

**HAROLD PINTER  
AND THE  
NEW BRITISH THEATRE**

**D. KEITH PEACOCK**

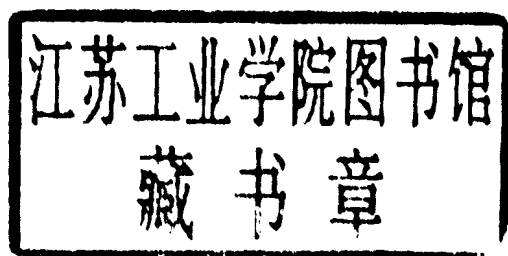
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**LIVES OF THE THEATRE**

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# **HAROLD PINTER AND THE NEW BRITISH THEATRE**

**D. KEITH PEACOCK**



*Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, Number 77*

**LIVES OF THE THEATRE**

JOSH BEER, CHRISTOPHER INNES, and SIMON WILLIAMS, Series Advisers



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## Series Foreword

*Lives of the Theatre* is designed to provide scholarly introductions to important periods and movements in the history of world theatre from the earliest instances of recorded performance through to the twentieth century, viewing the theatre consistently through the lives of representative theatrical practitioners. Although many of the volumes will be centered upon playwrights, other important theatre people, such as actors and directors, will also be prominent in the series. The subjects have been chosen not simply for their individual importance, but because their lives in the theatre can well serve to provide a major perspective on the theatrical trends of their eras. They are therefore either representative of their time, figures whom their contemporaries recognized as vital presences in the theatre, or they are people whose work was to have a fundamental influence on the development of theatre, not only in their lifetimes but after their deaths as well. While the discussion of verbal and written scripts will inevitably be a central concern in any volume that is about an artist who wrote for the theatre, these scripts will always be considered in their function as a basis for performance.

The rubric "Lives of the Theatre" is therefore intended to suggest both biographies of people who created theatre as an institution and as a medium of performance and of the life of the theatre itself. This dual focus will be illustrated through the titles of the individual volumes, such as *Christopher Marlowe and the Renaissance of Tragedy*, *George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre*, and *Richard Wagner and Festival Theatre*, to name just a few. At the same time, although the focus of each volume will be different, depending on the particular subject, appropriate emphasis will be given to the cultural and political context within which the theatre of any given time is set. Theatre itself can be seen to have a palpable effect upon the social world around it, as it both reflects the life of

its time and helps to form that life by feeding it images, epitomes, and alternative versions of itself. Hence, we hope that this series will also contribute to an understanding of the broader social life of the period of which the theatre that is the subject of each volume was a part.

*Lives of the Theatre* grew out of an idea that Josh Beer put to Christopher Innes and Peter Arnott. Sadly, Peter Arnott did not live to see the inauguration of the series. Simon Williams kindly agreed to replace him as one of the series advisers and has played a full part in its preparation. In commemoration, the editors wish to acknowledge Peter's own rich contribution to the life of the theatre.

Josh Beer  
Christopher Innes  
Simon Williams

## Preface

The production of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956 marks something of a watershed in twentieth-century British theatre. Although from the perspective of the 1990s *Look Back in Anger* does not appear as revolutionary as it did at the time, there emerged in its wake a generation of British playwrights who tried to break with the standard theatrical fare that had been predominant on the English commercial stage in the 1940s and 1950s. Apart from Osborne himself, these playwrights included Arnold Wesker, Ann Jellicoe, Shelagh Delaney, John Arden, and Harold Pinter. Of these, Harold Pinter has been by far the most successful. Unlike Osborne and Wesker, who had by the early 1970s lost critical esteem, and Jellicoe, Delaney, and Arden, who for various reasons gave up writing for the English theatre, Harold Pinter soon established and has consistently maintained a reputation as Britain's leading dramatist. Indeed, although he was commonly identified with these other playwrights, Pinter was in many ways different, and his work is now seen to stand apart from theirs.

Early in his career as a dramatist, Pinter's idiosyncratic style earned the epithet "Pinteresque." If, however, this term were simply applied today, it would obscure evident changes in the structure and thematic focus of his work. These changes were not a response to current theatrical fashions, but reflected the way Pinter adjusted his personal theatrical focus. Thus, during the 1970s, when British theatre was dominated by left-wing politics and the portrayal of class-conflict, Pinter, almost perversely it seemed, turned away from portraying the social interaction of the human animal to explore private perception and individual memory. In the late 1980s, when political theatre had disappeared from the stage, Pinter turned to politics, though not British party politics. Rather, his concern was with the international and national politics of freedom and democratic citizenship.

In 1996, in *Ashes to Ashes*, Pinter combined the structures of the Memory and Political plays of the 1970s and 1980s in order to deal with humanity's potential for both love and cruelty.

In his youth, Pinter had no aspirations as a dramatist. Instead, he found his creative outlet in poetry, short stories, and a novel. Pinter's first experience with the theatre—like Osborne's slightly earlier—was as an actor, sometimes in classical roles, but mainly in the standard repertory plays that the new British dramatists sought to displace. To some extent, he has continued to pursue his profession as an actor. At the same time, he has had an active and successful career as a theatre director and a film and television director. He has also written extensively for radio, television, and film.

Pinter's comprehensive participation in, and contribution to, both British theatre and its drama means that a study of the evolution of his career not only offers a fascinating topic in itself, but also helps shed light on the wider development of British theatre over half a century. In offering an explanation for Pinter's continued success in the most social of the arts, this book will attempt, where appropriate, to contextualize his work culturally, politically, and biographically, thereby exploring the link between the artist, his personal experience, his environment, and the historical moment.

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## A Theatre Hermetically Sealed

“What all this means only Mr Pinter knows, for his characters speak in non-sequiturs, half-gibberish and lunatic ravings.” Thus, in the *Guardian* of 21 May 1958, a critic signing himself M. W. W. greeted *The Birthday Party*, Harold Pinter’s first play to reach the public stage. The *Guardian*’s reviewer was by no means alone in dismissing the play and *The Birthday Party* closed after only one week with paltry box-office receipts. While M. W. W. was only able to explain what he had witnessed in terms of nonsense and madness, Derek Granger in the *Financial Times* (20 May 1958) dismissed the play as an inferior imitation of the continental avant-garde. “The interest of such pieces as an accepted genre,” wrote Granger with evident derision, “is hardly more than that of some ill-repressed young dauber who feels he can outdo the *école de Paris* by throwing his paint on with a trowel and a bathmat.”

Had it not been for television and radio, which gave him employment during the following months, Pinter’s playwriting career might have ended where it began. It is indeed ironic that during the 1950s, when television was considered to be a major threat to live theatre, it was the transmission of an extract of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* on the television arts program *Monitor* that increased public awareness and boosted audiences for the play. It was television and radio which, by offering Pinter playwriting commissions in the months after the failure of *The Birthday Party*, made his idiosyncratic technique familiar to a wider public.

During a symposium on the state of the English theatre organized by the periodical *Encore* at the Royal Court Theatre on 18 November 1956, Arthur Miller declared that British Theatre was “hermetically sealed against the way the society moves”<sup>1</sup>; indeed in the postwar years it did appear that a gulf had opened up between ordinary people’s life experience in contemporary Britain and the theatre’s portrayal of the nation’s

social, moral, and spiritual values. The drama of the 1950s was a fossilized remnant of the British realistic well-made play of the late nineteenth century and was quite unaffected by the radical formal innovations that had shaken European drama during the previous half century.

As might be expected in the light of the upheaval of the war, British drama of the late 1940s and early 1950s was dominated by writers who already had established reputations and whose style was that of the 1920s and 1930s. The leading playwrights of the early postwar years were Noël Coward, whose major work was written before and during the war, and Terence Rattigan, who had also, to a lesser extent, established himself before the war. Also popular with West End audiences were the plays of the actor and dramatist Emlyn Williams, who wrote realistic serious comedies and whose most popular works, such as *Night Must Fall* (1935) and *The Corn Is Green* (1938), were written before the war. Another actor and dramatist whose first plays were written during the 1940s, but who came to wider public attention after the war, was Peter Ustinov. His most successful plays were *The Love of Four Colonels* (1951), which satirizes the national characteristics of an American, a Russian, a British, and a French officer of the postwar occupying force who attempt to win the love of a sleeping beauty in a disputed European country, and *Romanoff and Juliet* (1956), which is set in an imaginary European country during the Cold War and portrays the romance between the son of the Russian ambassador and the daughter of his American counterpart. These romantic fantasy-comedies, based upon contemporary international political problems, were probably located for their audiences at just the right distance from the reality of the postwar world. In an even lighter vein were the plays of William Douglas Home, best known as a writer of snappy, elegant comedies such as *The Chiltern Hundreds* (1947), which deals affectionately with the upper class into which the author was born. The novelist Agatha Christie also wrote successfully for the theatre by simply exploiting the structure of the well-made play for sheer entertainment. Her most famous play, *The Mousetrap*, which opened in 1950, is still playing and has become something of a national institution. It would be unjust, however, to characterize the British theatre of the 1950s as one solely devoted to light entertainment. Although this may have been the predominant mood, from the 1930s a few dramatists had been experimenting with dramatic form and exploring more serious social, moral, and philosophical themes than romantic love, family discord, personal ethics, or adultery. One such writer was J. B. Priestley, who was also a novelist but had established himself as a successful dramatist during the 1930s. His work for the most part had a naturalistic base, although in his so-called "time" plays, such as *Dangerous Corner* (1932), he subverted the materialist philosophy of naturalism. His concern with a fourth dimension and with the subconscious represented in the "time" plays, as well as his experimentation with expressionism to

portray the metaphysical and symbolic in *Time and the Conways* and *I Have Been Here Before* (both 1937), divided his work from that of most of his contemporaries; nonetheless his plays found favor even with West End audiences up until the advent of the New Theatre.<sup>2</sup> Some claim for experimentation must also be made for T. S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, and Ronald Duncan, who attempted, each in his different way, to revive poetic drama; ultimately they were all unsuccessful in their attempts. Eliot began the process in 1934 with *Sweeney Agonistes* and was joined by the other two writers after the war. By the end of the 1950s, however, the moral and spiritual concerns of poetic drama seemed outdated and irrelevant in the light of the more concrete social issues that the drama was beginning to explore.

As Terence Rattigan contentiously claimed in his introduction to the 1953 edition of his *Collected Plays*, the typical audience-member of the 1940s and 1950s was not about to encourage change. In this introduction, Rattigan created (to his subsequent regret) the character of "Aunt Edna," a personification of the ordinary, unsophisticated audience of the period. "Let us invent a character, a nice, respectable, middle-class, middle-aged, maiden lady, with time on her hands and the money to help her pass it," he wrote. "She enjoys pictures, books, music, and the theatre, and though to none of these three arts . . . does she bring much knowledge or discernment, at least, as she is apt to tell her cronies, she 'does know what she likes.' Let us call her Aunt Edna." What Aunt Edna certainly did not like were foreign works of art, which were beyond her comprehension. "Aunt Edna does not appreciate Kafka—'so obscure, my dear, and why always look on the dark side of things?'—she is upset by Picasso—'those dreadful reds, my dear, and why three noses?'—and she is against Walton—'such appalling discords, my dear, and no melody at all.' She is, in short, a hopeless lowbrow."<sup>3</sup> In the 1964 edition of his plays, Rattigan, now very much on the defensive after his work had been associated by hostile critics with the Aunt Edna mentality, cast himself as a Plaintiff in a court case concerned with the "new" and the "old" drama. At one point his Counsel defines the term "French Window Drama," and in doing so illustrates a type of realistic drama that had been prevalent in the 1930s and had reestablished itself, as though nothing had happened in the world, after World War II.

It is a portmanteau phrase to cover a species of complacent middle-class theatre, either comedy or drama, and utterly devoid of either intellectual or sociological content. . . . In such plays french windows were extensively employed for entrances—usually for young couples in tennis clothes who after depositing their rackets, often went straight into a proposal scene on a sofa, set facing squarely to the audience and with its back to the fireplace; but it was also useful for

the entrance, at the end of Act One, for characters, often pseudonymized in the programme as "The Stranger", who would ultimately reveal themselves as the Devil or God or someone's long-lost husband. French windows were often useful too, for the heroine's frantic final exit to plunge herself into the mill-race.<sup>4</sup>

As Rattigan freely admitted, British drama had for more than half a century remained insulated from developments in America and Europe. Expressionism, constructivism, and surrealism had passed almost unnoticed, and the craft of playwriting had, for the most part, become stale. Managements played safe in order to attract the few customers available, and plays were therefore usually selected on the basis of economics rather than aesthetics. A small cast, a limited number of sets, leading roles appropriate for star-names, and a plot containing the tried and tested ingredients of popular success were the features required by theatre producers. Since serious plays could prove to be a financial liability, revues, musicals, nude and variety shows—the type of entertainment provided by Archie Rice in John Osborne's *The Entertainer* (1957)—were the preferred product. In *The Unholy Trade* (1952), Richard Findlater deplored the fact that, in spite of the major social and political changes that had affected Britain and the world over the previous fifty years, the playwrights of the English theatre in 1951 were

still timidly exploring the problems of maintaining country houses, and discussing the etiquette of the Guards. Middle class families are commonly depicted with a full crew of butlers and housemaids, and the working class are not depicted at all—except as comic relief. Communists, if brought upon the stage, are bumptious young men passing through a phase. England, behind the footlights, is still a right little, tight little island, where family virtues are secure and there's no trouble with servants or foreigners. To make this pattern of life more credible, plays are frequently set back in the pre-1914 age, which is, it seems, the land of heart's desire for the nostalgic English.<sup>5</sup>

In these settings inhabited by articulate middle-class characters, ethical, moral, and spiritual concerns, as well as the eternal triangle, were the staple subjects of postwar British drama. Two of Rattigan's immaculately crafted realistic plays, *The Winslow Boy* (1946) and *The Browning Version* (1948), offer prime evidence. *The Winslow Boy*, based upon historical fact, is set in the favored Edwardian period and concerns a father's unshakable belief in his son's innocence of the theft of a five-shilling postal order from a fellow naval cadet. *The Browning Version*, brimming with pathos, is set in a contemporary English public school. It centers upon a schoolteacher, Andrew Crocker-Harris, whose heart condition has forced him to resign



from his teaching post in a public school to take up a less stressful job at a far less prestigious "crammer." Crocker-Harris is feared and disliked by his pupils and held in low esteem by his colleagues. Most hurtfully of all, he is humiliated by his adulterous wife, who cruelly suggests that a copy of Robert Browning's version of *The Agamemnon*, given to him as a leaving present by a pupil, may simply be a bribe to ensure the boy's graduation to another class. Crocker-Harris faces up to the fact that his career has been a failure and that his marriage has been a sham; at the close of the play, he is finally able to salvage for himself a modicum of self-respect. Both plays are effective pieces of theatre that work on the audience's emotions and evoke respect and sympathy for the individual faced by institutional injustice and an unfeeling, sometimes cruel world.

In this conservative theatrical climate the chances of an unknown writer having his or her realistic play professionally produced were slim, and even slimmer for a play that could be described as experimental. A limited number of opportunities for production were offered by London's "Little Theatres," theatre clubs or play-producing societies such as the Arts Theatre Club, the New Boltons, the Lindsay, the Players, the Unity, and the Mercury, which had a policy of producing new and experimental work from both Britain and abroad. Their audiences, although small, were at least sympathetic to new ideas expressed in nonnaturalistic forms. Most of these theatres were constituted as members-only clubs in order to avoid censorship by the Lord Chamberlain. Indeed, the Lord Chamberlain's office was one of the causes of the stagnancy of British drama. Under the 1843 Theatre Act all stage-plays were required to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain before production, in order to be examined particularly for indecency, impropriety, profanity, seditious matter, and the representation of living persons such as royalty and politicians. A license for performance could be refused outright or awarded conditionally upon the removal of offending scenes or dialogue. Since at least the beginning of the twentieth century there had been agitation for its abandonment (by George Bernard Shaw, among others), but it was only in 1968 that Parliament yielded to pressure and repealed the act. After World War II the Lord Chamberlain's censorship was mainly applied to perceived obscenity in language or performance. Nevertheless, political censorship still occurred, even during the early years of the New Theatre. In 1957 Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop was prosecuted and fined just under £15, including costs, for Richard Harris's imitation of Winston Churchill's voice at the official opening of a public lavatory during a performance of Henry Chapman's *You Won't Always Be on Top*. In 1966 the Chairman of the Governors of the Royal Shakespeare Company, George Farmer, and the directors Peter Brook and Peter Hall met the Lord Chamberlain to protest against his unwillingness to issue a license for their Vietnam War play, *US*, on the grounds that it was "bestial and left-wing"<sup>6</sup> and that it might offend the American

government. Apparently, in order to draw attention to the gravity of his office, the Lord Chamberlain saw fit to appear before them wearing his full court regalia, complete with sword. Some iconoclastic dramatists such as George Bernard Shaw, while avoiding reference to specific political issues or public figures, had examined social and political ethics in their plays. In general, however, the office of the Lord Chamberlain effectively discouraged the theatre from dealing with contemporary social and political issues. During the early postwar period the theatre was, therefore, left to explore spiritual, moral, and ethical dilemmas in language that was still acceptable to Aunt Edna. During the early 1960s the influence of the New Theatre, together with the freedom permitted to television to deal directly with social and political concerns, led ultimately to the termination of the Lord Chamberlain's authority over the theatre.

Being small and noncommercial, the Little Theatres were willing to take economic risks, but in the 1940s, like Britain in general, they were suffering from financial stringency, in their case owing to falling audiences and rising costs. While admiring their contribution to innovation, particularly in the prewar years, Richard Findlater recognized that in the 1950s the British theatre could not look to them for its salvation. Despite this gloomy prognostication, the foremost of the postwar Little Theatres, the Arts Theatre, may claim to have at least prepared the ground for the revolution in British drama with the first British production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, directed by Peter Hall in 1955, and of Eugène Ionesco's *The Lesson* (1955), *The Bald Prima Donna*, and *The New Tenant* (both 1956). It was the same Arts Theatre that was to confirm Pinter's reputation with its production of *The Caretaker* (1960), *A Slight Ache* (1961), and *The Lover* (1963).

The realistic well-made play that dominated the British theatre of the early postwar years was essentially rationalistic; its ordered structure was based upon consistency of characterization and advanced by means of units of balanced discursive dialogue that explicitly revealed cause and effect. This formal arrangement, however, reflected a belief structure that in Britain (although less so than in Europe) had been subject to erosion since World War I. The world portrayed was one of security and predictability, a world dominated by middle-class tastes and values, in which each member of society accepted his or her place within the social hierarchy. The dramatic development of exposition, complication, climax, and denouement reflected an ordered world in which human rationality prevailed and the unpredictable could be resolved. By the 1950s, however, the mass of British society no longer subscribed to these values. The end of World War II and the election of a reformist Labour government in 1945 raised the social expectations of the working class, and after the war the trade unions exerted increasing influence upon working conditions and wages. During the late 1940s and into the 1950s two different but not entirely

separate views of the country's state began to emerge within the population. Among the working class it appeared that the heightened expectations were beginning to be fulfilled, certainly on a material level, as by the mid-1950s the relatively high rate of employment permitted most people to take part in the growing consumerism. With the coronation of Elizabeth II in 1953 it could even be imagined that a new Elizabethan age was dawning, in which Britain would reclaim her rightful place as a world power. In contrast, the politically aware and educated young experienced a growing sense of disillusionment.

Domestically, the promise of a social meritocracy remained unfulfilled. The 1944 Education Act established secondary education for all up to the age of fifteen and increased the participation rate of working-class children in grammar school education. This offered a limited number of children future access to higher education and a wider selection of career opportunities than had been available to their parents. For some, however, there was an unexpected downside. Along with the increasing class mobility of the early 1960s, produced partly by these changes in education, came a sense of alienation. As early as 1956 John Osborne, in *Look Back in Anger*, portrayed the potential effect of such class mobility by presenting in Jimmy Porter a character who finds himself *declassed*, divorced from his class background but unable to identify with the new class with which his education aligns him. Many of the dramatists of the New Theatre experienced this sense of social alienation and, over the next decade, were to represent it implicitly or explicitly in their plays.

Internationally in the decade following the war, Britain seemed to be threatened by a myriad of uncontrollable forces. It appeared that its culture was under threat from American consumerist values, its language was corrupted by the intrusion of American idioms appropriated from the then-dominant American cinema, and its young were provoked to anarchy by rock 'n' roll. Politically, the dismantling of Britain's empire, begun with the granting of independence to India in 1947, marked a waning of her international influence, which was brought home sharply by the Suez Crisis of 1956. Chinese involvement in the Korean War of 1951 and Russia's blockading of Berlin in 1947 and its invasion of Hungary in 1956 inspired fear of Communist expansionism. Finally, most threatening of all was the adoption of the atomic bomb by both East and West. By 1956, in both domestic and international terms, Britain was therefore socially and politically very different from what it had been in 1939. In this shifting moral, social, and political landscape, protest and the rejection of the past were firmly on the agenda, particularly among the young.

It was not, however, in the service of political protest but to attract writers back from the novel to the theatre that the English Stage Company was founded. In 1956 the company placed an advertisement in *The Stage* calling for new plays; the advertisement attracted between 675 and 750