a brave artist speaks the truth about US imperialism"), Pinter took the time in his acceptance speech to explain something of his own approach to drama, insisting, for example, that "Sermonising has to be avoided at all cost. Objectivity is essential. The characters must be allowed to breathe their own air," before turning to the political problems of the day.

Pinter delivered a short but devastating history of US foreign policy since World War II, explaining at one point: "Direct invasion of a sovereign state has never in fact been America's favoured method. In the main, it has preferred what it has described as 'low intensity conflict.' Low intensity conflict means that thousands of people die

but slower than if you dropped a bomb on them in one fell swoop. It means that you infect the heart of the country, that you establish a malignant growth and watch the gangrene bloom. When the populace has been subdued—or beaten to death—the same thing—and your own friends, the military and the great corporations, sit comfortably in power, you go before the camera and say that democracy has prevailed."

After once again scathingly denouncing the Bush and Blair governments for their savagery and mass murder in Iraq, Pinter took up the responsibility of the writer and intellectual:

"A writer's life is a highly vulnerable, almost naked activity. We don't have to weep about that. The writer makes his choice and is stuck with it. But it is true to say that you are open to all the winds, some of them icy indeed. You are out on your own, out on a limb. You find no shelter, no protection—unless you lie—in which case of course you have constructed your own protection and, it could be argued, become a politician...."

"When we look into a mirror we think the image that confronts us is accurate. But move a millimetre and the image changes. We are actually looking at a never-ending range of reflections. But sometimes a writer has to smash the mirror—for it is on the other side of that mirror that the truth stares at us.

"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.

"If such a determination is not embodied in our political vision we have no hope of restoring what is so nearly lost to us—the dignity of man."

A complex, but distinct connection exists between the artist's position on the fundamental moral and political challenges of the day and the quality of his or her work. The artists, as Trotsky once noted, are not empty machines for creating form. They are living people with psychologies that are the result of social circumstances.

Important impulses, including outrage at the crimes of the ruling elite, propel important work. Nothing artistically serious in our day will be accomplished without a commitment to intellectual and social truth.

David Walsh



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact