

Edward Fox in conversation with Alexander Lass, for the Pinter Legacies project, 16 December 2020.

Alex Lass - Edward, many thanks for agreeing to talk to me today about your experiences working with Harold Pinter. My understanding is that you worked with Pinter three times. On *The Go-Between* in 1971, on *Quartermain's Terms* in 1981, ten years later, and *Old Masters* in 2004.

Edward Fox - You're correct.

AL - So I wonder if we could chat about those three projects in chronological order.

EF Yes.

AL - *The Go-Between* was the film adaptation of the LP Hartley novel and Pinter wrote the screenplay.

EF - Yes, he did.

AL - How involved was Pinter in the actual making of the film? Do you recall?

EF - Harold was around because he was a great friend of the director Joe Losey's. They worked as a wonderful collaboration. So he was around. And I remember him especially at the cricket scene because he was devoted to the game of cricket. Harold was.

AL - He was, absolutely.

EF - And I think he described Trimmingham, my part, as "flicking the ball off his eyebrows."

[laughter]

EF - It made me laugh then; it makes me laugh now.

AL - So Pinter himself was around the filming and it was shot on location in the UK?

EF - Yes it was shot in Norfolk. We were very, very lucky. It was one of those rare examples of talent mixed with determination, which my father was also considerably involved in because it was produced by John Hayman. Stop me when things are not interesting.

AL - Highly unlikely.

EF - They may not be. Anyway, at that time, the business of getting a film made in this country without the backing of big American money – which had decided to disappear for its own very good reasons around that time – was very difficult. It wasn't a cavalier subtraction of money. It was for very good reasons, to do with unions and all sorts of things. Anyway, John Hayman had to find the money for this film, which was a very small budget, really in the nick of time.

And it was achieved. He was a very great, terrific man John Hayman. He managed it at the last minute. And I remember the unit, the very good, Technical unit. Jerry Fisher was the lighting camera man, Conan Dylan – a very, very, very great set and theatre designer. I mean, there were wonderful people involved.

AL - Right.

EF - And they stayed around for those few days when the money was questionable and they might just as well, they were within their rights to – there is a point about this story [laughter] – they were well within their rights to say, “Well, we're not going to get paid, so we'll leave.”

AL - Yes.

EF - And would have been okay. Understandable, regrettable. But they stayed on, the whole unit. And really they stayed on, in my belief, because of Joe and Harold. They did that wonderful thing of believing in the worthwhileness of what people had wished to commit themselves to. That's just a story about respect for Harold really. The regard which he was held in, and certainly Joe Losey as well.

AL - That is fascinating. I wonder, can you remember what the process of making the film was actually like? Did the scripts change much or was Harold's dialogue considered sacrosanct?

EF - Once Harold had finished a script, he'd gone through it with such a mental tooth comb in his mind, that there was very little to change, or nothing to change. You know, you didn't just change Harold's scripts. You worked in consultation with him and with Joe.

AL - That makes sense.

EF - But you know Harold made all that unnecessary really. He was very well aware that every second of the film must count, because the second before and the second afterwards relies on the prevailing seconds. Not single word or moment was wasted.

AL - Indeed. Okay, one more question and then we'll move on to your collaboration with Harold and Simon Gray. Given that Harold himself was a well-respected and hugely talented director, do you recall if Harold ever took on any directorial responsibilities on *The Go-Between*? Or was he very much present in his capacity as the writer and he wouldn't tread on Joe's toes as the director?

EF - Well, the two of them were so much in tune with each other's minds and approaches and beliefs, so they didn't really need to cross spheres. Harold would never have dreamt of questioning Joe on a point of filming, technical filming. They might in terms of interpretation, acting interpretation, or a scriptural matter. But in terms of how it was filmed, they didn't need to have differences. Joe was a master.

AL - Absolutely. So let us now fast-forward ten years. In 1981, you did the Simon Gray play *Quartermain's Terms*, which was directed by Harold?

EF - Yes.

AL - Between 1971-1981, had you stayed in touch with Harold? Did you become friends or was it mainly a professional collaboration and that was that?

EF - Professional collaboration. I mean one knew him. You know, we would hail each other if we met but I was never close, intimate friends with Harold and nor would he have wished it nor would either of us have needed it, really. You know, we became friends when the work was together. Very good friends.

AL - I understand. With *Quartermain's Terms*, then did he just ring you up out of the blue and say he wanted you to be in it? Or was it Simon Gray who got you involved? Do you remember how did you came to be cast in it?

EF - You know, Alex, I don't exactly know how that came about. Casting always comes about in oddly circuitous ways and very often it is to do with money. And in this case, I think probably the producer, Michael Codron, would have needed to think and say to himself, "Am I going make my costs back with this casting? Am I gonna make any money on a production?" It's a necessary fact.

AL - Yes.

EF - With whomever it may be, in the lead role. I'd worked for Michael before in David Hare's *Knuckle* which sadly was an absolute disaster commercially, although the play deserved much better. So I think I wasn't top of the list in terms of commercial need.

AL - Right.

EF - Which is very understandable. However, Harold being Harold, I think, and Simon being Simon, they must have seen in me the possibility of the part being played alright, I think. And it turned out to be a wonderful collaboration with the two of them. I hadn't worked with Harold as a director before but he was really a magnificent director. Magnificent.

AL - In what way?

EF - Ah well, that's a difficult question to answer in a word or two. Really because it wouldn't mean much to people, but it is very difficult to articulate. You know. It's quite a difficult question to answer with intelligence really. But I shall try. What Harold demanded was a requirement always – which is the requirement of the real, true artist – to do whatever it is that Hamlet says to the players. That you mustn't play to the common denominator in the audience, you must always play to the judicious man, the judicious mind. Harold, along with all the thousand million great artists that have existed in history, and will go on to exist, believed that was and is essential. And that an audience, any audience, watching a spectacle was deserving of the best. Not just the best, but beyond that, in terms of artistic presentation. Does that make any sense.

AL - It certainly does, absolutely.

EF - I never know whether I'm making any sense or not, I'm afraid. But it is exactly what Hamlet says to those players who go into play before Claudius. He wants them to play to convince. Harold knew that what passes from a stage in the theatre to an audience is something you can't really define when it works. It's something subliminal. And that conveyance is entirely to do with the integrity of the play and the playing of it. As Hamlet says, the great director requires the actor to "o'erstep not the modesty of nature." You're reflecting, you're conveying, in the best possible way – but theatrically, not really – what is in the nature of a person's mind. So literally, the greatest actors will convey exactly what is going on within the character's being without actually ever saying anything. It's a theatrical contrivance. But for an audience, that is the power of what theatre and a play can convey. I'm really trying to say what Harold wanted to find, as a director.

AL - You are making complete sense, Edward. We're talking about truth in art here. And that is the director's quest. That is the quest that all of us theatre makers are engaged with. It's finding that integrity, that truth. Acting technique sits on top of that. But if it's all technique and there's no honest foundation, then it's not going to resonate, it is not going to work properly. You'll be found out.

EF - That's right, Alex. I love that saying of Fred Astaire's, something like "if it doesn't look easy, we haven't worked hard enough."

[laughter]

AL - Well said! And you see it with masters of their craft in other fields as well, you see it with elite sports players, you see it with musicians. The effortlessness of it.

EF - Exactly. There was this extraordinary man who's just died, the footballer called Maradona. It's lovely hearing English players saying, "I just didn't know, when he ran past me, I just didn't know he was doing it, he made it look so easy."

AL - That's right.

EF - That's always the aim.

AL - So let's speak a bit then about Harold and Simon Gray because they were very close friends, if I'm not mistaken.

EF - Very close, yes.

AL - I suspect maybe it was similar to Harold and Joe Losey, where they were very much hand in glove, as a duo, is that fair?

EF - That's quite right. "The meeting of true minds," you know, that sonnet of Shakespeare's.

AL - What did you think of the play itself, of *Quartermain's Terms*? Was it something that thrilled you from the outset or did you have to sort of grow to love it?

EF - Well, I think all of us in the cast knew that it was a great play. It will live through time. It's rather like that quote from Bach that I think he said of certain other composers. He said some of his contemporaries were brilliant though they will have been of their own time, they're Prussian blue. They fade. Apparently Prussian blue is a paint that doesn't wear well with time, it fades. It's a wonderful way to describe brilliance, but passing brilliance. *Quartermain* is not Prussian blue. Whatever Simon caught there is everlasting, unending perceptions of human character. Or perceptions that are unending, that are always relevant.

AL - It is not a play I know well, but it is intriguing that it hasn't been revived that frequently but when it has been revived it's been a big success, I think.

EF - Yes. It had the most wonderful cast. It was one of those productions where the quality of the acting was integral to the quality of the writing.

AL - Right.

EF - And to that extent, in that way, it was a wonderful, a wonderful year.

AL - Yes.

EF - It was a good year for the theatre.

AL - And then it was a 23 -year gap until you did *Old Masters* in 2004.

EF - Yes.

AL - I vividly remember I saw *Old Masters*. I remember coming to see you in it.

EF - I remember your generous spirit afterwards.

AL - I came with my family and it was at The Comedy Theatre, just a few years before it was renamed The Harold Pinter Theatre.

EF - I talked to all of you afterwards.

AL - You certainly did.

EF - Of course I've known you since you were about [gestures] that height, Alex.

[laughter]

AL - Indeed, since I was 5 years old! So tell me about *Old Masters*. Did you kind of pick up where you left off with Harold and Simon?

EF - Absolutely. We did. But by that time the old boy wasn't as well as he was that number of years before.

AL - Yes, he was already ill at that point.

EF - The things of just getting through a day, the demands of a director, were more of a strain on Harold than they had been. But that didn't affect him. His spirit of determination and the requirements that were needed from the work were undiminished.

AL - And I wonder had you worked with Peter Bowles before or was that your first time working with him?

EF - Strangely enough, I'd worked with Peter before on a play by John Arden at the Court, in the sixties. And he was wonderful, as a sort of mad scientist. What was the play called? It wasn't *Live Like Pigs*. I think it was called *Happy Haven*. It was a mad play about mad people. Peter was sort of raving mad in it and he was wonderful. He's a wonderful actor.

AL - He is.

EF - But we hadn't worked together since then.

AL - Right. So that was nice, another come another coming together of old friends and of course, you played sort of old friends in the play.

EF - We played old friends in the play, old rivals, sparring partners.

AL - That's right.

EF - Berenson and Peter's character.

AL - Yes, Duveen.

EF - A great combination. Yes.

AL - Yeah. That's right. Two intellectual / cultural titans of the era.

EF - There was, again, a wonderful cast. Wonderful cast. Barbara Jefford, wonderful.

AL - Barbara Jefford, Sally Dexter, Steven Pacey.

[Suggestion the interview winds down]

AL - Yes of course, we'll wrap things up. Two final questions, if I may. First, if you could have been in or now be in any one of Harold's plays, which one might it be, and why? Second, if you were to give some advice to an aspiring actor or director who was approaching a Pinter play for the first time. What advice might that be?

EF - Well, I think the part of Astor in *The Caretaker*, would be interesting for any actor to try and play. He has the amazing speech within it of having electrodes put on his head.

AL - Yes.

EF - It's a wonderful speech and it was brilliantly acted when I saw it the first time round. If I had to pick a part, among many of Harold's parts, most of which I am unsuited for and wouldn't get cast. But if you're asking me that sort of hypothetical question, that would be an interesting part to play.

AL - Excellent.

EF - In terms of advice, well really only what I said earlier. You must play to the judicious person in the audience. That was what Harold was after, to convey the power of humanity with truth, integrity, and talent. A rather boring answer to your question. But he was a very deep man, Harold. He's not easy to pin down at all. That's why it is sometimes hard to talk about him and his work sensibly. And if you think you've got hold of him, just be aware, you haven't.

AL - Yes, I think you're quite right.

EF - You know; you couldn't keep hold of Harold. So just think more.

AL - Lovely, Edward. Thank you so much for your time and personal reflections and insights.

EF - It was a pleasure speaking with you, Alex.