

## Bollocks to the pause

Since 1994 I have worked with and got to know Harold Pinter and in 1997 I directed the first revivals of *The Lover* and *The Collection* in London since the early sixties. Harold played Harry the homosexual. My association with Harold began at Chichester where I was his assistant when he directed Ronald Harwood's *Taking Sides*. Later, I assisted David Jones directing Harold in his own play, *The Hothouse*, before assisting Harold again when he directed *Twelve Angry Men*. So I am fortunate enough to have worked with him in his three roles of writer, actor and director.

My first experience of directing Pinter's work was at university twenty-five years ago, when I was given *The Lover* to direct as an exercise. I was daunted by the prospect because of the vast mythology surrounding his work. How long is a pause? What does dot, dot, dot mean? How do I make it menacing and ambiguous and like snatches of conversation overheard on the bus? Should it be funny?

Even now I would not profess to have absolute answers to these questions, but what I would like to try to do in this talk is give some idea of my approach to Pinter's work born out of my experiences.

So, how do you approach a Pinter? As a not all together glib response to the question, I've decided to title this talk 'Bollocks to the pause' or Relative Truth.

Let's start by demolishing some mythology by talking about the man.

When I first worked as Harold's assistant I made one dreadful early mistake. I breezed into the theatre packed with crew and actors working away, erecting the set, and said, rather too cheerily, in order to hide my nerves: 'Morning Harold! How are you?'. Some of you may know of a 1920s cartoon entitled 'The Man Who Asked For A Whiskey in the Bath Spa' in which everyone is in exaggerated poses of astonishment staring at one man. That's what it was like. Everything stopped. Everyone looked at me with a mixture of shock and sympathy for what they knew was to come. Silence. Harold; 'How am I? How am I? What does that mean? What is the received response to that? How am I?'

It was terrifying but, as I got to know him and his work better, I began to understand what lay behind it. He and, consequently his characters, love language to such a degree that they will not part with a syllable of it superfluously. Every word is chosen. And when a word is wasted or used without thought, it is physically painful to him. Thus the frequent odd constructions or choices of words need to be seen through the eyes of a lover of language.

The how are you? story really compounds the view of Harold as rather gruff and austere, but soon after I saw another side to him which is equally if not more key to his work.

A production meeting in Chichester in the bar before a preview of *Taking Sides*. Designer, Costume Designer, Lighting Designer, Author, Producer, Director and rest of team sitting round a big table in a private section of the bar discussing last minute problems. All rather fraught. A little boy is wandering about the room. And he is crying incessantly. Everyone round the table is flinching in terror that Harold is going to lose his temper about this

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interruption to our meeting. The boy gets closer. We flinch more. The boy approaches Harold. Harold spins his chair round. We see the headlines. 'Playwright punches pre-school punter'. We hide. 'Hello, son. What's the matter? Have you lost someone?' Then, with the boy on Harold's knee, they have a hushed conversation. The boy describes what his mum looks like and where he last saw her and the two of them abandon the meeting with the minutes ticking away to curtain up and set off in search of mum. They find her and Harold returns to the meeting and picks up with the same uncompromising determination as before.

These are good dinner party anecdotes but they are also very good demonstrations of the two sides to Harold which are very much in his writing. Precision and ambiguity exist side by side in Harold and in his writing. A person's failure to use a word or a phrase with precision can send him into a rage but the incessant involuntary crying of a child in distress becomes an instant priority. He is an intensely loyal, loving and warm-hearted man with a terrific sense of right and wrong. He has a very black and white sense of how the world ought to be. But when it comes to personal issues and personal behaviour he has a generous understanding of how muddy and unclear matters are.

To H it is unequivocally clear that it is wrong to torture people in Turkey, that it is wrong to sell arms to dictators, that it is wrong to decide to bomb one nation because they won't tell you where they've hidden their chemical weapons while shoring up another which has huge stocks of chemical and nuclear weapons. And yet he will not allow himself to say that in a couple or a family who are in conflict it is possible, in any sense, to state that one person is better than another or that one person holds the moral or ethical high ground.

### Theatrical Influences

One of the features of so many productions of Pinter in both rehearsal and performance is ponderous thought. The opening exchange in the 1996 Julie Christie *Old Times* at Wyndhams (Dark. Fat or thin?) was so slow, you'd forgotten what the first word was before you'd got to the fourth.

And in rehearsal various approaches are tried. I know of examples in which all the actors were off book from day one (though they had not been told!) so they were fed the text line by line by the DSM. Or where the text is projected onto the walls in the rehearsal room. All these ideas are aimed at making the text sound natural and spontaneous - good impulses but for the fact that Harold's writing is not a product of the sort of deep (almost filmic) naturalism toward which these devices tend.

Instead his work is born, to a great extent, out of a very theatrical tradition of 1950s touring and weekly rep. The tradition which has been encapsulated by the phrase; 'Learn your lines and don't bump into the furniture.' Harold, like Ronnie Harwood, was in Wolfit's company before he went to work for Anew McMaster in Ireland. His experience was of rehearsing a play, perhaps a whodunit thriller filled with suspense and bold theatrical tricks in a week while performing something else. Opening the whodunit and rehearsing *Othello* for a week. Opening *Othello* and rehearsing *Lady Windermere's Fan* and so on for months at a time. His entire theatrical upbringing was concerned with getting the show on quickly and effectively,

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using whatever theatrical tricks and shortcuts were at his disposal in order to give the audience a damned good night out. And contrary to many beliefs, he has never rejected that tradition. He may have introduced us to a different group of characters and locations but the theatrical devices are, though refined, the very ones he learnt in weekly rep forty years ago. Look at the balcony scene in *Private Lives* and change the setting to a coal house roof in Hackney, Elyot to Len and Amanda to Stella and you're reading Pinter.

Perhaps his lack of rejection of his experiences as a young actor is demonstrated most clearly in his rehearsal technique as a director. On the first day of rehearsal you meet, read the play, talk for 15 minutes about it, look at the set model, talk a bit about the costumes, have a coffee and a chat to get to know one another and break for lunch. After lunch you start work on scene one. By the end of week two you have your first off book run and then most of the rest of your time is taken up with runs of acts or the whole play and detailed and incisive notes. His tools are the text - which is never marked with any notes-, a pencil and a pad of yellow lined paper. He refers to the text only to clarify a point and seldom takes his eyes off the action - most of his notes are given from memory or from the tiniest jotted reminder of a thought.

### Subtext

One element which ties directors and actors into knots over Pinter texts is the notion of subtext. In fact I would argue that there is a great deal less subtext lurking beneath what his characters say than many other writers. If we take subtext to mean that characters say one thing while meaning something else, I think it is very rare in Harold's work. However I do accept that there are other thoughts at work at times and the question arises; 'How do you present this?'

To my mind the Cardinal rule when working on Pinter (true, I think, of any play) is discuss nothing in the rehearsal room which you cannot convey clearly to the audience. Harold once said that his lines should be like snatches of conversation overheard on buses. The point being that such conversations assume a significance - you create the world you think explains the snatch you have heard; you make up the significance.

The mistake to make, as an actor, is to try to create significance in the way you say it. The text (the snatch of conversation) is what you play on stage. Subtext (the assumed significance) is what lies beneath. That is why it is subtext. If you bring it up from beneath the text you are making it text as well which is not what the author has written. This is quite apart from the fact that it does not aid the process.

It was a desire to bring the subtext to the surface in *Old Times* which caused the huge row between Visconti and Pinter in 1973. Visconti's production took place in a boxing ring and Anna and Kate were presented as two lesbians who caressed each other continually culminating in a three-way masturbation scene. Harold was not pleased.

Taking text off the page

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Another minor danger is of being preoccupied with the 'map' of the words on the page. Fifty Pinter words may occupy the space taken up by five hundred of a writer who deals in long speeches. The risk is that '(Pause)', or '(Reflectively)' in the middle of text or a series of short lines with dots and dashes breaking them up, lead you to feel that you, in delivering the text need to break it up.

A pause or a dot, dot, dot is relative. It is relative to whatever has gone before and whatever comes after. In the words of Tom Stoppard in *The Real Inspector Hound*, 'You can't start with a pause!'. Because it's not relative to anything. You can end with a pause because something has gone before it.

At this point I have to tell my favourite Harold story. I directed *The Hothouse* at The Comedy after David Jones had returned to New York and we had transferred from Chichester. A particular scene has spread so that it is now three minutes longer than it was when we started the run. I call a rehearsal to look at it. I tell Harold and ask him if he wants to come. He says he might. I start the rehearsal. No sign of Harold. We look at the scene and get to a moment where it sort of stops. I say to the actor, 'That's the moment I want to look at. There's a sort of gap there. Why is there a gap there?' The actor replies, 'Well, I've been looking at the text and it says 'pause' there and I feel that I wasn't giving enough weight to that pause.' Harold's voice booms from the back of the stalls, 'You know what I say to that pause? I say Bollocks to it, that's what I say. It's just some rubbish some writer wrote thirty years ago.'

The notion that Harold views his texts like commandments carved in stone is anathema to anyone who has worked with him. Of course you can't be sloppy with text - as I have said, every word is chosen as is every bit of punctuation - a comma is not a full stop - but the idea of Harold saying a pause is so long, a comma is so long is a nonsense. That said, it is perhaps illuminating to note the length of Harold's own pauses. I once timed them in *The Hothouse* and they were all three seconds long!

The fact that Harold is an actor who has played his own roles is oddly, frequently overlooked when people examine his work. The pace (NB not speed) of Harold's delivery both as an actor and in every day life is machine-gun-like. Not unlike Coward it is very fast and light. Never ponderous or portentous. The power of this within the plays is that you never see the abyss into which the characters may fall until they teeter on the edge. Everything is a surprise. Whereas if you open a play with *Dark*. (Pause) Fat or thin? you might guess there's not a lot of hope for these people!

### Mode of Writing

I have been lucky enough to work with a lot of writers, including Harold, Ronnie Harwood, Simon Gray and Alan Ayckbourn, on the first productions of their plays. Something I think very pertinent to our discussion of Harold's work is that he writes unlike any of them. Every other writer I know decides on a subject and then sits down to write the play. Many have set writing hours. Some set a few months a year aside to write the new play. Alan Ayckbourn always takes January off to write. Harold writes from image. That is to say an image comes into his head and it compels him to write about it. He sees a couple having

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breakfast through a window and it becomes *The Birthday Party*. Of course he has long periods when he has no inspiration and doesn't write at all but once he has an image it's very quick. He wrote his last play, *Ashes To Ashes*, when I was working with him on *Twelve Angry Men*. One day he came in and said 'I've started writing a play.' And about six days later he gave me the first draft to read having been rehearsing all day for those six days. The final text differed in about twenty places. Later, the designer, Tom Rand told me he had been in the middle of a meeting with Harold when he saw him drift off. You can imagine he's not a person who's attention wanders, so this came as quite a shock to Tom. Moments later H said, 'I'm sorry, Tom, you'll have to go, I've got to write something'. It was the first play since *Moonlight*.

This may seem like a curious detail but actually Harold's mode of writing should have a crucial impact on the way one works on his plays. Alan Ayckbourn tells a great story about playing Stanley in a production of *The Birthday Party* directed by Harold. Alan, being a writer himself, was very excited about being directed by the author. He was excited at the prospect of getting some insight from the horse's mouth. On the first day of rehearsal he said to Harold; 'Can you tell me where Stanley comes from, who his parents were, how he came to be with Meg and Petey, how he knows Goldberg and McCann, what this organisation is?' And Harold said; 'Mind your own \*\*\*\*\* business'.

Again it's a great story and one which further compounds the enigma of 'Pinter', but if you see it in the context of the way he writes, as he has often explained, it makes perfect sense. The truth is that he really does not know. All he can be sure of is that these people do these things during their traffic across the stage. To my mind, as a result, the real trick in rehearsing and playing his texts is, therefore, to just do it. Knowing who Stanley's mother was does not help you to play the moment when Stanley has his glasses broken. You have the words Harold has given you and nothing else. In this sense it is like life. If someone appeared where I lived, invaded my space and broke my glasses I doubt I'd be thinking in detail about my mother. I'd be wondering how I could see without my glasses and how I was going to evade being taken away by Goldberg and McCann. These things are in the text.

### Ambiguity

In my efforts to get the text off the page ten years ago, I recall looking up 'Pinteresque' in the dictionary. It said 'Situations fraught with menacing ambiguity'. A lovely, if rather sweeping, description but dangerous if thought to be a clue to how to play Pinter. Ambiguity is talked about a lot in relation to Pinter texts and it is a terrible red herring. Ambiguity is perceived. You cannot and must not attempt to play ambiguity. If you do you just get confused as an actor and make the audience confused. Harold's work is never about people being confused. You have to make clear decisions as an actor about what you are saying, thinking and feeling. Those decisions may change utterly moment by moment and it is these changes, these movements from one definite stand point to another equally definite stand point which create a lack of certainty for the audience. What we have to be very clear about is the distinction between the response of the audience and the approach of the actor. There is all the difference in the world between what you are trying to engender in the audience and what you are trying to feel or think yourself as an actor in putting the text on its feet. Which takes us onto . . .

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## Relativity

A function of Harold's uncompromising sense of right and wrong in the world is that his approach to life is to interrogate the world. To demand of people and governments what they think they are doing. He never sets out to solve the world's problems in his plays or his political life but he does insist that we are honest about the fact that there are problems and inconsistencies however hard they may be to face. And this approach is carried into his writing. Just look at the preponderance of questions in his work.

Is your lover coming today? - The opening to *The Lover*

Fat or thin? - The second line of *Old Times*

Is that you, Bill? - The opening of *The Collection*

What happened to 6507? - The opening of *The Hothouse*

Glance down a page of any text and you will see question marks peppering the page. Throughout the plays people are asking questions and answering questions. The point for Harold is that an answer and the Truth are by no means necessarily the same thing. The Truth lies somewhere between the question and the answer. *The Collection* is, on one level, a play about whether or not two people had sex in a hotel room in Leeds. If it were by Ray Cooney that is all we would be concerned with. In fact, though we may itch to know what happened, the play concerns itself with the devastating power of not knowing; the torture of uncertainty.

When we were rehearsing *The Collection*, Harold and I had agreed that we had no view on what the 'Truth' was and that we actually felt we should steer away from making a decision. All the energy in the piece comes from the fact that only Stella and Bill know what happened and they keep changing their story. James and Harry can never know what happened because they were not there. They have to rely on the statements of their partners which, for obvious reasons, are unreliable. It would therefore be a nonsense for us, in the rehearsal room to have an agreed version which everyone, whether they were in the hotel room or not, would 'know' as the truth. Moreover, Harold makes the point that memory is relative even to the individual. Even the two people who were in the room, experiencing the same events in the same place at the same time, may have wholly differing versions of those events. This notion is most clearly put by Deely's phrase in *Old Times* 'There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place'. Recollection is reality.

## Sex

Finally, let's talk about sex. Pinter texts contain numerous references to sexual matters. And here lies another pitfall. Sex plays a huge part in the plays, particularly, of course *The Lover* and *The Collection* but it is also in *Mountain Language*, *The Homecoming*, *Old Times*, *Betrayal*, *The Birthday Party* and many more. The sex is never straightforward. By which I mean that it is never simply in the context of an equal, consenting, loving relationship. Sometimes it is only suggested by an image - for example Devlin making Rebecca kiss his fist

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in *Ashes to Ashes* - at others it is talked about specifically as in the interrogation in *Mountain Language*.

The crucial thing in approaching the sex in the plays is to understand that we are never concerned with the act of intercourse. And the reason, theatrically, that we are not concerned with it is that the act contains no dramatic energy. In a sense, I think, here lies the distinction between eroticism and pornography. What Harold uses is the fantastic energy created between the moment of sexual attraction and orgasm.

It is an almost demonic energy; something which goes beyond notions of right and wrong, almost beyond reason. What is crucial is that orgasm is never achieved in any satisfactory sense. We are never interested in the sexual act but in what leads up to and away from it. The power of sex and sexuality exists in anticipation. What he explores is the sexual animal squirming beneath the smartly dressed exterior. Thus the mistake is to, like Visconti, bring the sexual act to the surface, because to do so limits the plays to smut.

The critic, Michael Billington directed *The Lover* at The Battersea Arts Centre and every time the famous bongo drum was brought out it was held by Richard as a giant phallus. This reduced the whole play to a sort of tits and bums *Carry On Up Your Pinter*, whereas the real point about the drum is that it is a neutral item across which Richard and Sarah begin their ritual touching and scratching of fingers. For them it has a huge erotic significance of which we know nothing. It is not a sex aid. There is dramatic and erotic power in this because we know where it is going to lead (intercourse and orgasm) but we also know that the objective of their game is to delay the ultimate pleasure in order to prolong the delicious torture of anticipation.

In *The Lover* and *The Collection* particularly we also play with the vast power of sexual jealousy but in tortuous ways. There is no simple argument - You slept with someone else, I hate you. Instead, in *The Lover* Richard is actually jealous of himself in the form of his alter ego the lover, Max. His fear is that Sarah is more attracted to and excited by his fantasy role of Max than by his real self. Another example of a situation which is very ambiguous for the audience but which needs to be crystal clear to the actor playing Richard.

I'd like to conclude with a silly story about the only critical question ever to totally flummox Harold. He was introduced to a woman and her six-year old son. The woman looked down at her son and said: 'This man is a very good writer.' The little boy looked at Harold and then at his mother and said: 'Can he do a 'W'?'

Joe Harmston

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