

## Basil Chiasson, Email Interview with Douglas Hodge, for the Pinter Legacies project, Autumn 2018.

Basil Chiasson - A decade after Harold Pinter's passing, 2018 is shaping up to be a big year for Pinter in and around London. You've got such experience with Pinter: working in several capacities with him and on his work. Looking back, is there an experience or project you treasure most?

Douglas Hodge - Across the ten years of working with him almost exclusively, there were many moments of mentorship and inspiration, but I think the moments when he was really putting pen to paper were the most thrilling. During *No Man's Land*, instead of having two dressing rooms - one for Gawn and I, and one for Harold and Paul, we decided to all be in one dressing room together and there were many events during that time that forged our friendship. I do vividly remember him saying that he'd started to write again during that time. It seemed like the most fragile secret. He hadn't written anything for so many years. Somehow Antonia's idea of getting him back on stage had got his juices flowing again, and then one night he quietly handed me *Moonlight* saying there was a part in it for me. I took it home on the tube with it burning my hands. Years later, when I was directing the sketches and *Dumb Waiter*, we sat in his lair in Holland Park and he read me a poem he'd finished that afternoon. And there was the same thrill of newly minted work in the air. He folded it up and handed it to me as a present and I've still got it of course.

BC - Have you found that within the industry there are assumptions, even expectations, about Pinter's plays, particularly when it comes to how the plays should be staged?

DH - Many assumptions, yes, and especially over-reverence and caution. From both audiences and performers - audiences assuming it will be unintelligible, when in fact there is no need to decipher or decode it - it just is what it means to you. And from actors, tip-toeing round real people written with the most exact ear, and playing a sort of style rather than the piece. I simply hate Pinter in black roll-neck sweaters and leather jackets and fake cockney accents spouting ambiguities into a sort of black box vacuum.

BC - You've directed a triple bill of Pinter plays and then single plays. Can you speak a little about the challenges and freedoms of these two different contexts for staging Pinter?

DH - Harold once talked to me about riding the top decks through London when he was younger, on the night buses, and getting sometimes a peek into a room with some people in. From these silhouettes he would extrapolate what might be going on. He glimpsed some people in a room and it wouldn't leave his imagination. He wrote *The Caretaker* when he glimpsed a man rummaging through a slightly open door in a house in Chiswick. He saw a man standing over another man in the light and he wrote *The Room*. These rooms are strange Hopper-like paintings, moments of powers struggles and dreadful unknowns. Harold wonders what would go on in them. For me directing his plays is often about these rooms. I have a dream of one day creating a Pinter House, outside somewhere like the National Theatre or in the West End, where the plays and sketches would always be going on. You'd enter the house and behind each door would be another play in process which you could slip into and eavesdrop on. Even when I directed *Victoria Station* on film I found the rooms that they were trapped in, the cells they inhabited, had to be clearly understood. For the more impressionistic memory plays like *Old Times* I felt the walls might just be sheets of mist... a very, very tender

membrane where past and future and present could be passed through. Miriam Buether created a whole slice of a house for me when we did the sketches at Oxford Playhouse and each room was a different arena in which the drama was held.

BC - It has been observed more than once how Pinter's plays appeal to actors, given, you know, the tactical nature of the dialogue and so on. What about directors? Are there ways in which his plays offer directors an experience or ways of working that is special, unique, even unusual?

DH - My answer would be the same for the actor as for the director. It's the music. there is no doubt that the longer one works on the text, and everything begins and ends with the evidence of the text, and also because there can be zero changes to the text, it reveals its own exact musical qualities. The rhythms, the pauses, the silences start to suggest, somehow, a true way to say the text. You can still be utterly real within it, but it is a very exact science. Harold rarely changed much more than punctuation after he'd written a play. He had an untrammelled access to his subconscious, that he trusted utterly - even to the point that sometimes his own work could be revelatory to him as you worked on it. It needs to be played with an intrinsic sensitivity for this inner music. As if, say, *No Man's Land* were a late Beethoven quartet. It's hard to explain but when this interior music is wrong it's so clearly wrong and when its right, the actor is able to get out of the way of the play, and the play can come through unencumbered with performance.

BC - You've observed in other interviews that Pinter had shifted in the earlier seventies to a more experimental style, and your production of *Old Times* in New York seems like you were really capitalizing on this: I'm thinking of your and Christine Jones's decision to go with the stylized and remarkable set you did, Constance Hoffman's quite sophisticated vision for the costuming whereby the play's layered representation of time is captured even in the actors' clothes, and then Thom Yorke's scoring of the production in addition to having Clive Goodwin's sound design. Cue to Britain now, where I've noticed that there has over the years been some apprehension about being too experimental, perhaps too European, with Pinter's plays. Do you think that British productions of Pinter's work are pushing it in interesting and new directions, or as much as you'd like to see, or...?

DH - Harold told me this story. He was invited to a certain Eastern European country to receive their highest award for writing. And in his honour there would be a performance that night of one of his plays. He and Antonia took their seats and the play began, in the language of that country, but immediately it seemed unrecognisable to them. There was a large, large cast. At one point a small band played what seemed to be folk songs. The set was a set that didn't seem to fit any of the worlds Harold had imagined. Just before the interval, Harold turned to Lady Antonia and whispered, 'they've got the wrong bloody, man, its one of Tom's'. Indeed they thought that it was a Tom Stoppard play they were seeing. 'What shall I do?' he spat, 'shall I accept it on his behalf?'

Come the second half it began to be clear - it seemed to be a version of *The Homecoming* - where the lines had been divided into other egos... that followed the cast around... dividing the lines and speaking as ghosts behind the main actors - was in progress. 'It's *The Homecoming*,' said Harold. He accepted the award to warm applause. I have for a while dreaded what would happen when he died and a certain licence which he would never allow starts to infiltrate the stage with the usual directors who's vanity thinks they can improve or mend the piece or use it as a launchpad. Luckily Antonia is there to oversee his estate, but I'm sure it won't be long before the plays are taken and 'mended' with all sorts of design. I know Harold would welcome any such

experimentation as long as the words are never, never changed or cut or rearranged. I still remember the Japanese production of *The Lover* in which the two actors are naked throughout. I don't really care if it's traditional, European or experimental as long as it's as true as the writing and as long as the words aren't rewritten.

BC - Almost from the start, there has been a fair bit of debate about the genre of Pinter's work. Theatre critics and scholars have asked: is this stuff realism, naturalism, experimentalism, avant-garde? Is your practice informed by such questions, and is it helpful to think about Pinter in such terms?

DH - I've no idea what such terms mean

BC - While interviewing for your *Old Times* you were asked about how American audiences respond to Pinter, versus British audiences. This is a bit of a tricky issue given how New York and London audiences may well not be purely American or British. Can I reformulate the question and ask about the kinds of discussions about Pinter you found yourself having while you were staying in New York and realizing that production? What were people outside of the cast and Thom Yorke saying to you about Harold Pinter that made you stop and make a comparison with your past experiences in Britain?

DH - As I often do, I had the entire creative team meet at my house for supper and we read the play aloud stopping when there were questions or ideas. One of the revelations is always just how funny it can be and I suspect in America his work isn't always permitted to get as good a laugh as it can. In a way it is the nuance of the vernacular that is most problematic for a foreign audience but somehow Harold's undercurrent of power plays make these small idiosyncrasies of the English language understandable. One of the conversations I had with Thom and Christine concerned the apparent obliqueness of meanings inside *Old Times*, how it contradicts itself, how it doesn't follow exact narrative and how it takes the shape of memory itself. My feeling is that if we were to see a piece of dance on stage we'd have no problem assembling a narrative for ourselves, no problem just getting out of it what we saw and felt, creating our own relevance as an audience. *Old Times* requires us not to explain its meaning but to be able to liberate the audience to experience the play. Memory repeats and rebuts as stories change and embellish and develop, as time drifts and eludes us and reconfigures as different truths. The audience needs to be able to trust entirely that they can travel down stream with those ideas and images as they occur. Hence, I wanted the set and the music to give permission to experience the play that way. Thom wrote some extraordinary themes and then played them backwards and forwards which seemed to me a literal leaping in to the very spirit of the piece.

BC - In other interviews you've observed how Pinter's plays are taking a page from previous playwrights, for example Noel Coward. After more than a decade since making that statement, have you discerned any other influences? Flipping the equation, do you think Pinter is evident in the work of any contemporary playwrights or even writers and work in other media, say, television or film?

DH - I think there's a lot of work that simply couldn't have happened, both in theatre and film, if Pinter hadn't existed. Pinter dramatised memory on stage - something no one to my mind had really truly achieved before. His free use of rooms and pithy phrases and his abrupt cuts in time and place are both filmic and also the essence of theatre. Movies like *Inception*, plays by the likes of Marber and Penhall and Mamet all draw from the well of Harold's work. Looking backwards, I do believe there is a lineage - just as Olivier and

Chaplin and Irving and Keen and Garrick all fed each other, I think Harold's early life on the proscenium arch stages of touring theatres, putting on weekly rep where the characters spouted epigrams and duelled with words and stances, all imbued Harold's framework. When I did *Betrayal* at the national directed by Trevor Nunn - probably my favourite Pinter play - Trevor always argued that Harold was a direct descendant of Ibsen and Strindberg, but I always felt there was a deeper British connection; to music hall, to gritty movies and the novels of Beckett and of course Coward whose plays of manners resembled a lot the world of Harold's writing, where people say one thing while meaning another, where manners are a thin carapace for murderous feelings. often in Pinter as I've said elsewhere, you have to say the politest thing while secretly wanting to strangle the person you are addressing. For me these constraints run all through British theatre from Congreve and Sheridan and Wilde through Coward and into Pinter.

BC - I just went to a conference on Pinter on radio and screen and there was a nice presentation on Pinter's style as a performer, the techniques he employed when acting for tele and for film. You would have observed him closely on the boards. Are there distinctive things that Pinter did as an actor, but also as a director, that you've adopted and made your own?

DH - He never played ambiguity - he chose something and played it, didn't play generalities, played specifics. I suspect David Baron was rather a saturnine and dashing actor. You could say the whole male acting profession breaks down into whether you are either a Spooner or a Hirst. he was definitely a Hirst. I like of course to think I'm both!

BC - Did Pinter's politics interest you in any way?

DH - When Harold Pinter died I felt a certain certainty disappeared from the world. He knew his facts, he was deeply informed and educated on many political fronts and he was ferocious and fearless in his views. Probably the most violent conscientious objector I've ever come across. His electric protection of other writers like Václav Havel and Rushdie, his tireless fights for the freedom of writers to speak out wherever they were in the world was something, I just wish I had the balls to imitate. At no point did Harold concern himself with being liked. And of course most of what he spoke so fiercely about - certainly concerning the military aggression of the USA - has all become such a depressing fact that he now seems prophetic. Many a day he was mocked for his political stances, and even derided for actually daring to have political stances, but he didn't seem to have a choice. He hated bullying whatever form it took. In a way every one of his plays deals with some kind of bully - and so did his political life - whether they are world leaders or men rummaging through the garbage. He couldn't rest until he'd fired them under the scorching blaze of his immense fury.

BC - I find your anecdote about that first meeting with Pinter compelling: in production for *No Man's Land* at the Almeida in 1992, when Pinter was having a go at the stage managers you intervened and got the sense there would be a punch up as he began to remove his jacket. Beyond that story of the first encounter offstage, do you have any other anecdotes about the many sides of Pinter that permit us to celebrate him in a way that does not engage in hagiography?

DH - Well he told me once that he could take off his glasses quicker than any man and I think that's about right.

BC - If you did a Pinter play again, which would you choose? And would you prefer to direct or act in that production?

DH – There's a few Pinter roles that I would kill to play. I'm hoping someone like the National gives me a run out before I grow too knackered. I enjoy directing all his work - its great company to keep - it would be nice perhaps to revisit *Moonlight* and I like *The Hothouse* too. I'd also love to see the movie of the Proust screenplay made one day - god knows how - but it'd be something to see what he wrote, finally manifest.