Harold Pinter: Independent and critical to the last

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The *World Socialist Web Site* has commented several times on playwright Harold Pinter, who died last week aged 78. He was a courageous and consistent voice of opposition to the military policies of British and American imperialism. When he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in October 2005, to his credit, not a single party leader in Britain congratulated him on it.

Pinter's opposition to their criminal policies in Iraq and the Balkans was deeply embarrassing to them. He had long been recognised, in the words of the Nobel citation, as "the foremost representative of British drama in the second half of the 20th century." The actor Michael Gambon, currently appearing in a West End revival of *No Man's Land*, has gone further, calling Pinter "the iron rod of English theatre." A new adjective, "Pinteresque", was coined to describe his groundbreaking writing for the theatre. His outstanding body of theatrical work was only one facet of his work, which also embraced writing screenplays, directing, acting, and writing occasional verse.

What is remarkable about Pinter's life and career is that his later political positions were of a part with the earlier work, which established his reputation. The Nobel citation noted that his opposition to imperialist war and his dedication to democratic rights and freedom of speech had developed from his early analysis of "threat and injustice." Fiercely independent and critical thinking marked all of his writing.

Much of the grounding for this can be found in Pinter's childhood. He was born in 1930 in Hackney, northeast London. His grandparents were Ashkenazim Jews who had fled persecution in Poland and the Ukraine. His father Jack, a quiet determined man, was a ladies' tailor. His mother Frances was a more extroverted and generous figure. Pinter was a much-loved only child.

His evacuation to Cornwall in 1939, separating him from this warm and loving environment, was a difficult experience, although he returned to London during the Blitz. Many critics have pointed to his experiences of isolation, tension, violence and fear during this period as a formative influence on his imagination. Pinter himself spoke often of his experiences of anti-Semitism in this predominantly Jewish area. During the 1930s, and again after the Second World War, the area was a recruiting ground for fascists, and there was bitter resistance from migrant workers, leading often to violence. Pinter was also struck by the anti-Communism under the post-war Labour government.

Such experiences shaped the development of a group of Pinter's friends at Hackney Downs Grammar School who remained close throughout his life. One in particular, the actor Henry Woolf, was an important supporter, collaborator and interpreter of his work. Pinter read widely, and there was a real intellectual ferment in their discussions.

He was also inspired by teacher Joe Brearley, who encouraged his passion for poetry and the theatre. Pinter was determined to become an actor. He was good enough to get a grant to RADA, but he found it class-bound and hated it. He left.

There were other indications of his emerging independence of thought. In the autumn of 1948 he was conscripted for National Service. He registered as a conscientious objector and refused to wear what he called the "shit-suit". He was arrested twice, and went through a series of military tribunals at which his objections were misrepresented and distorted. He expected to be imprisoned, taking his toothbrush to one tribunal. He was fined.

After a second spell at drama school he worked with two classical repertory companies, touring with Anew McMaster's Shakespearean Irish company and appearing with Donald Wolfit's company in Hammersmith. From these two rather grand actor-managers he learned a great deal. He was a fine actor, who continued to work in films and in revivals of his own plays. Donald Pleasence described him as "by far the most frightening" Mick he worked with in Pinter's own *The Caretaker*. He learned from Wolfit, in particular, the power of silence and the intense gesture.

Throughout this period of work as a jobbing actor he experimented with writing. He wrote hundreds of poems, prose sketches, and a partly autobiographical novel, eventually published as *The Dwarfs*, which he described as "rather a hotchpotch."

It is not surprising that he eventually found his voice writing for the theatre. Working in repertory theatre had given him, he said, "a feeling for construction ... and for speakable dialogue." He said he wrote for proscenium arch stages because they were the ones he was used to as an actor.

Pinter never forced a piece, saying that "you write because there's something you *want* to write, *have* to write." Asked by Woolf to write a play for Bristol University's newly established drama department, Pinter began *The Room* (1957). He had "started off with this picture of the two people and let them carry on from there". Thoroughly grounded in the theatre, the only way he could express the image was dramatically.

The play was not realistic like John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, but it used a new kind of realistic dialogue that sounded the way people spoke in real life, with concealed meanings and unspoken texts. Hidden pasts lurked in characters' silences, and the world outside the closed room was always threatening to burst in.

He was heavily inspired by Samuel Beckett's prose. Pinter dissolved the imperilled post-war world in small domestic scenes. He said that he liked the way Beckett created his own world, but one which "had so many references to the world we actually share." Pinter denied that he wrote symbolically. He would later say that he was not a realistic writer, but what happened in his plays could happen "anywhere, at any time, in any place."

The Room set out many of the themes that dominate his best work. A housebound wife and her silent husband find their home mysteriously threatened by a domineering landlord, a pushy couple, and a blind man.

There is an unspoken sense of threat, of impending catastrophe. The air is thick with sexual violence, and the greatest threat is to the certainties of their home. It was a successful debut, and led to *The Birthday Party* being premiered at the Lyric, Hammersmith in 1958.

Set in a seaside boarding house run by a childless couple, a lodger (Stanley) is confronted by two outsiders (Goldberg and McCann). They terrorise him, interrogate him and eventually take him away. It is never stated who or what they represent. The play has been described as a repertory thriller written by someone who had read Kafka, but this is not a paranoid Cold War period piece. The play is clear and unambiguous, with taut, spare dialogue. In a world of political anxieties, Pinter's play represents a confused world in the clearest possible way.

This is directly linked with his knowledge of earlier dramatists. In an early essay on Shakespeare, he wrote that he "amputates, deadens, aggravates at will, within the limits of a particular piece, but he will not pronounce judgment or cure." It is this same quality that makes Pinter's plays so understandable, and thus so terrifying.

The Hammersmith run of *The Birthday Party* was a disaster. The critics were hostile, and the play had closed before its one good review, by the influential Harold Hobson, was published in *The Sunday Times*, although that played a greater part in securing Pinter's future than the cancelled run. Over the next two years Pinter worked on a revival of the play and a television adaptation, as well as directing London premieres of *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*.

He also wrote revue sketches and a radio play, as well as other plays. Most importantly, he did not abandon his vision of theatrical writing. Trusting to the necessity of artistic expression he continued to "take a chance on the audience." As he said later, he gave the audience not what they wanted, but what he insisted on giving them. In *The Birthday Party*, when Stanley is being taken away, Petey cries out, "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do." Pinter called this line "the most important ... I've ever written."

His critical reputation was finally established in 1960 with *The Caretaker*. Again, a home is under threat from an outsider. Davies, a manipulative tramp, attempts to inveigle his way into the slow-witted Aston's flat. The play is vicious and funny, and Pinter elaborates poetry from everyday language. Alan Bates, who played Aston's brother Mick in the first run, described it as "the only play I have ever done in which I have not for one second thought ‘Oh, god, I've got to do this again next week'."

It heralded an extraordinary period. He wrote one of his greatest plays, *The Homecoming* (1965). The upwardly mobile son Teddy returns from America with his wife Ruth, whose presence creates a sexual tension that undermines the position of Max, the Jewish patriarch. During this period Pinter also began an enduring professional relationship with director Peter Hall.

Pinter began directing in 1962. Michael Gambon has attributed Pinter's skills as a director to his abilities as an actor. He liked to give actors room to "play around" in their role, said Gambon. He was an extremely sympathetic director, a good interpreter of playwrights completely different from himself. There was a longstanding and fruitful admiration between him and Simon Gray, for example.

He also began working as a screenwriter. As well as adapting his own plays, he collaborated outstandingly with director Joseph Losey on four films. Like Pinter, Losey was fascinated and appalled by English class structures and claustrophobic social relations. *The Servant* (1963), adapted from Robin Maugham's novel, dealt with another social intruder (Dirk Bogarde) preying on his weaker master (James Fox). Another collaboration with Bogarde, *The Accident* (1967) dealt with characters trapped in a network of affairs and professional relationships.

By the early 1970s Pinter was struggling with how to develop his theatrical work. He became a director of the National Theatre in 1973. He was conscious of a new generation of more directly political playwrights (David Mercer was a friend), and, perhaps driven by his screenwriting, was already moving further away from the trappings of realism. He began looking at memory, spending a year on a screenplay of Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche de Temps Perdu*. It was never filmed, although it was eventually staged in 2000.

He did not allow this to become an introspective rejection of the outer world. He expressed concerns that lyricism can create problems in expressing "what is actually happening to people." Instead he brought this theme to play alongside other familiar ideas. In *No Man's Land* (1974), the shabby poet Spooner is invited up to an expensive house after a night in the pub. This is another sinister intrusion, but also played out on the battleground of memories. *Betrayal* (1978), dealing with infidelity, is presented in reverse chronological sequence.

Pinter was also becoming more directly involved in politics. In 1973 Peggy Ashcroft had encouraged him to speak out against US involvement in the overthrow of the Chilean President Salvador Allende. His affair with Antonia Fraser, which began in 1974 and saw the ending of his first marriage a year later (and vilification in the right-wing press), also marked a more immediate involvement in political questions. With Fraser and others he began a number of discussion groups. Politically these were of a somewhat limited character, but they indicate the seriousness with which he was considering such questions. Their limitations can perhaps be seen by his vote for Margaret Thatcher in 1979, a decision he later described as "shameful" and "infantile."

He did not withdraw from political life or discussion. He drew certain conclusions from attacks such as the press campaign, which finished, off his liberal June 20th discussion group. He was, from this time on, a regular target for press attacks. He continued to direct and write screenplays, notably *The French Lieutenant's Woman* for Karel Reisz, but he became more openly involved in campaigns for freedom of speech, and his theatre work became more explicitly political. *One for the Road* (1982), for example, was a short piece about state-sponsored torture.

In 1985, on a PEN tour of Turkey with Arthur Miller, he erupted furiously at a journalist during dinner at the US Embassy. They were subsequently barred from the country, but were proud at having drawn attention to the torture of political prisoners. The experience also prompted *Mountain Language* (1988), a play about the suppression of minority cultures. Right wing critics regularly point to Pinter's ability to criticize the British government openly as "the most powerful rebuttal" of his politics, in Tory MP Michael Gove's words. Works like *Mountain Language* have, in fact, shown a remarkable astuteness. Kurdish actors in London rehearsing a revival of the play in 1996 were arrested by armed police for carrying prop weapons, and were forbidden from speaking their own language. This is the theme of the play.

Pinter brought his articulate rage to bear on the bloody crimes of British and American imperialism in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Detractors accused him of incoherence, but he maintained his expressive clarity, saying about the Gulf War, for example, "We were assured that was true. It was not true." His output of occasional and political verse increased. Talking about the line "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do," Pinter said that he had lived it "all my damn life. Never more than now." He wrote pieces like *New World Order* (1991), a ten-minute play about political torture and interrogation, which makes concrete and contemporary many of the themes in his earlier work.

The last years of his life were marked by a flurry of retrospectives, festivals of his work, recordings, and further directorial efforts. As the actor Michael Pennington suggested, this marked some kind of summing-up of his whole career. The fury and extent of his work in these years is all the more striking given his ill health. Diagnosed with oesophageal cancer in 2002, he told an audience in Edinburgh, "I am no less passionately engaged, nevertheless I think I have come out of this experience with a

more detached point of view." He recognized that his political work had been considered by the Nobel Committee, who acknowledged its links with his art. There were, he said, ambiguities he stood by as a writer but could not stand by as a citizen, so his political writing must be more uncompromising than the obliqueness of his creative writing.

Harold Pinter would be worthy of celebration if only for the dark, innovative plays he wrote in the early 1960s. It is unusual to find an artist of his standing who not only retained the critical independence of those early works, but also continued to pursue it with the same vigour and determination throughout his life. Such independence is increasingly rare, and must be recognised and applauded.