

Gawn Grainger in conversation with Alexander Lass, for the Pinter Legacies project, November 2020.

Alexander Lass: So Gawn, many thanks for agreeing to talk to us today about your work with Harold Pinter and on Harold Pinter productions. You - if my sources are correct - you have been involved in six different productions of Pinter works. Starting in 1974 and taking us up to 2005.

Gawn Grainger: That's right. Yeah. '74 was a play called *Next of Kin* at the Old Vic, and he directed it. That was the first time I met him. And I don't know why I was in it actually, but obviously something... suddenly there I was being directly by Harold Pinter, which was fantastic. The play was written by John Hopkins, and it was a very good play. But the critics didn't like it, for some reason. So we took it on tour; we went to various places in the country. What had happened was the National Theatre, which was run by [Laurence] Olivier, came to an end because Olivier went and [Peter] Hall came in and fired everybody. It was brilliant, the way he did it. He'd invite an actor to come to his office, and then he'd say 'you're ready for the West End'. And they'd come out and think 'oh God, that's great', but of course he was firing them. The only two people he kept on were me and Denis Quilley.

AL: From Olivier's original Old Vic company?

GG: Yes. Of course, Harold had come in with Peter Hall, who had directed a lot of his early stuff. That's how I met him. And he was, I think, he was a fantastic director. One of the best directors I've ever worked with. He had a vision, but because he had been an actor, he understood how an actor worked, and that was fantastic. But I do remember that when I was rehearsing... I thought my god, that's amazing: he drinks an awful lot of apple juice. It was not apple juice! And smoked Blacks, Black Sobranies, which was very glamorous actually, it was terrific.

AL: You were aware of him before you worked with him? You'd seen his work before, you'd just heard about him, or both?

GG: Oh, I'd seen his work, yeah. I was in New York in '67, doing a show. Well actually I was playing Romeo, would you believe? Round the corner was *The Homecoming* – so that was the first of his shows that I saw – with Ian Holm. Actually, strangely enough, where I'm sitting right now, this is where Ian Holm lived. I bought it from Penelope Wilton. So I'm doing lockdown, on my own, in this beautiful cottage. Extraordinary, how things tie up! I mean Holm in *The Homecoming* was absolutely, really wonderful stuff. But they all were. They were. That's when Vivien was still around, very sexy. So that's when I first got sort of close. And then then we did *Next of Kin*. In 1982, I decided I would just go on writing, which I'd been doing, and I was writing for television. And I'd two young kids and it seemed the best thing to stop being an actor. So, I wasn't an actor, apart from doing the odd television, radio and stuff, but not in the theatre. In 1990, I think it was '90 – you've probably got better dates than me - and Harold phoned me and said [audio break] So I go see Harold at Campden Hill. And he says 'I've written play and I want you to be in it'. And I said, 'but Harold, I don't do the acting any more'. But he said 'yes you do'. I said 'no, I don't'. And he

said 'you owe it'. I said 'who do I owe it to?' and he said 'the public, you c\*\*t'. That's how I got back into the theatre! And so I did *Party Time*.

AL: Yes, this in 1991?

GG: Yeah. It was mid-'91, I did *Party Time* and *Mountain Language* at the Almeida, which he directed. And that was reuniting the two of us. And then we filmed *Party Time*. We were down in Teddington, I think it was, and we were walking across the car park, and I said what's happening to you next Harold. He said, 'I'm doing *No Man's Land*'. 'How do you mean?' 'I'm going to be in it!' So I said, 'Oh, that's fantastic. Who with?' And it was to be Barry Foster. And I said, 'well, do you know, if I was younger, I'd love to pay Briggs'. And he said 'what do you mean, "younger"?' So, he said 'you can meet the director. And it's not down to me but we'll see how you get on.' So, I met [David] Leveaux in the Almeida. We had a chat and I think what hooked it for me was, I said, 'it's not about two men, it's a quartet'. And that's how we... so I got the job. Barry then dropped out because he was getting more money in *Grand Hotel* or something. So Paul Eddington came in who was brilliant. Absolutely wonderful. Did you see that production?

AL: Alas, no, I didn't. I was a bit young then. I was five.

GG: It wouldn't have worked for you, at five!

AL: I'd like to think I could understand Pinter at that tender age, but probably not.

GG: So that's what happened, and we did it in at the Almeida. And because of the size of the dressing rooms, we all shared. And I used to go in and, you know Harold had a sense of humour - a lot of people just think he's a grumpy old man, but he's not, he was wonderful fun - and one afternoon, one matinée, I went in and said to him, 'Harold, how many plays have you written today?' He said 'What?'. 'How many plays?' I said, 'I've written a couple'. He said 'what the fuck are you talking about?' I said, 'well, you're one of the great writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century'; 'What do you mean, "one"?' He was fun, we had such fun. Then we went to the West End and Duggie Hodge and myself would take it in turns to go and see him before the show. And he'd say 'would you like a glass of champagne?' 'I don't drink before the show, Harold'. 'What do you mean you don't drink? Have you ever seen me drunk on the stage?'. And there was another time when Hirst says to Briggs, 'Give me the bottle' and I think Briggs says 'No!'. And then he eventually lifted his arm up like that, as though he's really going to kill me. And when we got off stage, I said, 'Harold, what was all that about?' 'Well,' he said, 'you wouldn't give me the bottle'. And I said 'well you wrote the fucking play'; he said 'Ah, point taken'. He'd gone off line. But, that was such fun. And what else did I do with him? All sorts of things, actually. And then we were at the National, we did a little tour, where I'd do things like 'Mac' and cricket and other things that he'd written, and he would sometimes be in it with us. And then he and I, when all those terrible things were happening in Chile, we used to go and recite some of those wonderful righteous poems to raise money. And the Chileans did say that when it was all over they were going to fly us out to Chile to have a party. Well, they didn't. I once played cricket with Harold. Only once, for the Gaieties, and, with one run to win the other team, the ball went in the air and I dropped

a catch. And he didn't invite me again. In fact, he didn't speak to me for a bit. He was very fond of his cricket.

AL: He was, he was. So, let me ask you a question Gawn, based out of what you've just said. I think you are amongst a very select group of people who've been in a play not written by Harold, but directed by him, in one of his own plays, directed by someone else, and in one of his own plays directed by him, and acting opposite him on the stage. I wonder if it's possible... would you say that he, was he always himself, was he always 'Harold Pinter' or did he wear different hats depending on what the job was, what his role was?

GG: No, I think he was always Harold Pinter. But he did say, on the first day of rehearsals, he said, 'I am an actor. On this. I am not the writer'. But he was always Harold, vocally, in everything. If you ever phoned Harold and you've got the answering machine, you get 'I'm not here'.

AL: So that's interesting; when he was a *No Man's Land*, he was 'I'm here to be the actor'. So he wasn't opening himself up to textual queries or director's notes?

GG: Exactly. He handed it over to Leveaux, who he trusted.

AL: So, tell me, I was the associate director of *No Man's Land* in 2016 with Ian [McKellen] and Patrick [Stewart], would you be able to... are there any main contrasts, would you say with our production and your production from '92?

GG: Well, unfortunately, I was in the theatre next door. I was doing *The Entertainer*, so I couldn't see it.

AL: You couldn't see us. That's right.

GG: I hear it was wonderful. The two [audio break] who I grew up with, those two boys, they spent a lot of time telling me how wonderful it was. The two knights.

AL: I think there was a hesitation, mainly from Ian, to agree to do it initially, because of the legacy of the two knights. And I think he was a little bit... he didn't want to be in Gielgud's shadow, I think initially with Spooner, because it's such an iconic play, and the characters and production, the original.

GG: Oh, I saw the original, because I was at the National then. I was either doing something in the Cottesloe, I can't remember what.

AL: So could you articulate any key differences or similarities between the original and your production? The one you were in.

GG: Well, no I can't really. No. No. I mean, they were incredible, the two of them. And the boys were good too. But, no, all I remember, when I was doing it at the Comedy. Terry Rigby, who played Briggs originally, he used to come once a week and tell me 'you can't play it like that'. Terrible! Actors, I tell you!

AL: Let me ask you another question. We haven't spoken yet about *Taking Sides*.

GG: Oh, yeah. I forgot about that. Yes. Of course. Yes. He was wonderful on that. But I just thought he was a wonderful director. That was a fascinating play. And Ronnie Harwood used to sit in rehearsals every day. And that's the famous sort of story about Harold is, if there was a fly in the room, he would go berserk. 'Get rid of that fly. Kill the fly'. I can't remember where we rehearsed, now, somewhere in Camden. But yes, that was a great journey because we started off at Chichester, and then went in [to the Criterion]. But he was an extraordinary director.

AL: Can you articulate, what were his quantities as a director?

GG: His qualities were that he was very precise and led you to where he wanted you to be without being aggressive or, you know - because I've worked with directors who have just been impossible - so he led you there in a way. And, without sounding sentimental, I think with a love. And that was a difficult journey because old Dan Massey - who is buried in the garden here - he was very difficult because he was very ill. And he had to handle that.

AL: So when you were saying about Harold directing, he'd be very precise. You would say that he had a clear vision, and so he kind of led the company to realise his vision but without them telling anyone what to do.

GG: That's a very good point, yeah, you're absolutely right. But if you want to talk more about his direction, you should talk to Denis Lawson who took over in *Oleanna*. He talks a lot about Harold. In fact, he lives around here. So that might be quite interesting to talk to him, or David Suchet. Have you talked to David.

AL: I haven't, no.

GG: Sir David. Another Sir.

AL: Yes, indeed. Those chaps were directed by Harold a lot?

GG: Yeah. In *Oleanna*. The Mamet play.

AL: Yes absolutely. I know it. I know it well. In fact, it's currently in rehearsal, the new production for Theatre Royal, Bath.

GG: Is it? Who's doing it?

AL: Lucy Bailey is directing it, and John Heffernan is in it.

GG: Oh, he'd be wonderful.

AL: Yes, he's great.

GG: He's a lovely, lovely actor. I did something with him, well, the last time I worked.

Al: At the National? *Saint George and the Dragon*?

GG: That's right!

Al: Let me ask you another Pinter question. So why was it when you were talking to Harold, when Harold told you he was going to do *No Man's Land*, when you're working with him on *Party Time* and *Mountain Language*, you said if you were a bit younger you wanted to play Briggs. Any particular reason? Why Briggs?

GG: Well, because I knew I couldn't play the other two parts! And, actually, yeah. I thought Briggs was a great part. And I'd always wanted to have a crack at Bolsover Street.

Al: Yes, Bolsover Street, what a speech.

GG: Yeah. No, it's a fantastic part. And, you know, as I said earlier as far as I was concerned, it was a quartet. And that was where for the first time I met a very young Douggie Hodge. Douggie and I always said to each other, right, well when it comes around again in about ten years time, we'll play the other two parts. And it came around again and I think it was Gambon and David Bradley. So we didn't get to do it, we didn't get our chance! But at least we had the joy of working onstage with him. Fantastic.

Al: Did you find Bolsover speech challenging to learn and deliver?

GG: Yes, it was challenging to learn, and deliver, indeed it was. But once I'd got it inside me, it was a joy. It was a great speech to do. It was a fantastic speech.

Al: Did it get a big response? I remember in our production, with Owen Teale doing it, there were times when the response was just absolutely extraordinary from the audience. Just everyone completely losing it.

GG: Yes. It used to be like that. It really was. Looking back. When we did it at the Almeida, as I said, there were two dressing rooms, so the four of us were in one because he kept the other one for meeting people and drinks. And because it was Harold, one night it would be Lauren Bacall. I remember holding my hand out, and she said 'don't do that, kiss me'. And then Salman Rushdie, with his bodyguards, came. It was one hell of a time, I tell you.

Al: I imagine. So, now *Party Time*, that was a premiere, that was the first time it had been seen. When you when you were creating it, was there like a feeling amongst the company that we are premiering a Harold Pinter work? Or would you say that you just do the play in whether it's a revival or a premiere, you just got to do the play the best you can. You don't really think about those externals.

GG: Well, I think we were aware of it being a premiere, of a work of his. And Pinter, and Dotty Tutin, and Barry Foster, and a whole run of us, so we did have that feeling that we were the ones that were doing it for the first time. You know, whenever you're in a new

play, or when we were kids in new plays, you thought, 'my name's going to be in the book!'. But there were a lot of complaints, that the evening was too short. *Party Time* and *Mountain Language* put together was not much more than an hour. But it's such a political piece that... a fantastic piece actually, a wonderful piece. And then, as I say, they went off and made a movie of it, or television. So, yes, we were aware that we were doing a premiere, of Pinter.

AL: Tell me, when you did the television version, were there many changes or was it quite faithful to the stage version?

GG: It was very faithful. I don't think they changed anything. Except I think we changed an actor. Because somebody couldn't do it, was doing something else. But otherwise no, there were no changes.

AL: OK. Alright, Gawn, well, look, this has this has been an absolute delight. I don't want to take up the whole of your afternoon.

GG: Good. I've got to do the washing up!

AL: Let me ask you two questions to finish with. If you could play a part in any Pinter play, what would it be? And then if you could give advice to a young actor who was going to be doing a Pinter for the first time, what would that advise be?

GG: Well, I'd – now - I'd play the Richardson part in *No Man's Land* because I know the play very well. That would be that. But to a young actor coming along... I think you have to trust the text and you have to... I think you have to totally trust Pinter. A lot of people change it or try to change it, but you know, when it says 'beat', 'pause' then give it a go. I think... do you know, it's a very difficult one to do for a young actor, I think, but that's it. I've always believed in, whatever I do, is finding the truth. And you know, I know some people say they don't understand what Harold's on about. Well, I think we all do, and I'm sure you do know. There's a book, that Billington writes of Harold, have you read that?

AL: I have yes. It's brilliant.

GG: So, that's all I think I can say. Find the truth and the roots of the person and you worry it until it comes to you. I'm inclined to tweet - not when I'm working - and I tweet how the character... where I'm trying to find him, is he round the corner, is he here? I know he's somewhere. Until it grows, it becomes, you become him, and the walk, everything.

AL: One quick one just before we finish. With that in mind, with this business of finding the truth in Harold's characters, why do you think his plays are so frequently revived and still find an audience today?

GG: Because they are great pieces, they're masterpieces. They're fantastic theatre. Audiences want to see them and actors want to play the parts, because they're wonderful parts. They're classics, they have become classics. I can still see Herald at Simon Gray's funeral. And he got up when we read a poem. And afterwards, I sat down with him and said

'do you know and that was fantastic, that was absolutely great'. And he then phoned me to say, 'good to see you. Will we ever meet up?' And that was the last thing I heard. In fact, no, it wasn't the last because Judy Daish, and her husband, were here on the night that Harold died. She had to leave here quickly to go to London. And Gordon and Zoe and myself sat here. And every five minutes, the centre light, which is often up in the middle of the table, kept on going off. And I said 'that's Harold saying goodbye'. Yeah, I forgot that. Yes, right up to the end.