

Samuel West in conversation with Alexander Lass, for the Pinter Legacies project, 16 February 2021.

AL: Sam, many thanks for taking the time to talk to me today for the Pinter Legacies and Histories project. You've had an extensive involvement with Pinter and his work for many years beginning with your role in the film *Reunion*. Am I correct that this was your first professional encounter with Pinter's work?

SW: You are. I did his play *Family Voices* when I was at university as part of a first term drama project at Oxford called 'Cuppers', which is a very spit and sawdust thing where you're given a budget of, I think it was £80, to put on a 45-minute play, which includes your get-in and you'll get-out. And I was very lucky to work with a writer called Ming Ho, who was in the same year as me. We were both in Michael Gove's English set. He wasn't in it, though I have been in a film with him! And she chose this play and I played the young man. And I got a little Award for it from Katie Mitchell, who was president of the Oxford University Dramatic Society at the time. And I'd had some experience of Pinter's work through my father's work; he'd done *The Homecoming* in the West End playing Max when he was younger than I am now, so in his mid to late forties, I think. He'd lost his hair and was quite big and always played people older than him. But when I auditioned for *Reunion*, it was just after I left university. It was the summer of '88, so I would have been 22. And I was auditioning to play a 17-year-old the aristocrat Konradin Von Lohenburg in Pinter's version of Fred Uhlman's novel, which is a short story about a Jewish boy in 1930's Stuttgart who becomes friends with an aristocrat. The aristocrat meet Hitler and tells him what a fan of his he is. Then the boy escapes to America and doesn't go back until he's older. And in flashback he discovers that his friend, the aristocrat, is basically von Stauffenberg and was involved in the plot to kill Hitler, and executed, which is the last word of the book. Pinter produced a beautiful screenplay for it. We did this in the autumn of '88, and in the spring of '89 it went to the Cannes Film Festival. So it was quite exciting. But Harold wasn't very involved in the process. He was very pleased with the film, I think. And later on in life as I met and worked with him more, I got to know that, and also got to know that that Antonia was a great fan of the film, which became very hard to find for a while. There wasn't a print of it available. And she used to show it to friends because she thought it was a little gem. Very few people have ever seen it. But it was a wonderful, wonderful screenplay and wonderful first professional job after I left university.

AL: If you cast your mind back to it, do you recall any particular preparation you did for it once you offer the part, when you were preparing for the role.

SW: Well, nowadays I would do a great deal more. I read the book, of course, which is very short and basically a long short story. There's a wonderful quote from, I think it was Arthur Koestler in the preface.... Because Uhlman was a painter; he had an exhibition recently in Hampstead, in that gallery in Hampstead, which I went to. And it was basically the story of his life. He went to London rather than to America, but he was the Jewish boy in the story. I didn't really know that at the time. I mean, had I known that I would have found out more about Fred Ullman and more about von Stauffenberg. But no, it was very interesting working with Jerry Shatzburg. He's still with us and he was a photographer, a fashion photographer, a very brilliant one. He became a film director and made a number of films

that are very well thought of but not particularly well known, like *Scarecrow* and *Panic in Needle Park*. And I watched one of those. I can't remember which one I watched first, I've seen them both now. And there were things about it like extraordinary people to be working with like Alexandre Trauner designed it, who designed *Les enfants du paradis*. And it was, it was almost his last film. I think he's in it at one point; he plays a man who shows Jason Robards around the archive. He goes back into storage room, and that's how he sort of goes back into his memory. But we shot in Stuttgart and then in Berlin. And it was basically the story of a friendship of two young boys in 1930s Germany with rising fascism. I mean, it's been told in other ways. I was not as young as Christien Anholt; it was both of our first jobs really. I enjoyed filming in Berlin very much. It was interesting having to go quite far out of the centre of Berlin before we could find a 1930s street that hadn't been flattened by allied bombing, there was quite a lot of that. And I loved working with Jason Robards – I only met him a few times. He won back-to-back Oscars in the seventies; *All the President's Men*, and I can't remember the other one was. And when we went to Cannes, he sat next to me and I noticed that he was a bit fidgety and I asked him why, and he said 'it's the first time I've seen my work since *All the President's Men*, and I had to see that because they gave me an Oscar'. I always thought it was interesting that such an extraordinarily gifted actor just hated watching himself, thought it was no part of the process. And I've slightly inherited that, not the extraordinarily gifted actor bit, but the hating seeing myself. Also, he raised his hat to ladies - and we did call them 'ladies'; it was sort of like working with somebody from the 19th century. But Pinter, maybe because he was Pinter and also maybe because I think he knew that Jerry was being very respectful to his script.... There were very, very few changes. I don't think I changed a syllable. And there were a couple of bits of extemporised dialogue that went in, but nothing I think was removed or not shot. And that was very... I now live with a playwright, my partner, the playwright Laura Wade. And I sort of started the journey there that thinking that, you know, the writer is the real star, Jerry was a very well thought of director and I'd done a couple of jobs before I went to university and Christien was sort of starting out, most of the cast was... I mean Jason was a big star obviously, but the big name on the piece was Harold Pinter, that's the person who got us there. So we shot his screenplay and then went home. And I think that's really good. I'm fascinated - and we'll talk about the Pinter festival later – I'm fascinated, of course, they discover that Pinter's never written an original screenplay. All his films, however many there are, are adaptations, either of his own plays or of books, I think. I don't know why that is, but I think it's that that arm's length thing he has maybe suits his own relationship with the work, his own relationship with his own subconscious. He had a very simple way of telling the story and he, and he did it and it's a lovely little film, I think.

AL: You mentioned that he sort of wasn't particularly involved and there was a sense of, you know, the preciousness of this script. Was he there in Berlin on location with you or he delivered the script and he wasn't sure around?

SW: I'm not sure I met him during the process. I think we must have had a read through. I certainly auditioned. I auditioned I think three times. And I remember the lunch where Jerry offered me the job. But I don't think I met Harold during the process. No. Which was really interesting.

AL: That is interesting. Let us fast-forward then to - and you must jump in if I skipped anything out - but 2006, you're artistic director of the Sheffield Crucible and my understanding is that's your net when it was your next involvement with Pinter. And you programme this special celebration of Pinter's work at Sheffield, including readings and performances of *No Man's Land*, *Family Voices*, and *The Caretaker*. I wonder if you might speak a bit about this project, its genesis, its purpose, why you chose the plays, the process of producing, rehearsing it, and how it was received.

SW: We had a young director. I was able to offer basically one slot a year to a director whose work I didn't know. And I think probably nowadays I would try and make it more than one, but there wouldn't be as many slots. That year, it was Jamie Lloyd. It was his first main stage production. And he said 'I want to do *The Caretaker*, and I want to do it with Nigel Harman'. And I thought, well, Nigel Harman's a very good name for a regional theatre. He was with my agent. He seemed keen and very talented, and he would certainly sell tickets. So I said, 'well, who do you want to play Davies' and he said 'David Bradley'. I said 'I think that's an extraordinary idea. Does he know?' He said, 'well, I can we can have lunch. Why don't we why don't we have lunch with him'. So we had lunch with David Bradley and David I think, was very impressed with this young man, as we all were. I remember our production manager coming out of her first production meeting with him going, 'he's quite something; he really knows what he wants'. He'd worked on smaller fringe productions and some quite big fringe productions as well. But the main stage of the Crucible, even with a three person play, is quite a reach. He had a designer [Soutra Gilmour] that he'd worked with before and worked with many, many times since. And they did a wonderful version of the play. And I thought, okay, well this is three people, it's not a particularly expensive production; one set and three people. I know a bit about Pinter. Michael Grandage had done celebrations of Caryl Churchill and other writers before. And I thought, well, why don't we do a Pinter festival? So we sort of brainstormed it. We said, what's the silliest thing we can do? Well we said, we've got to have a cricket match. So we started with a cricket match against the Gaieties. And Nigel played, which was lovely, for the Sheffield theatres' eleven. I didn't because I had I had a kidney stone at the time and I was on quite lot of morphine, which was delightful! And I had to discharge myself from hospital to go to the cricket match, which was at Chatsworth. It was very, very lovely and we lost the game quite quickly, which was absolutely the right thing to do. But we had shirts printed and everything, so it was a proper start. And then our production manager, our head of props Neil [Surname], said I want to build a box theatre in the foyer and we'll mike it up. And my dad, who was wondering what to do that season... he was going to do it was going to do *A Number* with me. That's right. Caryl Churchill's play *A Number*. He said, well, why don't we do a bit of *The Homecoming* in the box. So we did, we learnt that, and then every few days local people would come in and do bits. And so we sort of, we sort of thought, well, how do we celebrate this man in all his multiplicity? So we did a screening of the Nobel lecture at the Friends' House, the Quaker meeting house, in which local actors and members of the company read bits of that, and we discussed it. We did a reading of his poetry over tea in the Sheffield Crucible cafe one-day, which Nigel Harman and I took part in. We did an extraordinary reading of *No Man's Land* with my dad and Julian Reinhardt and me. And Corin Redgrave. And Corin, as you may remember, had had a stroke, I think, the year before and came quite close to death, I think, and had a lot of memory loss. But he had played this part at the National about five years before. And Jemma Redgrave, his daughter, who I knew from *Howard's End*, was a friend.

And I called her and I said, 'look, I don't know whether your dad is in a place where he can read in public, but if he would, would he like to come up to Sheffield and read - is it Hurst? I can't remember -

AL: Yes.

SW: In *No Man's Land*? And she put it to him and I think he said yes, and she said, 'Yeah, that would be really good because it's a step in, it's a toe back in the water'. But of course it's sold out very quickly and we got a lovely director in and Corin read it quite beautifully. And then afterwards he said to me, 'isn't it amazing play, I didn't know it'. And I opened my copy, which was the National Theatre printed edition from the last production and pointed to his name in the front. And he said, 'Oh, oh, yes. Oh, how extraordinary'. He had no memory, no memory of having played the part. But obviously some singing blood in him knew that he had played the part and the muscle memory was there. And he was wonderful. And it was a very good idea. I remember being very, very pleased that we had done that. And then we got Pinter up. Pinter wasn't well and we didn't know whether he would be able to come. He sent me a sweet note saying how thrilled he was with the programme, because the programme is very, very extensive and strange. And Michael Billington came up and talked to Penny Wilton and Douglas Hodge, you know; two very, very, very reliable Pinter actors. And we should have probably had a bit more of a sort of 'Pinter for beginners' introduction. But, in fact there's something there for everyone. And, and then Pinter said, 'OK, look, I'll come if Harry Burton interviews me'. So, we booked it into the studio and it sold out in eight minutes. And Harry came up and they read the new sketch that Harold had just written called 'Apart from That'. And they talked about the UN, and they talked about cricket, and they talked about the Labour Party. And they didn't talk about his plays at all, it was wonderful. It was just a chat between friends about how Harold was responding to, basically, current affairs that morning, you know, which was wonderful. And it wasn't until he'd left that we realised he hadn't really talked about his plays, and that didn't matter at all. I remember Michael Billington talking about an extraordinary thing in the 'pause for thought', which was the chat, of how - and this has become almost the thing I like most about Pinter, he really put his finger on it - that until Pinter came along with *The Birthday Party*, there was this sense that the well-made play was a secret that the dramatist was in some way keeping from the audience and revealing to them at dramatically effective speed. So, there would be a secret or there would be a revelation or there would be a piece of drama that the dramatist would tell you sort of half-way through act three, and then there would be a meltdown, or before the curtain of *The Winslow Boy* or something... which is a marvellous play; the curtain line of Act one, the boy is clearly innocent. And Pinter had, of course, trained in those plays and in fact was acting in them when he wrote *The Birthday Party*. He was very much as an actor or a child of a repertory and had a great fondness I think, for well-made plays. But then *The Birthday Party* comes along, and instead of this sense that the dramatist is somehow a wise wizard who knows exactly what's going on, Michael said, Pinter is like, there's this room-world - the room being so important in Pinter, not just as the name of his first play, but as the world - that the play comes from Pinter sort of walking past the door, which just happens to be open, and looking in and writing down what he sees or hears. And he has no more idea about what's going on than you do. And that's a brilliant description, I think. There's, you know there's a very famous, it's almost a trope with Pinter that, you know, if you asked him what his plays were about, he would

famously say 'the weasel under the cocktail cabinet' - which is actually quite a good description, I think it's not nonsense - or 'none of your own fucking business', I think he said at one point. We'll talk more about why he needed to say that, but I think a lot of the time he didn't know and, and wasn't really interested. Famously, he said that the first line of *The Homecoming*, 'What have you done with the scissors?' came into his mind, fully formed. And he said, 'it seems to me that character A, who wanted the scissors, was asking character B, who he suspected had hidden them, their whereabouts. I knew no more. I suspected that character A was character B's father, and this was confirmed when a page later character B said to character A "Dad, why don't you shut up?"' So these people sort of appear and start talking. In fact, my partner put it very well. And she wrote a play about two people in a novel once and I said to her 'how's it going?' and she said, 'Oh well, they're talking'. And I remember it reminded me of that story of the beginning of *The Homecoming*. So that was a really important insight into Pinter and into the revolutionary nature of that discourse; that he knows no more than you do. And most of the time he doesn't want to. So there were things like that that stay with me so like it was yesterday - and this is, you know, 15 years ago now. And then we did... what else did we do? We did some of the short plays, we read a lot of the short plays. And we did a performance of *Family Voices*, of course, with my mum and dad. Yeah, it's the first time we appeared on a stage together, all three of us, and we later did it on radio. We recorded it, it must still exist. My father played the father, and I played the voice I had done in 'Cuppers', and my mum played the mum. It's quite good casting actually! It's a wonderful play, *Family Voices*, it should be better known. And we read... Oh God yes, of course, yes, we did a season of screenplays! I think we found a lot of his films. I mean, 12 or 13 I think, maybe it was nine; it was it was it was a good number including *Reunion*, which I introduced, and *The Pumpkin Eater*, which is now on DVD but at the time it wasn't - a wonderful film that David Hare had written about in *The Guardian*, as the centrepiece of a piece about Pinter screenplays where he called them 'part of a literate mainstream we now lack'. I think he said - I've got the quote, let me find it - I think he said that the... David Hare summed up their themes: adultery, violence, alcohol class, and sex. And these were the films that people went to see in the 1970s. Until *Star Wars* oh no, sorry, cinema is for teenagers, or even smaller than that. And that's how we're going to build our business model, on 13-year-olds going to the cinema, not adults. But Pinter had this place in a literate mainstream, whether it was *The Servant* or *The Go-Between* or *The Pumpkin Eater* or *Reunion* up to a point. I mean, *The Pumpkin Eater* got - was it Anne Margaret [Bancroft], I can't remember - got an Oscar nomination and Meryl Streep got one for *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Oh and *Betrayal* and of course, more Oscar nominations for that. So, you know, he was a really great screenplay writer. And I think he enjoyed that bit of his career because he was very successful and quite well-dressed and, you know, jetted around some quite nice film festivals and worked with some very good people who wanted to work with him. So that's a sort of quick guide to the festival - it's not quick at all, it's an extremely long guide to the festival.

AL: Not at all, that was a very lovely guide. A quick question about *Family Voices*: can you remember, was there anything specific about working with your mum and dad on that on a Pinter script that was that seemed to really enhance your, or to make it particularly challenging or interesting or... have you worked together since and it hasn't ever felt the same or is there anything, any kind of reflection or comment you can make about that specific combination of factors?

SW: Yes, I can. Almost the first joke I was ever told - and I warn you it's not very funny - was a story about an actor who could never stress words, stress sentences correctly. And I use the word 'correctly' in inverted commas. The stressing of English is a sort of bugbear in our house. My mother used to do a workshop called, 'if you've phrase correctly, you will earn more money'. And she thinks it can be, not reduced to but summed up as a few principles, the main one of which is: there's only one main stress in every sentence of spoken English. When in doubt, go for the noun. And don't stress prepositions, conjunctions, or titles unless you're playing newsreaders or sports reporters: 'To be or not to be. That is the question. Whether it is nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. That's the sports' reporter version of a 'To be or not to be' and it's a shorthand, but it works. And the first joke I was told was about an actor who couldn't stress lines correctly. And the director got more and more frustrated. And eventually they just broke early and he went back to the hotel and he was going to go for a swim and he walked to the top of the diving board. And he saw this actor walking on the side of the pool and he tried to avoid him, it was too late, he'd seen him. And the actor looked up and he said, oh, 'Mr. Miller, Mr. Miller, you've got your watch on' [emphasised as statement of fact, not as a helpful caution]. And that was the joke. It works because it's mis-phrased. I was expected as a seven-year-old to understand that and think it was funny. And as somebody who sort of idolized my parents, I kind of learned the principle. 'You've got your watch on'. And why was why was that funny? I think there is - and I don't want to go too much from the outside in - but there is a music to Pinter. There is particularly one thing he does where he repeats things. And if you stress it, like you've just said something very similar, it's not as good as if you've never said it before. So there's a bit in *The Homecoming* where he says something like, 'Why don't you get a dog? You're a dog cook. You think you're cooking for a lot of dogs?'. And if you say, 'Why don't you get a dog? You're a dog cook. You think you're cooking for a lot of dogs?' - as if you said the dog thing twice already - it's not as good. It's just not as good. It's not as funny. And it's not as violent. , 'Why don't you get a dog? You're a dog cook. You think you're cooking for a lot of dogs?'. First of all, Pinter loves to the music of it. Secondly, he recognises that that's how people use words. I remember my mother at about this time, actually when I was when I was doing *Family Voices* - maybe that's why - at University came up to give me some parcel of tuck or something, you know, ironically a parcel of tuck and she handed me some gloves - it was quite cold - and she said, 'Do you think these will fit you? I think these will fit you. These will fit you won't they?'. And I remember exactly the way she said... 'Do you think these will fit you? I think these will fit you. These will fit you won't they?' Exactly the same thing three times, not noticing that she'd already said it twice, the third time. And I think that's Pinter; Pinter would be proud of that. And both my parents get it. And there is a sort of violence in the language that is really helped by stressing lightly. And kind of, you know, that thing that Gielgud says that 'style is knowing what play you're in'. You don't play Coward the same as you do David Mamet or Pinter the same as you do Terence Rattigan. There is a Music to Pinter, which is partly to do with speed of thought. Often what you say in response to something is an instantaneous reaction to what's just been said. Whereas with Caryl Churchill, it could be a response to something that's said two lines ago. And they often sort of intersect. That's a thing that she does beautifully, and that's not quite Pinter's thing. So, he would get frustrated when people would say, you know, 'Why am I saying this?' And he would say 'Well that's because that person just said this to you'. And it would have nothing to do with what had happened five seconds earlier. But that

didn't bother him. So I did think we're all in the same play to answer your question. I think it's kind of we're playing the same piece. You know, now you would say, you know, is it Strauss or is it Beethoven? Is it Steve Reich or is it Mozart? And I think Pinter; it's very helpful with Pinter, not to sing it - that's really important that, you know, that you live the language and you act to the language - but that there is a certain music to it, which it is good to have.... perhaps not half an ear, a quarter of an ear on. And I think I'm okay at it, I think I sort of understand it. And certainly, Harold was kind enough to say that occasionally I did... kind of enough occasionally to say that I did. Sometimes I did. And for instance, when we were doing *Betrayal* and I did think yes, when we were in *Family Voices* together that we, you know... unsurprisingly, because I was read to, every night when I was young. And I notice now that my six-year-old, she reads aloud quite well and she phrases a bit like me. And I wouldn't... It's not surprising really because she's... not entirely like me, but quite a lot of the time, I think, you know, that's how I would have said that. And that's interesting. Plus, you know, I made quite a lot of my living by reading aloud. I don't make a lot of my living by dancing, stage fighting, or riding a horse, which are three things I'm very bad at! So yes, it's important to say, yes, I think I can do that, I think I can sight read on the whole. More about *Betrayal* later...

AL: Why not? Let's move on.... You mentioned it, that's lovely. Let's move, then, onto *Betrayal*. In 2007, you starred as a Robert in Roger Michell's production of *Betrayal*, at the Donmar, opposite Toby Stevens as Jerry and Dervla Kirwan

SW: as Ruth - sorry, Emma. Yes. Ruth is in *The Homecoming*. Yes.

AL: She is. Let's have a little chat about that, the character of Robert, your reflections on the project, the process, Roger Michell. Was Harold more involved in this one, et cetera?

SW: Yes, he was. I remember him coming in. We rehearsed at the Tricycle in Kilburn and I remember him coming to a Saturday morning. Probably the last run in the rehearsal room. And we're all rather nervous. But it's a short play as you know, and it was over before it had started and he was very kind about it. And I think almost the last time I saw him was when we went to the Ivy after the show, when he came to see it at the Donmar, and he was very pleased with the production. And he beamed at me across the table after saying something nice about my performance - I can't exactly remember what it was - but he, you know, he could be an extremely bad-tempered man at times and a smile from Harold Pinter could keep you warm like a good offdrive would keep you warm during winter, you know. I remember it like it was yesterday. And I don't think he was in the business of being nice about things that he didn't care about. He was very, very good at cutting the umbilical cord of his plays because he was an international star as a writer. And, you know, there are very funny stories of him going to see plays in Budapest, his plays in Hungarian, and suddenly realising he was watching *The Homecoming*, and that they'd put Max's dead wife into the show. She sort of appeared and looked in occasionally and it was like 'I didn't write this'. But he doesn't really complain because he thinks it's done: you make of it what you will. And that's a very difficult thing for a writer to do. Well, I think, I think being internationally famous certainly helps. I remember one thing that really made me smile: Roger, who I'd worked with twice before - and I've worked with again now four times, on one play and three films, small parts in two films and a bigger one, more recently - I think Roger had been

going to direct a James Bond movie and he'd had a small heart attack. And so he very quickly decided to do a play instead. And he chose a very good play. I mean, he chose a wonderful play. But he chose a good play for somebody who doesn't want to be directing a James Bond film because, they have another heart attack, and he cast me and Toby and Dervla. And we were very happy, I think. Oh, and Ian as the waiter. And the Torcello thing - that extraordinary scene where Robert confronts Emma about the affair she's been having for five years - centres around a letter, as I'm sure you remember, that Jerry has written to Emma. And Roger, being a good and conscientious director, got Toby to write it, to Dervla. And Dervla read it, and I think it helped a lot. And I remember Harold saying to Toby... Toby has a line saying, 'Did you go to Torcello?' And Toby said 'Did you go to Torcello?'. And Harold said 'Why did you say "did you go to Torcello" like that?' And Toby said, 'well, because I've written to her about... she's written to me about Torcello, so I knew she was planning to go'. And he said, 'when?', and he said 'well, in the letter that I got from her' and he held up the letter, and Harold said, 'well, I haven't seen that letter'. And I was fascinated because Toby had absolutely done exactly the right thing to make the character believable onstage. He'd done the backstory, he'd written the letter, there was an exchange of letters. Both of them had the letters. But Harold... because it happened offstage, Harold wasn't interested. And it brought me back to that thing that he was doing, touring in rep when he was writing *The Birthday Party*. My father... Harold directed my father in *Twelve Angry Men*, and I think he was a very good stage director. And I'm quite jealous of him directing *Twelve Angry Men* actually, because I would love to do it. Well, though nowadays you wouldn't be able to do it with twelve men, you'd have to find some other way of doing it.

AL: I remember being in it, I was in it a prep school. I played juror Number three.

SW: Yes. Yes. Nice. Nice part. Well, they're all nice parts. One of my favourites... But I think Harold had done it very well and very conscientiously, but it was quite sort of 'learn the lines and don't bump into the furniture'. There wasn't an enormous amount of backstory. There was a lot of music of the stuff and concentrating on the truth of the words in the moment. But he was... he had come from what nowadays you would say was a sort of old-fashioned theatrical background, and the idea that there was a bit of the play that he hadn't seen, this letter, they didn't quite cross. And I felt that was fascinating. And Toby was a bit... he was amused, but he was also put off because he'd done his homework like a good actor.

AL: It's a bit like, there's a similar story with an actor who is being directed by Harold asked him, 'Where was he before the scene starts?' and Harold said 'What do you mean?' 'Where am I? Before the scene? Before I'm in this scene, where am I? What do I have been doing? Where am I?' And Harold said, 'well you've been in the wings waiting to come on.'

SW: Exactly. Exactly. Exactly. And that's not a contradiction. No. I don't think he saw that that was any less truthful, in a sense. And perhaps he's right. I mean, you embrace the theatricality of a play, don't you? And there was another thing of course, that's at the centre of *Betrayal*, which is the image of throwing the baby up and catching it, that Jerry talks about. And it's Harold's own memory. But it's an engine, it's a psychological engine for the play that he allows, but he doesn't want to investigate; he doesn't want to know too much about it in case it goes away. And I think that's very interesting, that he has and sort of jealous relationship with his own unconscious. He's not guarding the meanings of the plays,

he just doesn't want to talk about them in case that the people stopped talking. I think. And he doesn't think it's necessary for you to know anything more about that to be able to act it because he wouldn't. I mean, that was another thing, of course, we showed a number of his performances in the Pinter festival, as an actor. And what a very, very good actor, he was. Those *Arena* Programmes where he does - what was it – not *Mountain Language*... what's the short play with the whisky [*One for the Road*]. Anyway, I can't remember, I'll check it and correct it. But a really terrifically powerful actor. And in *Mansfield Park* as well, lovely performance and, you know, he could have been a great actor if he wasn't an even better writer. So I think he took his attitude to acting, which was quite old-fashioned and actor-manager-y, and just said it, well, I can do it why can't you?

AL: Well, in fact, that leads us on nicely to - you acted opposite him 2007 in *The Homecoming* on the radio?

SW: Yes. Yes, that was delightful.

AL: So by this point, you knew him fairly well or at least professionally speaking.

SW: Yes. I mean, I remember when he came up to Sheffield. He'd said that he couldn't come because he wasn't well; he had throat cancer, I think. And I said, 'oh, that's a blow. I'm so sorry, is there anything we can do?' And he said, 'Not unless you have a flying carpet'. We signed a bat, we all signed a bat on the cricket on the day of the cricket to give to him, which he was very pleased with, because there were a couple of England players in the Sheffield theatres' side, including David Troughton's son. David Troughton was one of the Umpires. And, as always, he was more interested in cricket than in anything else. We'd probably want to talk a bit about cricket. But then he got a bit better and he decided to come up to Sheffield. And we put him up in the best hotel in town. And I had a glass of wine with him. And he wrote a poem that night, which is now on the wall in Sheffield theatres. And he read it to me and I said 'That's amazing'. And then the next morning he said 'It's rubbish'. It's somewhere between the two! But he wasn't he wasn't pleased with it the next morning. But there it is on the wall of Sheffield theatres because he wrote it when he was in Sheffield and that was wonderful. But he... I've lost track of your question.

AL: We were talking... we were moving onto acting opposite him on the radio in *The Homecoming*.

SW: Yes. And so I'd seen him in Sheffield and was a bit scared of him, to be honest. He was quite an easy man to be scared of. Which is why when he smiled, I remember it so well. But, you know, he, well... I don't want to say he didn't suffer fools gladly because what a stupid thing it is to suffer fools gladly. Why would anyone do that? But he had a short fuse...

AL: Some people have a higher tolerance of people who they've made an assessment of.

SW: Yes. He didn't have that. He was... he didn't have that. And we were very, very pleased to have him, but we didn't want him to do too much while he was there. And I think we managed to walk that line fairly well. And certainly, Sheffield was thrilled that he did he'd come, but doing the radio was a bit different. I mean, because radio is different. One of the

questions you asked is, what's the difference in acting in radio? I remember Michael Gambon... Maybe I should search for this because I think I've written this somewhere else. If it's still up, this piece, then I should be able to get... here we go, oh, I can't see it. Maybe it's not there anymore. I remember Michael Gambon was playing Sam, the chauffeur.

AL: Yes. The brother.

SW: His brother, Max's brother. And he says, 'You know, I wouldn't get this job if it was on stage', he said. I said, 'well, they wouldn't get you. It's not big enough part'. He says, 'yeah, well, he's a smaller man, isn't he?' And of course I thought, 'yeah, he is'. Sam is not... Michael Gambon is six foot two or three, I think; a very impressive figure. You wouldn't cast a six foot three Sam. It just wouldn't work. 'He's a smaller man, isn't he?' And I thought, well, Lenny is absolutely my ideal part, you know, the violent North London pimp! I'd never played anybody like him - except on radio, where people go, 'yeah, you can be Lenny, of course you can; you can sound different, you don't need to be posh. You can be him, you can be somebody else'. And Harold didn't think... I mean, obviously he had casting approval. And luckily, he said yes. And when I did it, I did the world premiere of a Pinter line, which was 'Ta-ta'. Because Thea Sharrock who was directing said I think we need an exit line there Harold. What do you think? He said? Yeah. 'What about "ta-ta"?' 'Ta-ta'. I said 'yeah, absolutely, thank you'. Nobody had said it before! There is actually... talking of premieres of Pinter lines, I worked with a wonderful costume designer called Tom Rand early in my career and became friends with him and he designed *The Birthday Party* that my parents were in at the Piccadilly Theatre in, I think 1999. And he designed the whole room, sorry, he designed the whole house as Eileen Diss, Pinter's favorite designer often used to do with things like *The Homecoming* I remember. And, and there's where Goldberg's going upstairs and they sort of needed a line. And Harold said, 'I've got a new line'. And everybody went, 'oh!'. 'Timmy, when you're going upstairs, what about saying "what a lovely flight of stairs"?' So my father went 'what a lovely flight of stairs'. And Tom Rand was so proud of this that he puts it in his bio; his is design for Pinter's *The Homecoming* caused Pinter to put a new line into the play: 'What a lovely flight of stairs'. And I thought, yeah, that's what happens when you really respect a play. And Harold says, I've got a new line. And it just, so everybody stops. and it's a great line: 'ta-ta'. So that was nice. Yeah. I mean, I remember being quite nervous about... because you know, it's him, but he's as an actor and also he's Max, you know, he's the patriarch and he's violent, and he had... his voice was very gravelly. I mean, it was always impressive and dark, but it had got quite rough then which suited... And he would sort of bite bits of the language, that extraordinary violence he could get into a change of tone that Max is, you know, it's absolutely at the heart of Max. When he's talking about his dead wife and then 'she wasn't a bad sort of bitch'. And we kind of orbited him nervously. But actually, I remember saying, 'Dad, why don't you shut up' and just seeing him beam at me and he obviously sort of relished the fight. I think that's one thing to say about Pinter's love of cricket is that it's a communal activity like putting on a play that is based in a personal war between bowler and batsman. And I think he, I think he really relishes that. He's the sort of man who would be the first to shake your hand after you bowled him out or you would be expected to be the first to shake his hand after he'd hit a century, though he never did hit a century. He was very clear on the fact that he'd never hit a fifty, which I never have either. And probably never will now. But, you know, cricket made him happier than anything else because I think it just spoke to his sense of fair play, but also

a sense of, of war. You know, it could have been chess. But something about his fast North London friends, when he was young, had sort of led him into that team mentality. Bartering bits of Webster as they walked across Hackney Downs, you know; 'mine eyes dazzle. She died young' - just being turned on by bits of the *Duchess of Malfi*, can you imagine that, that doesn't really happen anymore, does it? So that the cricket thing I think was that he wanted you to give it your best shot. So Lenny versus Max is a relationship that needs to be taken on the front foot, like it like a well-pitched delivery. And I suppose I committed myself to that with great joy. And I probably will never play Lenny again, I'm too old now. But I have played it once and it was opposite him, which is a bit marvellous.

AL: Absolutely. There's something about the ritualized combat of cricket, and the veneer of civility, and underneath you've got people hurling very hard, fast objects at each other and swinging large chunks of wood.

SW: Yes, and with great intent, yes, absolutely.

AL: And that's a metaphor for his writing.

SW: Yes. Brilliant, absolutely. Yes, I should have said that when I was introducing the players for the cricket match. Unfortunately, I was high on morphine! But yes, you put it very well. And I think that that's why test cricket, particularly, was something that he liked. Because, you know... There are Americans who get test cricket and what they get in the end is the idea that you can play.. well, first of all they don't mind that you can play for five days and draw, or even tie. But that in fact, in retrospect, that the five-day war centres around that one hour after tea on day three, where it could go either way. And once you can read that, which of course Harold could, fluently, I think I think it was like, yeah, as you say, that the sort of the suppressed violence, the veneer of civility, and the extraordinary antagonism of the batsman/bowler relationship. Brilliant. So yes, there was a lot of that in the in the recording and, yeah, the only time I worked with him as an actor. Amazing.

AL: That brings me on to a couple more questions. I won't keep you all day, but that has been absolutely fascinating. But you are in - as we've just been talking about - you're in a relatively rare position of having worked with Pinter himself in his capacities as a playwright, screenwriter, and actor. The only one that you haven't... You were never directed by him?

SW: I was never directed by him.

AL: But you yourself are an actor and a director. So, as someone who wears multiple hats - and has great experience across different mediums; radio, TV, film, theatre - is that as anything you can reflect on Pinter with these different hats on as well? Do you do find that he is just a completely protean character or they're kind of compartmentalized? And, and it just so happens that he was adept at all these various things and he was different. He very much inhabited the different roles as and when the occasion demanded it.

SW: I think he was certainly good at wearing all those hats himself. And obviously, he was a very good actor and could have been, could have made his career as an actor and discovered that it wasn't... I mean, he was very good at it, but it wasn't his gift, you might

say. He was also a very, very good director, an extremely decent poet, and not a very good cricketer, but he liked the last one most! And his politics, of course, were changeable. I mean famously he did vote conservative [in 1979], but then, I wrote an appreciation of him for *Socialist Review* when he died. I would... It's hard to summarise him, because he's so much more than the sum of his parts. When he died, I was doing the *The Family Reunion* at the Donmar with Penelope Wilton, who of course was in the first production of *Betrayal*. She was the first Emma with Gambon. And she was terribly upset and she made a speech. And I can't remember whether it was her or me, but one of us said - you remember it was Christmas Eve that he died - and we played two days later and we made a curtain speech, because he was going to come and see us, I think, that week, and he never did. And she said 'we've lost our captain'. And I mean, not enough is said about how brilliantly he wrote for women. There's often only one woman in a play. But he had got two Oscar nominations for best actress I think, for, for his screenplays and, and I think none for the male parts. Especially something like *The Pumpkin Eater*, which is about a woman who has five children, and absolutely written from her point of view; a remarkable piece of... not ventriloquism, but absolutely becoming the female voice in the centre of the story. So, yes, I think it's an act of imagination really. When the Nobel Prize Committee said, you know, 'he forces his way into oppression's closed rooms'. And you think, well, he didn't need to do that. Or that extraordinary line he has in *Mountain Language*. What is it? 'Your language is forbidden. It is dead. No one is allowed to speak your language. Your language no longer exists. Any questions?' I mean, there isn't a syllable out of place in that. It's a very short play, you know, and everybody went, oh, I'll see a Harold Pinter play before dinner! But Carol Churchill does the same and those are masterpieces. I suppose I'm getting around to a long-winded way of saying that he kind of has this, like a say, a fecund relationship with his own unconscious which he trusted and was celebrated enough to be able to trust. And so he just sort of did what took his fancy. And it's interesting that he adapted books, but he didn't write his original screenplays; his home for original work was the stage. He just liked the thing of adapting. And if he could find a way into it, like the brilliant idea that they're making a film of *The French Lieutenant's Women* for *The French Lieutenant's Women* was his way of getting John Fowles's... but not in a kind of 'look at me, I'm Harold Pinter, what a clever person I am'... Or the process of going backwards in *Betrayal*. Michael Grandage said a fascinating thing about *Betrayal* I realize I'm hopping around all over the place, but in a sense that's my answer - He said that when it first came out, when it was first put on, was just after domestic video recorders had become not ubiquitous, but certainly common at home. And there was that funny thing you could do of putting your finger on the reverse button and watching people walk backwards through a scene. And Michael said... I have no evidence that this is what Harold was thinking of, but it's terribly interesting that the play comes just at the point where people started thinking about things going backwards. And, and that was picked up by Douglas Hodge, in a thing about Pinter's acting that I wouldn't want to go unrecorded from, from our pause for thought that Billington introduced. But he said - this was before I'd done *Betrayal* - But he said the extraordinary thing about playing Robert is *Betrayal* is that you start from the end. So you've become the person who's known about the affair already. And Doug, I can probably find a recording of this, but Doug said something like, I generally only discover I'm in love with somebody two years after I've left them. And so this thing of playing the breakup scene is always difficult for me because I don't feel it at the time. And the great thing about *Betrayal* is you don't have to, by the time you get to the scene where you have to say 'five years!', you don't have to go 'five years!'

because the audience already knows the person you've got to turn into. So at the time, you can just sort of deal with the information in the moment which you sometimes do quite neutrally or, or carefully or without necessarily flying off the handle. And it's such a gift for an actor that you don't have to act the response, you can just do the moment. And I think Harold was very given to that idea. And it's an absolute gift for actors that, because, well it allows you to play the long game and allows you to play the cover-up. There aren't really types are there in Pinter? There's just people. You know, he played the most extraordinarily loving torturers. If you wanted a torturer who loved his kids, you'd absolutely cast Harold, wouldn't you? Look for the kindness in a despot - Well, that's a Harold Pinter part, I think, I think Harold's free. You know what I mean?

AL: 100%. OK Sam, so, two more. If you were to direct a Pinter play in the next few years, what might it be and why? And if he were to act in a Pinter play...

SW; Ah, I'm not going to get to play Lenny, am I?

AL: ...who would you want to be?

SW: Well, I think I would love to direct *The Homecoming*. I do find it an extraordinary... I love its violence. I'm a pacifist, and sort of not given to actual violence at all, but I love its verbal violence. And I think it will last as a play. I'm always fascinated by the, you know there's this, sometimes when there's this division - like Woody Allen between the early funny stuff and the other things - that Pinter went to Broadway with *The Caretaker*. They didn't go to Broadway *Mountain Language*. But actually I saw a production of *Ellie Jones* did in Brighton Town Hall in 2007 of some of the short plays cut together. You've toured the building and watched different plays in different rooms, and it was an absolutely shattering. And I think... I mean, the trouble is that Jamie Lloyd's done them all. And pretty damn well. I was I was quite cross the I didn't get to do *Family Voices*. I would love to have directed that, but I think Patrick Murphy who directed it, and who I love, did a very nice job. The great thing about that season, the Pinter at the Pinter, which I only took part in reading a couple of poems, was how stuff like *Celebration* shined. And Jamie just cast it to the hilt and did it excitingly and on that one rotating set. And, you know, he sold out; he sold out The Pinter for, I don't know what it was, twelve weeks or something. Absolutely remarkable thing; it seems even more remarkable now there's no theatre going on at all? Yeah, I suppose *The Homecoming*, just because I've always loved it. And in fact, I used to do Lenny as an audition speech. I think that's, I remember doing it at university. But now...

AL: Or in the future?

SW: Aren't there are new ones? Feels funny, doesn't it? I think we probably have to probably have to...

AL: Are you a Spooner or a Hurst?

SW: Oh, good question. Yes. Well, can I grow into those?

AL: Yes, indeed.

SW: I'm probably a Spooner, I expect. Yes. Yes. Socks and sandals, is what Gielgud said, wasn't it?

AL: It was, yes, although when I did it... when I was Sean Matthias's associate in 2016 with Ian [McKellan] and Patrick [Stewart], Ian, I think, was a bit conscious of the ghost of Gielgud, and so he was adamant about white plimsoles.

SW: Good. Yes, good. I wish I'd seen that. I wish I had seen that. What was it like?

SW: It was pretty extraordinary. Certainly for me as, as the associate; it was my first big starry... I discovered as sort of Rolls Royce production - every element was absolutely to the hilt as you put in. And that play, a magical play, the poetry, the darkness, the booze. With Ian and Patrick at the top of their game.

SW: I don't know why I couldn't see it, probably young children.

AL: I've no doubt. And they'd done it before, of course. They did it in New York. They paired it with *Godot*, so they'd had a sort of... they did *Godot* at the Haymarket and they took *Godot* around the world. And they did it at Berkeley, in California, and then New York, and they brought *No Man's Land* back on its own as its own thing. And so, but then they recast it, from the Broadway version, with Owen Teale and Damien Maloney. So, they were new to the production, I was new to the production and it was really amazing for us, kind of fresh blood. It all felt like we were sort of doing it afresh together rather than reviving a production, the huge hit production that a small group of them and had already. And we toured it, we started with a five-week term, Sheffield, Newcastle, Brighton and Cardiff. And then we did three months at Wyndhams. And it was, I think it was Ian was more keen on the tour initially than Patrick. Ian's really... he feels very, very strongly as his 80th birthday, as his one-man show demonstrated, up and down the country, he feels really strongly about touring

SW: My father played Bolingbroke to Ian's Richard II in 1971 for Prospect, and then Claudius to his, not to his Hamlet, no, what did they do? They weren't, that was Derek Jacobi. Sorry. They did work together a lot. And, and I think they've both got that touring gene, that classical touring gene. In fact, when we did a conversation on the stage of the Theatre Royal, Bury St Edmunds, Ian had been there the night before, and he left us a lovely card saying 'I've warmed them up for you'. But yeah, I think that I've sort of been educated in that mold, which is quite hard, actually, because the jobs don't exist anymore. I mean, my father was... is absolutely a classical touring actor and would like to die on stage playing a large classical part for a company that values him somewhere, you know, obscure. And nobody's doing it because it's so expensive. In the great scheme of things, it's not expensive.

AL: No, no, exactly, but the reason why I think *No Man's Land* was such a perfect example of that kind of thing, and how you can make it practical nowadays, is because you've got Ian and Patrick, so, you know, it was it was just to complete... the atmosphere around the theatres in every town we visited, it was absolutely amazing, and the queues at the stage

door, hundreds of people at stage door afterwards, I've never experienced anything like it. Damien Maloney had never experienced anything like it.

SW: I remember doing a gig for Belarus Free Theatre, which I actually, I thought - it was very good gig - I thought of the name for it where it was called. 'I'm with the banned', which was because those people who had been involved in the Belarus Free Theatre are now not allowed to be on Belarusian television, so Jude Law - which is quite a loss to Belarusian television - and me, to a much lesser than, our films are not shown on Belarussian television. At least I had I had that that was true, I don't know whether it's still true. But I think Roger Waters did... played a set at the end. So of course all the Pink Floyd fans came along and they sat... it sold out in nine minutes, they sat absolutely respectfully through a reading of some of the Pinter, some of them Nobel Prize speech given by Jeremy Irons and Sheila Hancock at the top of the show. And I was really moved actually that, you know, they were there for Roger Waters, of course they were, but those words have power. Chick Corea actually said - he died only last week - and this thing he said about playing music in large groups, he said creates silence. Let me see if I can find it actually, it's really good for Pinter. Is that thing of, particularly about silence.

AL: Especially given that poem that you mentioned that's on the wall that Pinter wrote in Sheffield?

SW: Yes. Silence. Of course. You remember it?

AL: Silence, yes, I'm pretty sure, Silence. I took a photo of it when we were there with *No Man's Land*. We were in the Lyceum, though, not the Crucible.

SW: Yes, no, you would have been. Now, hang on... I had a long... here we are: 'Chick Corea's cheap but good advice for playing music in a group. Leave space. Create space. Intentionally create places where you don't play.' And then later on, lower down. 'Create space, then place something in it.' It's good advice for life really. But a lot of people talk about Pinter's pauses, and they're kind of the joke, aren't they? But actually, I think he understood. And maybe that's why the plays got shorter. He understood the power of silence and - he wrote a play called *Silence*, didn't he? He understood the power of making space and then placing something in it. Intentionally creating places where you don't play. And yet it's musical. It's musical, though I don't know whether he was musical as a person. But he's certainly musicals as a writer, I think. And that was, again, what was exciting about Jamie's season is that he cast it to the hilt. He was clever enough to realize that people wanted to be in the plays.

AL: Exactly. And the combination of... because there are some people out there who will go and see Pinter no matter who's in it? But if you really want to open it up to a, to try to universalize it and try and get new people into the theatre who might never have been in a theatre before, then you've got to cast it appropriately, but also, shall we say, highly.

SW: Highly. Well, in fact, I give you an example. That evening that I talked about where I read a poem, Tom Hiddleston read a speech from *Betrayal*, and I think that might have been the first time he and Jamie had met. And he read it beautifully and there were there were at

least three other... he played Jerry didn't he? Can't remember. Anyway, there were were at least... No, maybe he played, I think he played Robert. He played Robert. And there were three other Roberts in the wing watching, including me and the original. And so that was all quite interesting. But quite soon after that, it was announced that Tom was going to do *Betrayal*, and of course it went to Broadway. Now that's Jamie just going, 'ah, that works' and talking to him and casting him and Tom going 'I like this. Why don't we do again?' So it's absolutely jumping at that chance. Very clever.

AL: Alright, Sam, this has been a brilliant. Let's draw this to a close: one more question. If you had to give some advice, a piece of advice to an actor or director who was going to be approaching Pinter for the first time? What would it be?

SW: I haven't thought about this enough. Well I think this chance has been really interesting, actually, I've got some ideas clearer in my head than they were before about the man and his work. I would suggest watching him as an actor, particularly of his own - and listening to him as an actor - particularly of his own work. Not because you want to copy him, but because there is muscle in the language and you need to be fit to play it with its combination of intention and violence and clarity and silence. Don't forget that he started as a radio writer, and he's very, very good on the sound of things and the sound of silence as well. I think, an OK Pinter production can become a very good one if it sounds good. Whereas designing it beautifully, and even casting it well, won't make it happen in quite the same way. You know what I mean? I think if you're... I mean a play like *Betrayal*, for instance, which is often described as the Pinter play for people who don't like Pinter plays; it's a beautifully worked play, and even Michael Billington now likes it, but you can see why he thought that Pinter had stepped away from something into something middle-class and the bit woolly. But actually when you play it, it's extraordinarily taught and tense and needs to be. So I think, weirdly, get Stanislavskian on its ass! Even though Harold wouldn't have liked that. Play the intention. Play the action. Know the obstacle. Be there in the scene and be alive to the moment, because it will take you wherever you need to be, possibly at a millisecond's notice. Rob Hastie, who's doing such a great joy in Sheffield now... I used to say when, occasionally, very occasionally a young actor would say to me, 'I don't think my character would do that'. I mean, nobody would dare now, not because of me, but because it's such a cliché. And I would say something slightly snide like, well think again, he does. But actually Rob's got a much better version, which is, when he says, 'I don't think my character would do that', he says, 'oh, what a shame'. Because actually, what we discover is that when Pinter can write a decade of Oscar-nominated screenplays, he writes about sex and alcohol and violence and infidelity and adult concerns, and fearlessly and tenderly and beautifully. So, kind of grow up and play it to the hilt, I think. But know the style as well. Don't be intense without quite knowing what you're being intense about. Notice how subtle he was as an actor and how the language often does it for you. It's quite easy to overplay, I think. Yeah, I think that's what I'd say.

AL: Wonderful. Sam, thank you so much for your personal reflections.

SW: It was a pleasure!