

Mark Taylor-Batty, Interview with Sean Mathias for the Pinter Legacies project, 24 July 2017.

Mark Taylor-Batty - I want to talk to you about your production of *No Man's Land* - which started in the America of course, but transferred to the UK - with Sir Patrick Stewart and Sir Ian McKellen. What first drew you to doing that play? I understand you had an ambition to do it for many years.

Sean Mathias - I did, yes. I actually attended the opening night of its debut production, when I was about nineteen. Not that I think I understood a word of it, but it left a very indelible mark on me because of Sir Ralph [Richardson] and Sir John [Gielgud], and just I think seeing... I didn't know Pinter's work that well but I realised that this seemed very, very different from the other Pinters that I'd ever read. I'm not sure I'd ever seen a Pinter play - it might have been the first Pinter play that I saw - but I was aware that it was a departure, and I think because... it's very hard to define, it leaves a lingering, not frustration, but a need to analyse it in the mind, and also spiritually because it's got a provocative sense of place and death, impending death, so the spiritual weight of the play seems to be constantly there. It's very important that it's done by actors of the right age, which Ralph and John were and which Patrick and Ian are. So, I'd tried a few times and Harold had given me - I knew him a little - and he'd given me his blessing to do it, but I couldn't cast it the way I wanted to cast it. These things sometimes they don't seem to fall into place. I tried to do *Godot* for many, many years before I finally did it. When you're younger you get very disheartened, as you get older you accept things as they are and if it's meant to be you know it's meant to be. And then Patrick Stewart actually asked me to direct him in it, after we'd done *Godot*. It's funny, I said 'I know that play very, very well; I'd love to do it, love to do it with you, who'd you want to do it with?' He said 'Ian', and I said, 'oh Ian won't do it', because I'd tried to get him to do it twice, really tried to persuade him, and I'm very close to Ian and I know his tastes and, you know, I'm sort of very in tune with him, if you like. I also know that if he doesn't want to do something there's not much leeway for persuasion. So I said, I think it's a hopeless case Patrick; I tried but he doesn't respond to the play or the role. I think he feels Gielgud left such an imprint on it, he doesn't want to do it, he doesn't want to follow in Gielgud's footsteps. I said, well, how about we do a reading of it and see if we can't hook him in that way. So Patrick said 'that's a great idea'. And then we hit upon the idea of doing it with *Godot*, because Ian and I were quite keen on doing *Godot* in America; Patrick didn't want to do *Godot* again. And so Ian wanted to do *Godot* and Patrick wanted to do *No Man's Land*, so it was sort of serendipity, it was a bit of... it was like brokering - I'm quite good at brokering deals - it was a deal! We did the reading and Ian absolutely fell in love with it, he realised what a fabulous role Spooner was and what an interesting play, and he wanted to do it. And then, because in the interim we'd lassoed this idea of doing the two plays in repertoire, everyone was very excited. Ian and Patrick come from a Royal Shakespeare background where repertoire is the order of the day. It happens less, well it hardly happens now except probably at the RSC, even at the National there's no company, people come and do one play. So that's how it was born and we decided to do it out of town first because *Godot*, we'd done a lot so it didn't need

to be discovered or warmed up, as it were, so we really wanted to have a look at the Pinter and try and work out what it was all about (laugh) because none of us knew what it was all about. We had sense of it, but we didn't really understand it.

MTB - And that's quite a challenge to put those two plays in repertoire...

SM - Yes it was.

MTB - ...for the actors to switch between those roles.

SM - It was, but I think *Godot* is so physically exhausting, they found the Pinter enchanting after the *Godot*. The Pinter is obviously mentally exhausting on some levels, and Spooner is on stage the whole time but for the other actors not nearly as physically exhausting. *Godot* is very - we did a very animal, physical production, which I think is what the play's all about, spontaneity and - whereas the Pinter is all a kind of mind... a kind of wonderful chess of the mind. So I think they found it refreshing because I think it's much easier doing a play four times a week than doing the same play eight times a week. So, whilst it was challenging and tiring, I think it was also very refreshing and invigorating. We had the time of our lives! Definitely one of the happiest jobs I'll ever do.

MTB - That's fantastic

SM - It was great.

MTB - You talk about not really having a handle on the play to start with. What did you learn about the play as you worked with it? Did you develop a relationship with it, as it were? Did you come to terms with it?

SM - A very strong one. I'm not sure I've come to terms with it so that I could tell you what it's about, but what I came to terms with was the way to do it. In the beginning... there are so many avenues you could go down, because the language is so arresting, and sub-conscious, poetic, heightened. It doesn't seem apt to what is going on at the time and all the characters speak in very different ways, but they all have these big speeches and they all use this extraordinary language of their own in these big speeches. So, when we first started, Patrick arrived with a very strong sense of Hirst and how to play him, what to do, so in a sense he was on his own in a room. The director is the person who should have the strong sense and guides everyone else but he had a very, very good interpretation which I felt really worked and was excellent so I was able to really congratulate him. But I didn't feel that I knew the others so well, particularly Spooner and Foster - Briggs and Hirst are slightly easier to read - Spooner and Foster are very elusive, very mercurial, they seem to share that quality. I think that's in a way why Spooner has such a strong effect on Foster, he gets so thrown off, because he recognises another mercurial character. 'Mercurial' is one word or you could say they're... what that word we called them, cheats is a good word... chancers! they're chancers, you know. They're dodgy. So, it's very hard - Billy and Ian were going all around the houses, with me encouraging them, instead of saying 'no, no don't do

that', just me saying 'yes, go for it'. For a few weeks we did that and then I realised the only way the play could work was if you contained it within the drawing room. So, in a sense you had to do it like a drawing room comedy, a comedy of manners. It's a play, I mean I don't know, is it a comedy? What did Pinter call it? Has he given it a...

MTB - I don't think it has one in the script.

SM - I don't think it has. I mean it's a wonderful comedy, no doubt about it. I sort of thought of Noël Coward, and I thought these characters have got to behave on the surface as if they're playing cards, drinking gin and tonics, meeting at the club, going to the pub, leading perfectly normal lives. And that goes against the extraordinary things they say, so you can't do the poetry poetically. And once I felt I'd discovered that - which all seemed pretty obvious, then - when we got out to New York, we started rehearsals in New York, we got out to Berkeley, I said to everyone 'right, stop, this is the way we're doing this play. You're not to veer outside of this box, you've got to do this', they all kind of looked at me - actually actors quite like a director when they just get very parental - they said 'ok fine, fine'. We tried it, we started doing it and everything started to make much more sense, and became much easier to do. And of course, it's sort of obvious, isn't it, because Pinter was influenced by so many of the plays he did as an actor in rep', plays of a certain period, although a lot of them were three-acts like his earlier works, this is a two-acter. I'm not sure if this... this might be his first two act play?

MTB - No, *Old Times* is a two-act play as well.

SM - That's one play I really would love to direct. Is that a two-acter?

MTB - It is, yes.

SM - And that came first, did it?

MTB - That was 1971. Talking of influence... People talk perhaps maybe too much of the influence of Beckett on Pinter, but there is something Beckettian about *No Man's Land*; people have made comparisons between it and *Endgame* for example. And I noticed in your product the set, the rotund - as it were - of the set, seemed to be almost deliberate reference to *Endgame*.

SM - Oh!

MTB - I don't if that was...

SM - No, it wasn't conscious. I've never seen *Endgame*. I was asked to do it, and I read it, and I simply couldn't fathom it, so... I mean it's rather wonderful but I thought, to get my brain inside there! The problem with directing is you've got to sort of go in and inhabit these writers' heads, these writers' landscapes. And it's quite... I mean it's a thrill, it's an honour, but it's quite psychically exhausting if you really go right in, which I love to do. I don't think there's any point in going along for the ride unless you're going

to, you know, go on all the biggest rides you can get. I felt that because I'd done *Godot* then they wanted me to do *Endgame*, it's all a bit obvious. So I shied away from it. So I can't really comment on the influence on *No Man's Land*, but he did send everything to Beckett famously and asked his opinion. I would have thought there's a pure Coward section in Act Two, with the mistaken identity. Of course, it's a wonderful - I mean lots of writers have done it with great effect, maybe no-one more than Shakespeare with *Comedy of Errors* - mistaken identity is a wonderful thing on stage but his is such an original way of doing it, and such a sly, sly way they lead you, he leads you onto that trap, and then releases it! And you go back into the other situation. It's quite extraordinary.

MTB - There was something about that in your production, the whole Charles Wetherby section, and again thinking about Beckett, there was almost something Didi/Gogo about that relationship at that point it seemed. I don't mean in a cheeky way, but I wondered if there was any bleeding across between those two productions in those kinds of ways.

SM - Well there was with certain lines, well, references to time and not knowing what time-frame you are living in, which is a big theme of both of the plays, and certain lines I think could almost be adapted. And we did, we did definitely pick up on stuff while we were doing the two plays. I mean in a way, you know, the funny thing is - it's different when you're studying work from the outside, and your writing about and analysing it - but in an odd way in the theatre it can be quite unhelpful because what you've got to do is give the work an environment and a setting. If your production is too filled with references it can sort of kill it. So, I think very heavily conceptual productions can be absolutely brilliant or completely disappointing because they can just take away from the essence or the timbre of the play. In a way, I just think that we tried to identify that world and when we brought it to London it changed somewhat because the two actors [playing Briggs and Foster] were British. So for the American actors, who did a great, great job, the idiom was so extraordinary I had to explain... it's also a very 'London' play, isn't it? It's all about London life, a certain part of London life, a certain period, that place where bohemia and academia meet. It's a very sort of North London, intellectual, cultural thing that he was observing... a genre, world, setting, that he was observing. I remembered when I first came to London, and going to Swiss Cottage and Camden Town and Gloucester Crescent - which has now become such a famous street because Alan Bennett and others lived there - I remember going to sort of very arty, bohemian sort of meetings and play readings and being a young actor desperate to get in, I went to everything I could do. It was such a rarefied world, I don't think that world exists now, everything's been so much more commercialised. We've got the fringe, thankfully, which is great, but there was this world of lunchtime theatre which was this whole other world, and I think Harold's commenting on that, you know, with Spooner's character, well with both of them; I mean Hirst is successful and Spooner isn't, it's quite simple in many ways, the play. You know, Briggs is a closet queen and Foster is just an outrageous flirt. You can break it down to certain stereotypes which can be really helpful, particularly when it's so obtuse, and then you light on a stereotype or something obvious or something surface and it's like 'ah, what a relief to have that, let's hang on to that side of it'.

MTB - There was a lot of naturalism in the production, talking about finding ways of making... not so much making sense of the play but hooks, ways into it, and certainly I was very struck at the beginning with that senses of Hirst having dementia; this not being able to quite remember who he is, why he is, as well as the alcoholism. Although you had those moments where it would break away from the naturalism, before sort of settling back in. Did that, as you went on, was that something you were conscious of developing, was that something you wanted to develop, that naturalistic approach to the roles, that sense of the back-stories that was so evident?

SM - Well we, yes, we certainly did a fair amount of table work, and asking questions and trying to locate it. I think it's very hard for actors to play roles unless you've done a certain amount of digging, and find the back story that's either in the text - often it's not in this text, you've got to invent it. And I don't actually need to be privy to the actors' invention, I don't often want to know but I want to be provocative in making them think, and go into their back stories to quite a strong degree. Because there are hints of it; Foster, for instance, having been at sea or having been in the East. Is the East, you know, is Harold just using a metaphor? Did he join the navy, this young man, because Spooner suggests he should. Or is the East just Foster's vivid imagination from the East End. Is it an exaggeration of that? What's Briggs, because Briggs is so meticulous and precise and masculine and big and blokey, and yet he's, you know, sort of very soft, or there's something very soft about him inside. So, all these strange contradictions, you can't just play them through language, or you can't enact a play through ideas. You've got to anchor it to something or other. I mean the first scene - we worked very hard on the whole play so it's silly thing to say - but that first scene we worked super-hard on because it was so difficult. So very, very difficult. And we slowly, slowly built up a painting. And I think it has to be based in naturalism because they've come from the pub. They've been in the pub and the other two lads have been in the pub. They work for Hirst and they've had a night off. He listens to Schubert or whoever it is. And there are certain things... you could say well, they're lies, everything Harold's written in this play is a lie, or an untruth - but that's not very helpful. There's enough lies in it already (laughs). So if you can find any truths like they have met at the Spaniard's Inn...

MTB - You mean Jack Straw's Castle?

SM - Yes, Jack Straw's Castle, The Spaniard's Inn is just round the corner. Jack Straw's Castle's gone now, the Spaniard's Inn is still there. They have met there. And a notorious gay cruising ground for many years. It might still be, I don't know, with the onslaught of the internet sites and all that. But, a very odd... two men, two bachelors picking each other up in the pub. This apparently went right over the heads of the first cast. It was a different world then, people didn't necessarily talk about these things.

MTB - But unless Harold was very naive, he was quite obviously referencing, you know, people picking each other up on Hampstead Heath.

SM - We hope so, we hope so.

MTB - So clearly that's part of it. And the play, this is the only full-length play that Pinter wrote that's only got men in it [other than *The Caretaker*]. And he was obviously throughout his writing very interested in writing about that bond between men and the difficulty of starting and maintaining a bond between men. And I think this play, and *Betrayal* after it, they really centre in on that in different ways. Now of course that's interesting because *Waiting for Godot* has this very strong bond as well, and whether there's hint of the homosexual or whether it's just homosocial, or whatever it is that he's working through, this fascination with an inability to sustain or to construct a bond... that starts really with *The Caretaker*. I always thought of *No Man's Land* as a kind of update on *The Caretaker*, which is perhaps unfair to it as a text, but I see the two as kind of brother texts in many ways. You have this interloper coming into this established arrangement.

SM - Which he loves; a circle, and someone coming in to pierce, to penetrate it.

MTB - And to try to take, possibly, advantage of what he can find there. And failing to take hold of the real opportunities, the human opportunities that are available. Well, I mean there are various interpretations of course...

SM - Well it's definitely homo-erotic, some of the language and the relation between Briggs and Foster, which I think we did, we investigated. We didn't over-do it, but we certainly investigated it. He did start writing the play with a woman in it; he wrote to Peter Hall that there was a woman in it, but obviously she didn't develop in his mind. And there are very few references to off-stage woman. Hirst has this mysterious past, with the drowning. Spooner refers to his wife and children. And then of course there all the invented women in the wonderful Charles Wetherby section. And those names fly fast and furiously. And I think that's where it becomes Coward-esque. There are some Coward-esque names, Doreen Busby, there are these names that are sort of faintly ridiculous, aren't they, names that are meant to make you laugh. But of course the real poison in that scene is the male rivalry, it's the stag! And you see Hirst, he's so pathetic in the first scene. Well, just very drunk in the first scene, and then sort of pathetic and lost and drowning in his own sub-conscious in the second appearance. It's sort of virulent and manicured and cocky, in that scene. And it's a wonderful... He gives Hirst a great thing to play in each scene, which is why it's a little simpler, I think, that role. He's got something very strong and specific to play. Spooner is very elusive and strange, but I think Ian made tremendous sense of him. It took him a while to find him, he made such sense of him. But, yes, the male bonding, the male rivalry, which is so ambiguous, and it's there to the very end. You think: 'what the fuck happens now?'

MTB - What do they want from each other? And that never gets resolved.

SM - I suppose Spooner really did want a job. Didn't Antonia write to Harold and say 'Did he get the job?' That's in one of the letters. But he wants a job! You know, he's probably sleeping rough some nights, if not all the time, who knows? And the other two want to hang on to their jobs. So, there's that work ethic, but it's the... That's where the

naturalism comes again as well in a way, because you have to keep a job to earn your money to keep going. And it again was a very, very different world; there are more opportunities in today's world, but at that point for those working-class characters - especially if they're a bit dodgy, they're not very qualified - to find that old boy with all that money and that comfortable house, they don't want to lose that set-up. Who knows what they're planning with regard to his will, and everything. So, you have to play, I mean I wanted them to play - all the time, continuously - this danger, this rivalry, this sense of who's on top. Nobody ever stays on top for very, very long, which is so wonderful. It keeps shifting, the power, all the time. We had that circular carpet, within the wall, and I realised one day that if you were in the circle you behaved slightly differently than when you step off. So we used that as well as a sort of space game, psychologically. I mean, these are things that they don't necessarily present to the audience, they're just things we found in the play that were very useful to explore, which made it all a bit more complicated and wonderful to watch. I think what was great was that the play, the production came across as very, very enjoyable. People had a really good time. It wasn't everyone's cup of tea - some people didn't get it at all - but people had a really good time on the whole, and were fascinated by it all, and loved to come round back-stage and really wanted, the ones who had really loved it, to analyse it and to talk about it. And young people, young people were very turned on by it.

MTB - It's kind of the definitive production of that play for this period, and an important production as a result of that. This may be a meaningless question, and I don't know if there's a sensible answer for it, but did it make a difference that this was the first important production of this play since Harold died? Did his not being there make a difference, as it were?

SM - Well, I knew him a little bit, but over a number of years, and I know Antonia quite well. And there were times when I really thought 'I wish Harold could see this'. But there were other times that I was very relieved. Because to discover it was very hard, and very daunting. If we'd had him as a presence in the room, whilst discovering it, it might have been too inhibiting, I don't know. He was quite a tough, stern character. However, when we did start to discover it I felt very strongly that he would have approved, and would have enjoyed what we were doing. That was totally sanctioned by Judy and by Antonia. Who knows? He's not with us, we don't know. So, yeah, I felt his presence definitely. I hadn't thought about it being the first production.... The last production was with Gambon and Harold was alive during that..

MTB - That was a few months before he died. Of course, Gambon gave that speech from Hirst at his funeral.

SM - The ghosts and the jars...

MTB - In fact, I think Harold had asked him to give that speech. They had prepared his funeral to that degree, is my understanding...

SM - Well it's a marvellous speech. Extraordinary to do that at a funeral.

MTB - This was the first Pinter that you've directed. Is that right? Would you have any ambitions to do any others, or was it an itch that you wanted to scratch all these years since seeing it the first time round?

SM - I think there was an itch to scratch Pinter, definitely. It happened that I tried this one. I'd also, I'd not gone as far, but had looks and started and did a bit of casting for *Old Times*, which didn't happen yet... this was a while ago. I'd been offered *The Birthday Party*, which I turned down, so I mean my brushes with him had been few and far between. But I think, this is just - It's hard to talk about one's own work, I don't want to be too self-conscious about it - but I think on the whole I enjoyed doing a lot of different writers and going into their world. The only person I've done twice is... I've done two Chekovs, I've done two Sondheim's, and I've done two plays by a living author called Martin Sherman, an American playwright. I've worked with Pam Jones a few times, but she did adaptations for me.

MTB - You've done some Cocteau's, haven't you? More than one Cocteau, or was it just the one?

SM - No, just one Cocteau, one Coward, one Shakespeare, one Ibsen, it's odd... one Beckett, one Anouilh... It's very odd, I think I was sort of... I would say it's a privilege, you kind of go... like Cocteau, I was wildly obsessed with him. And then when I've done the play... it's like having a love affair or something, and then it's like OK, I'll walk away, I want to have a love affair with someone else now! But I do love *Old Times*, I do love *Old Times*, so never say no. It would be hard to have as good an experience on another Pinter play, you know. This was so satisfying.

MTB - And the cast, just getting that cast is the first port of call, isn't it, if you can't get that...

SM - Yes, yes, well both casts on both sides of the Atlantic were very bonded, and had a really great time, and this was maybe even deeper because all the cast were living at home, by the time we came to London we were all home. We'd been on the road, you know: we'd been in Berkeley, we'd been on Broadway, and we'd been on a tour of England - with Ian and Patrick and me - and so by the time we all got to the Wyndham's, it was 'ah, were home!' And then they just had a gorgeous time, they loved working with each other. And it developed, very, very nicely. I think we did it just the right length of time, I think we did it for fourteen weeks in town. It was just the right length of time.

MTB - I'll bring this interview to a close now. Thank you for your time. Thank you very much.