The Theatre of the Absurd as professional network in Harold Pinter's early career

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Harold Pinter's plays first gained recognition as part of a then-emergent strand of European and British drama which came to be called the Theatre of the Absurd, an early association which is now seen by some as unhelpful, a critical convenience that was soon outgrown.[1] This view reflects the many disputes about the nature, value, and even the existence of the Theatre of the Absurd that have raged since the first publication of Martin Esslin's highly influential book of that title in 1961.[2] Such disputes reflect real critical difficulties, one of which lies in deciding what status to accord the Theatre of the Absurd: should it be referred to as a movement, a genre, a convention, a trend, a phenomenon? Or should only terms denoting scepticism, such as 'label' or 'critical construct', be used? In this chapter I argue that one objectively verifiable manifestation of the Theatre of the Absurd was as a professional network which greatly aided Pinter's career in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Considering it in this way shines a new light on Pinter's early progress as a writer, and on his career-long negotiations with the critical perceptions that defined him; it also suggests new and productive work that may be done with a critical term which has proved as persistent as it has been debatable.

Within contemporary business discourse there are thought to be two main kinds of professional network: 'expansive' and 'nodal'. According to *Flexjobs* writer Adrianne Bibby, an expansive network is 'a broad umbrella group of contacts' who

‘can be present and former colleagues and industry contacts who can either speak specifically to your work experience and accomplishments, or offer a broader personal endorsement of you as a potential hire […] the group may include family members or friends’ (2018). However, in a *Forbes* article entitled, ‘You Need Two Types Of Professional Networks To Get Super-Rich’, Russ Alan Prince, President of R.A. Prince and Associates, adds that expansive networks are ‘the type of network most professionals develop […] useful but often limited’ (2017). Essential for serious success, it is suggested, is the development of a nodal network which, according to Bibby, ‘typically […] can be a more narrow subset of people, but also a more powerful group of “marquee” contacts who may wield influence in your industry’ (2018). As Prince puts it, a nodal network comprises ‘a few very powerful, highly targeted deep relationships that in turn have an array of similar relationships of their own’ (2017).

An analysis of the contacts and connections through which Harold Pinter developed his career as a playwright, which was highly successful even if it did not make him ‘super-rich’, would seem to bear out the analysis offered by Bibby and Prince: initial opportunities came about via Pinter’s expansive network, but real and lasting success was achieved through the development of a nodal network of influential critics and practitioners which included Harold Hobson, Donald McWhinnie, Barbara Bray, Martin Esslin, Peter Hall and Samuel Beckett. What I highlight in this chapter is how far Pinter, in making these crucial nodal connections, was joining a pre-existing network of like-minded professionals who were already engaged in producing and promoting a particular kind of avant-garde theatre with which his work shared identifiable affinities. Where previous studies have noted individual collaborations and points of connection, I will collate the evidence in such

a way as to reveal an overall pattern of collective, though largely uncoordinated, endeavour. As Bibby notes, a node is ‘the point in a system or network where different paths intersect or branch out’ (2018), and one way to think about Pinter in these early years is as a significant node in the extensive network of artists and advocates whose cumulative efforts brought into being the Theatre of the Absurd.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first I establish the characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd and the grounds that exist for considering Pinter a part of it. In the second I look in detail at Pinter’s early career, identifying a network of significant contacts, each already connected to the Theatre of the Absurd, whose support helped him to establish himself as a playwright. The final section considers how fully Pinter was able to break his connection to the Absurd when it became unhelpful. Characterizing the Theatre of the Absurd as a network allows it to be seen anew, as a collective endeavour comprised not only of the innovative playwriting of Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Pinter and others but of the numerous acts of encouragement, collaboration, patronage and advocacy that enabled the realisation and acceptance of their work. It then becomes possible, without the need for rigid thematic interpretation, to regard the Theatre of the Absurd as a demonstrably real and culturally significant phenomenon, the impact, influence and meaning of which can be considered holistically. This account of Pinter’s early career serves as a UK-focused case study offered in support of this suggested reconceptualization.

Pinter’s Absurd association

‘The Theatre of the Absurd’ is a term which has been used since the 1950s to refer to a body of post-war drama associated with Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco and others. Its broad thematic concern, as it was defined by Martin Esslin, is a ‘sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition’ (2001: 23-4), and this reflects the fact that, as Arnold P. Hinchcliffe notes, it ‘derives its inspiration from an existential view of life’ (1969: 92). Non-naturalistic and formally unconventional, it is characterised, in the words of Irving Wardle, by ‘the substitution of an inner landscape for the outer world [and] the lack of any clear division between fantasy and fact’ (1968: 15) so that, as Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh write, ‘significance in the absurdist text […] is affective and allegorical: it expresses itself in rhythms, atmospheres and intensities’ (2015: 17). While the dramatists connected with the Absurd did not comprise a unified movement, their plays, as Michael Y. Bennett has written, ‘befuddled audiences in a similar manner’ (2013: 1) and, as Dan Rebellato has shown, in London provoked hostility from those who feared that their ‘refusal of vitality […] would undermine the naïve realist strain of new British playwriting’ epitomised by *Look Back in Anger* (1999: 146-7). Nonetheless, as John Bull has contended, by the time of Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* in 1966, ‘the strands of Absurdism that can be traced back to Beckett, and to Ionesco, had taken over as the model of British avantgarde theatre’ (2000: 91).

While asserting the validity of his categorisation, Esslin was careful not to claim too much:

> It must be stressed […] that the dramatists whose work is here discussed do not form part of any self-proclaimed or self-conscious school or movement. On the contrary, each of the writers in question is an individual who regards himself as a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in his private world. (Esslin 2001: 22)

There is some truth in this, but at the same time it is problematic to regard the writers of the Theatre of the Absurd as isolated outsiders when each was involved in making theatre, a collaborative enterprise necessitating the help of numerous facilitators and fellow practitioners. Pinter, in particular, having acted professionally since 1949, had acquired extensive experience and numerous contacts in the highly social world of the theatre – as William Baker's recent book *Pinter's World* shows in detail (see Baker 2018: 1-22). Moreover, almost as significant as their ties to other theatre workers was the encouragement and support which dramatists associated with the Absurd received from the many commentators and opinion formers – Esslin included – who saw value in their work. The Theatre of the Absurd was assuredly not a 'self-proclaimed or self-conscious school or movement', but neither was it a series of entirely unconnected one-person cottage industries.

If the connections and collaborations that I will highlight below give one kind of justification for considering Pinter as part of the Theatre of the Absurd, another is provided by the fact that his early work was repeatedly likened to that of other writers associated with it. A representative example is reviewer Derek Granger's statement that *The Birthday Party* (1958) 'comes in the school of random dottiness deriving from Beckett and Ionesco' (quoted in Billington 2007: 84), an assessment which was at least partly defensible, because Pinter acknowledged the influence of Beckett, though not that of Ionesco (see Batty 2005: 108 and Billington 2007: 94).[3] In keeping with such perceived affinities Pinter was included in Esslin's book, appearing in a chapter devoted to 'parallels and proselytes' (a suggestive title that leaves open how far those included are knowingly contributing to an identified trend). By the third edition of *The Theatre of the Absurd* in 1980, in accordance with his enhanced

critical and commercial status, Pinter had been given his own chapter, signifying elevation in Esslin's hierarchy to the status of major Absurdist.

As we will see, Pinter was later to complain that the categorisation of his work as Absurd had worked to foreclose and circumscribe interpretation, but its immediate effect in the 1950s and 60s was as a means of promotion. In *The Theatrical Critic as Cultural Agent: Constructing Pinter, Orton and Stoppard as Absurdist Playwrights,* Yael Zarhy-Levo has shown how conceiving Pinter's work as Absurd was a key step towards his acceptance by reviewers as a valid presence in British theatre. For her the most significant thing about the Theatre of the Absurd is the way it functioned to promote the writers associated with it:

> Constructing the group, and attaching a familiar label to it, can be perceived as Esslin's means for 'selling' the playwrights. Although Esslin's explicit claim is that he merely attempts to describe a new theatrical trend, the strategies he employs reveal his implicit motives of contributing to these playwrights' acceptance. (Zarhy-Levo 2001: 11)

As Zarhy-Levo shows, viewing Pinter's work as affiliated to the Absurd allowed critics to appreciate its avant-garde qualities, so that 'his "puzzling" style [was] evaluated anew and perceived as the attractive feature of his drama' (Zarhy-Levo 2001: 24). As she also shows, the categorisation facilitated Pinter's presentation as a British representative of an established continental trend. In both these ways, being linked to the Absurd was advantageous to Pinter as an emerging playwright.

This does not mean, of course, that he endorsed the connection. Artists often resist categorisation and Pinter repeatedly expressed a dislike of theory, preferring to present himself as a practical man of the theatre. As he said, 'A rehearsal period that consists of philosophical discourse or political treatise does not get the curtain up at eight o'clock' (Pinter 1997: 11). At the same time, Pinter did not explicitly refuse or refute the 'Absurd' label, for instance saying in a 1960 BBC interview that 'what I try

to do in my plays is get to this recognizable reality of the absurdity of what we do and how we speak […] There is a kind of horror about and I think that this horror and absurdity go together' (quoted in Esslin 2001: 242).

While Pinter's willingness to use this language might be thought surprising given his later feelings about the Absurd, it can be accounted for in more than one way. First, because association with the Absurd had contributed to his acceptance by the critical establishment, distancing himself from it was not in his best interests, as he was more than likely aware. Second, debunking any particular interpretation would have seemed proscriptive from a playwright who preferred not to explain his work and consistently argued that that 'a play has to speak for itself' (quoted in Gussow 1994: 42). Finally, Pinter may have felt bound to the idea of the Theatre of the Absurd at the level of courtesy through his relationships with and indebtedness to a wide range of colleagues and supporters who were themselves associated with it, not least Esslin himself. Though these suggestions, especially the last, are speculative, they are consistent with the picture that emerges from an examination of the professional connections through which Pinter built his writing career.

Pinter's Absurd connections

Harold Pinter's early career was enabled by the support of a number of powerful contacts, many of them already linked to the Theatre of the Absurd. Some were established practitioners through whose efforts his work was staged and broadcast, some were influential critics who helped to promote it through their public praise and support; one, Martin Esslin, was both. The many points of connection that can be identified between Pinter's various nodal contacts validate their designation as a

network whose collective efforts to promote a particular kind of avant-garde drama resulted in the establishment of the Theatre of the Absurd in Britain.

Pinter's first introduction to the world of playwriting came via his expansive network – the 'Hackney gang' of his schooldays, with his old friend Henry Woolf, now at Bristol University, soliciting from him his first play, *The Room*, first performed in May 1957. It wasn't long, however, before he made, through that piece of writing, a more nodal connection, one which established the first of many direct and indirect links between Pinter and Samuel Beckett. In December 1957 *The Room*, having been entered into a student drama competition, brought Pinter to the attention of Harold Hobson, one of the judges and, as drama critic of the *Sunday Times*, one of the most influential people in the British theatre industry.

Hobson was quick to spot, and advertise, Pinter's talent, giving a glowing report on *The Room* in his column. The play was 'a revelation', Hobson told his readers, and he urged 'the directors of the London Arts Theatre and the English Stage Company [to] be after Mr. Pinter before they eat their lunch today' (Hobson 1957). In the event it was West End impresario Michael Codron who acted on Hobson's advice, contacting Pinter promptly and going on to produce *The Birthday Party* in May 1958 (see Billington 2007: 74). When this show was panned by the majority of his colleagues, Hobson became its champion, declaring himself 'willing to risk whatever reputation I have as a judge of plays' in its defence (quoted in Esslin 2000: 9). This was in effect a reprise of his enthusiastic support for Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which most other critics had similarly disliked. He was to look back on this in 1984:

> One sometimes wonders mischievously how many of the university professors who now write books on the work of Beckett, and the PhD. candidates who now prepare theses on him would have recognized his greatness as a writer if Ken

> Tynan and I had not been in the audience that first night to recognize instantly his greatness and to proclaim it far and wide. (Hobson 1984: 188)

Hobson evidently relished his role as an almost uniquely perceptive evaluator of new and challenging drama, and in 1958 did not waste the opportunity to re-occupy centre stage in defence of *The Birthday Party*, writing a rave review that was to become one of the most celebrated in British theatre history. Pinter's first brush with British reviewers was therefore inescapably similar to Beckett's, and Hobson's outspoken championing of both gave them a common, and highly influential, ally.

The initial failure of *The Birthday Party* was discouraging for Pinter, who was to recall having been 'very depressed for about forty-eight hours' (quoted in Bensky 1977: 356). Before long, however, he was offered hope by BBC radio, which already had links to Beckett and also Ionesco. Both Donald McWhinnie, Assistant Head of Drama, and Barbara Bray, Script Editor for Sound Drama, were active supporters of Beckett, commissioning *All That Fall* (1957) and *Embers* (1959). Irving Wardle describes McWhinnie as acting as both 'director and […] propagandist' for 'material he believed in' (Wardle 1968: 14), and Jennifer Birkett describes McWhinnie and Bray as determined 'to get Beckett's work before audiences, to explain it, and […] to educate the public ear' (Birkett 2015: 166). Bray was to recall: 'We had the power to commission and Donald included Harold among a group of young writers to whom we extended patronage and help. After the failure of *The Birthday Party*, we were able to help Harold keep body and soul together' (quoted in Billington 2007: 95).

Initially this help took the form of encouraging words, but eventually Pinter was commissioned by McWhinnie to write a radio play for a fee of 85 guineas. This became *A Slight Ache*, which was broadcast in July 1959, and which was followed by *A Night Out* in March 1960 and *The Dwarfs* in December of the same year; as

Michael Billington comments, ‘at this stage, BBC Radio and commercial television were Pinter’s greatest champions’ (Billington 2007: 111). During the same period Ionesco had also received exposure on BBC radio thanks to Sasha Moorsom, a producer in the features department who had recorded an introduction to his drama by the author himself; because he spoke almost no English, she ‘translated his French, and got him to repeat it word for word on tape’ (‘D.R.’ 1959). Moorsom’s efforts to bring the theatrical avant-garde to the attention of British listeners complemented those of McWhinnie and Bray, who had become powerful additions to Pinter’s nodal network as well as significant figures in the promotion of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Equally significantly, in 1961, McWhinnie was succeeded as Assistant Head of BBC radio drama by Martin Esslin, who had been with the BBC, mostly in the European Service, since 1940. Esslin worked at first under Bray, by then Head of Radio Drama, and when she moved to Paris in 1963 he took over her post, which he would occupy until 1977 (see Calder 2002 and Birkett 2015: 178). Support for Pinter’s work continued during this period: September 1962 saw the broadcast of the playwright reading his short story *The Examination*; in February and March 1963 nine short sketches written by Pinter were broadcast; and *Tea Party* followed in June (see Esslin 2000: 15 and Billington 2007: 156, 158-9). Of Esslin’s elevation to Head of Radio Drama, Zarhy-Levo writes, ‘One can suggest that Esslin’s change of position […] enhanced his authority as a drama “theorist”’ (Zarhy-Levo 2001: 13), boosting the credibility of his conceptualisation of the Theatre of the Absurd. This is no doubt true, but it might be added that his motivation to promote his ideas had likely been strengthened by his time as part of the proselytising BBC radio drama team. Esslin’s writing of *The Theatre of the Absurd*, in other words, can be seen as a

continuation via different means of Bray and McWhinnie's patronage of Beckett and Pinter. Not only had Pinter profited from the support of three nodal contacts in significant institutional positions, in Esslin's case he benefited from support offered in more than one highly influential capacity.

Capitalising on the connection in theatre as well as radio, Pinter nominated McWhinnie to direct *The Caretaker*, his first major stage success, in 1960 (see Billington 2007: 126).[4] This is one example of the way that, throughout this period, Pinter's work was presented to the public in ways that encouraged associations with the Theatre of the Absurd. Both *The Caretaker* and a 1963 double bill of *The Lover* and *The Dwarfs* were staged at the Arts Theatre which had, as Arnold P. Hinchcliffe observed, 'gained the reputation of being the home of the theatre of the Absurd' due to its earlier productions of Ionesco, Beckett and Genet (Hinchcliffe 1974: 105). Also at the Arts, *A Slight Ache* played as part of a 1961 triple bill, *Three* (see Esslin 2000: 14), which also included a piece by 'South London Ionesco' N.F. Simpson ('Merlin' 1959). In the same month *The Caretaker* received its French premiere with Roger Blin, who had directed the premiere of *En Attendant Godot* and created the role of Pozzo, playing Davies, and Jean Martin, the original Lucky, playing Aston and directing.[5] Such connections, associations and collaborations drew Pinter further into the dense and intricate network of professional contacts through which many of the plays associated with the Theatre of the Absurd were produced and promoted.

One of the most lasting and significant connections in Pinter's professional career, one that certainly could be called a 'deep relationship', provides another substantial link to the Theatre of the Absurd. In 1962, Pinter began his long-term association with Peter Hall who, as Artistic Director of first the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and then the National Theatre (NT), was arguably the most

influential individual in the British theatre during the 1960s and 70s. As director of productions at the Arts between 1955 and 1957, Hall had directed the British premieres of Ionesco's *The Lesson* and Beckett's *Godot*, the latter engagement having had, as Sos Eltis has written, a profound impact on his career (see Eltis 2016: 91-4). Hall had been in Pinter's orbit since at least 1960, having been approached to direct *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*, but having been too busy on each occasion (see Billington 20017: 141). He was also one of several who put up the money for the film of *The Caretaker* (see Esslin 2000: 16).

Hall and Pinter's first collaboration was to co-direct *The Collection* for the RSC in 1962, and in 1963 the playwright told Michael Codron that Hall was 'the director of my dreams' and that he was consequently moving into the subsidised sector (quoted in Billington 2007: 149). Hall soon established himself as the pre-eminent interpreter of Pinter's work, directing the lion's share of Pinter premieres between 1965 and the early 80s, the association no doubt contributing to the increasing perception among peers and critics of the dramatist as an establishment figure. John Bull, for instance, characterised Pinter as the 'Crown Prince' of a 'new mainstream' whose 'initial impetus came from the world of avant-garde Absurdism' but which increasingly reflected 'the conservatism of […] commercial theatre' (Bull 1994: 56). Further to this, Hall integrated Pinter into, first, the wider work of the RSC as a director (see Chambers 2004: 133 and Billington 2007: 156-7) and, later, the management structure of the National Theatre as an Associate Director and formidable boardroom ally, as memorably detailed in fellow NT Associate Michael Blakemore's memoir *Stage Blood* (Blakemore 2014). That both Hall and Pinter gained in authority and influence from the association confirms that nodal connections can be mutually, and highly, beneficial.

One project that demonstrates Pinter's professional links to the Theatre of the Absurd in a unique way is a projected film described by Michael Billington as 'a kind of Cinema of the Absurd' (Billington 2007: 191). This was a portmanteau feature proposed in 1963 by Barney Rosset of New York's Grove Press, the American publishers of Beckett, Ionesco and Pinter; each writer was to contribute a 30-minute screenplay (see Knowlson 1996: 506 and Esslin 2000: 150). Years later Pinter was to recall a memorable pitch by Ionesco to the prospective producers: he saw sheep peacefully grazing on a Welsh hillside – suddenly they were all blown to pieces! The producers, agog, asked what came next, but Ionesco shrugged and replied, 'I don't know what happens afterwards'. As Pinter added, 'the film was never made'.[6] Beckett's contribution was later realised as *Film* starring Buster Keaton; Pinter's became the 1967 BBC television play *The Basement*; and Ionesco's piece *The Hard-Boiled Egg*, which did not include the sequence described above, materialised only as a published scenario.[7] In terms of theatre history, the unrealised project represents the tantalising moment that the three playwrights most strongly associated with the Theatre of the Absurd almost-but-not-quite validated the term through artistic quasi-collaboration although not, admittedly, in the theatre.

Although the film foundered, Pinter and Beckett's joint involvement may have helped to strengthen the ties between them. Beckett's biographer James Knowlson describes their relationship: '[Beckett] met [Pinter] when in London or when Pinter came over to Paris. Pinter used to send him copies of his plays in typescript and Beckett had considerable respect for the English playwright's work' (1996: 654).[8] Beckett sometimes sent notes on Pinter's scripts, suggesting a degree of willingness to act as mentor – no small gift given Beckett's eminence. Though this resulted in few changes to the work itself,[9] Beckett's implied approval might be thought to have

functioned like the royal crest on a jar of jam, an indicator of general approbation carrying great symbolic value. In this respect, Beckett may have been Pinter's most significant 'marquee' contact.

Describing the connections through which Pinter's early career was fostered confirms that there were strong and numerous professional links between Pinter and others associated with the Theatre of the Absurd either as practitioners or advocates. Arguably this group forms a distinct tribe within the UK's theatrical and cultural ecosystem of the late 1950s and early 60s, open to the influence of the continental avant-garde and committed to drama as high art; as Irving Wardle observed, Donald McWhinnie's 'published statements suggest a fastidious distaste for mass entertainment' (Wardle 1968: 14). Alongside these values sat a wariness of the explicitly political, both in terms of the influence of Bertolt Brecht and the imperative towards social realism which followed the success of *Look Back in Anger* (1956). The exchange of views between Kenneth Tynan and Ionesco that took place in the pages of the *Observer* in June and July of 1958 gave explicit, impassioned expression both to these cultural positions and to their fiercely argued opposites, and elicited engagement, over three weeks' worth of comment pieces and expanded letters pages, from cultural luminaries including George Devine, John Berger, Orson Welles, Lindsay Anderson, Keith Johnstone, Ann Jellicoe and N.F. Simpson, not to mention a number of heavily invested members of the public. [10]

Considering the tribal aspects of support for or resistance to the Theatre of the Absurd raises the question of how far the proponents of the different modes of theatre vying for primacy in the late 1950s and early 1960s may also have felt common loyalties in terms of nationality, sexuality, gender or class. The potential influence of such factors is suggested by an exchange with Tynan that Pinter was to

recall in 1997. Some years after the *Observer* critic had joined most of his colleagues in giving *The Birthday Party* a dismissive review (comparing the play unfavourably to the work of N.F. Simpson), the two found themselves sharing convivial drinks after a TV recording. The playwright remembered:

> He said to me, I assure you this is what he said, he said 'You know Harold, I didn't realise you were such a sort of pleasant fellow, I really had no idea', and I said 'Didn't you?' and he said 'If I'd known that I think I would have taken a very different view of *The Birthday Party*'. […] I've been trying to unravel those words ever since. (Quoted in Smith 1997: 73)

This suggests that there may indeed be more to unravel about Tynan's initial hostility to Pinter's work and also, potentially, his feud with Ionesco and mockery of Beckett (see Tynan 1958), but for the moment the exchange offers an intriguing glimpse of the social factors that exert a probably unquantifiable influence on the formation of the artistic networks that in turn shape theatrical history.

Pinter was not, of course, solely dependent on his connections to the Absurd. Even in his earliest days as a dramatist, he had a variety of other professional connections, most notably his relationships with the independent television companies which broadcast five Pinter teleplays between 1960 and 1963. As an ambitious writer with a family to support, the playwright took understandable advantage of whatever connections he could, whether from his expansive network of boyhood friends or from show-business contacts made as an actor. Even when this is taken into account, however, it remains clear that much of his early progress was facilitated by his engagement with a nodal network of influential professionals whose existing connections to other exponents of the Absurd, particularly Beckett, complemented their support of Pinter. As his success grew, he became less dependent on these connections and, for Zarhy-Levo, this is the significance of critics' adoption of the adjective 'Pinteresque' in 1964: 'its usage marks Pinter's

acceptance, because it reflects the reviewers' assumption that hereafter Pinter's plays can be "sold" by a "Pinter" label, detached from the association with Beckett' (Zarhy-Levo 2001: 31). Although the new label connoted many of the same things as 'Theatre of the Absurd' (unsettling atmosphere, poetic dialogue, ambiguity), henceforth the association would become less significant – until suddenly it presented Pinter with a problem.

Leaving the Absurd behind?

Harold Pinter's shift, in the 1980s, into political activism and overtly political playwriting has been much discussed.[11] It surprised many, because prior to this Pinter had repeatedly declined to engage in political debate: for instance, in December 1962, asked by *Encounter* for his thoughts on whether Britain should enter the European Common Market, he had responded, 'I have no interest in the matter and do not care what happens' (quoted in Anon. 1962: 59). As Pinter was well aware, this now left him vulnerable to the damaging charge of inconsistency. His counter to this was to demonstrate that political concerns had been present in his work from the start, specifically in the early plays *The Dumb Waiter* (1957), *The Birthday Party* and the then-obscure *The Hothouse* (1958); it may have been as a way of making this point that Pinter named his 1984 play about state oppression after a line spoken by Goldberg in Act Three of *The Birthday Party*, 'One for the road' (Pinter 1991a: 73).

The assertion of a political purpose behind his early work became a consistent feature of Pinter's interviews from the 1980s on. 'I must repeat', he said in 1995, 'that *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Hothouse* are doing

something which can only be described as political' (quoted in Billington 2007: 286-7). Stage and television productions of all three pieces invited critics and audiences to see this for themselves: Pinter directed the stage premiere of *The Hothouse* in 1980 and high-profile television productions of *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party* were broadcast in 1985 and 1986 respectively. In effect, Pinter was calling for a significant reassessment of plays which had thus far been considered examples of the largely apolitical Theatre of the Absurd. As discussed above, the playwright had not previously discouraged such interpretations in explicit terms but, to make his newly political focus tenable, this policy had to change. When, in 1985, Nick Hern put it to him that 'in 1958 your plays were seen as having no relation to the outside world at all', Pinter replied, 'Absolutely. They were dismissed as absurd rubbish' (quoted in Pinter 185: 10).

Although this is the only instance I've identified of Pinter taking direct issue with the term 'absurd', it forms part of a pattern nonetheless. When Michael Billington, then chief theatre critic of Britain's leading left-wing newspaper *The Guardian*, was chosen to write the authorised biography that would inevitably become the standard work on Pinter – replacing Martin Esslin's 1970 monograph, originally published as *The Peopled Wound* – it conveyed the implicit message that the playwright's work should be understood in relation to politics rather than existentialism. More specifically, because the book operated as a subject-sanctioned corrective to misrepresentations and misconceptions, we might see some significance in its assertion that *The Room* 'could not be further from the cul-de-sac of absurdism which presupposes that we live in an inexplicable universe' (Billington 2007: 92). Following the biography's publication in 1996, Billington became a longstanding advocate of Pinter, participating in and often chairing discussions of his

work well into the twenty-first century, making him a very significant addition to the playwright's nodal network.

Pinter's efforts to update critical perceptions were successful, at least to an extent. It probably helped that the Theatre of the Absurd as a theatrical mode had quite quickly fallen out of fashion in the UK,[12] and it certainly helped that Pinter's claims for the political resonance of his early drama came gradually to be accepted.[13] Most important of all was the fact that the critical and commercial success of his work had over time allowed Pinter's reputation to float free from the construct with which he had initially been associated – in which respect, as in so many others, his career had followed the path taken by Beckett's. However, as Pinter had learned from the seeming immortality of an ill-judged phrase about 'the weasel under the cocktail cabinet' (quoted in Taylor 1963: 285), once an idea is at large in cultural discourse it is very hard to eradicate it altogether.[14]

This has been made clear by the gradual revival of the fortunes of the Theatre of the Absurd in the twenty-first century. For one thing, a fresh wave of scholarship on the subject has included consideration of Pinter as part of the package.[15] For another, the recovery of the Absurd as a component of the theatrical repertoire, slowly building since Complicite's 1997 revival of Ionesco's *The Chairs* and continuing in such productions as the 2018 revival of the same playwright's *Exit the King* at the NT, has made Pinter's association with the genre both a selling point and a talking point once more. This is demonstrated by the fact that the promotional material for a 2018 production of *The Birthday Party* at the Harold Pinter Theatre referred to it as 'Pinter's landmark play about the absurd terrors of the everyday',[16] and by the headline of the review in the *Sunday Times*, which was 'Absurdly brilliant' (Hart 2018). As an emerging writer Pinter had acquiesced in the association between

his work and the Theatre of the Absurd, an association which helped him gain the initial acceptance that was a precondition of his later eminence; the price appears to have been a seemingly ineradicable association with a theatrical mode that, as generally understood, only partially reflects his artistic aims.

Conclusion

The tenacity of Harold Pinter's association with the Theatre of the Absurd can partly be ascribed to the attractiveness of cultural shorthand, not least to journalists and marketing copy-writers, but my argument in this chapter is that it also persists for a more fundamental reason. The dense network of nodal connections that links Pinter to numerous reviewers, producers, directors, actors, scholars, publishers and fellow playwrights, all in their different ways engaged in creating, producing and promoting an identifiable strand of post-war theatre, provides compelling reason to consider his early work as part of a larger cultural project that it makes sense to call the Theatre of the Absurd. The powerful and extensive network whose efforts made such a decisive contribution to Pinter's early success worked to create space in British theatre and culture for a mode of avant-garde, formally experimental drama which was to prove surprisingly assimilable into the British theatrical mainstream. Granting the existence of the Theatre of the Absurd as a network opens the way to seeing the plays and performances for which it was responsible as a body of work available for consideration as a whole – while being mindful of the need to avoid reductive or totalizing interpretations of the kind that for so long veiled Pinter's political concerns – and to appreciating that its characteristics were determined as much by the cultural

conditions in which it was brought into being as by the historical moment in which it appeared.

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[1] As Catherine Rees writes, the 'classification of Pinter as an Absurdist remains […] highly contentious', with some critics arguing that 'any such classification is an artificial and reductive way to discuss theatre' (Catherine Rees, 'Pinter the Absurdist' in Wyllie and Rees 2017: 25).
[2] In the introduction to their recent book *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd*, Carl Lavery and Clare Finburgh list seven terms that have been suggested by critics as improvements on Esslin's - see Lavery and Finburgh 2017: 2.
[3] For an alternative, but complementary account of Pinter's early career and its points of intersection with Beckett, see Jonathan Bignell's '"Random Dottiness": Samuel Beckett and the Reception of Harold Pinter's Early Dramas' (Bignell 2020).
[4] Beckett also favoured McWhinnie as a director, insisting he direct *Eh Joe* for the BBC in 1966 (see Birkett 2015: 188).
[5] Despite this impressive pedigree, the production received poor reviews and flopped. See Esslin 2000: 14, Billington 2007: 130 and http://www.haroldpinter.org/plays/frn_caretaker_fr61.shtml (accessed 11 May 2019).
[6] Pinter told this story at the Barbican in London on October the 9th, 2002, where he was appearing in conversation with Michael Billington prior to a screening of *The Caretaker*.
[7] 'The Hard-Boiled Egg' appears in Ionesco 1976: 97-114.
[8] For a detailed look at the relationship between Pinter and Beckett, see David Tucker's piece, '"That first last look in the shadows": Beckett's Legacies for Harold Pinter' (Tucker 2016).
[9] For one example of Beckett's comments on Pinter's work in typescript and their impact on the play as eventually performed, see Gussow 1994: 28-9.
[10] For a summary, see Esslin 2001: 128-33. Letters on the topic were published in the *Observer* of July 6, 1958 ('Ionesco v. Tynan'), p. 19; July 13, 1958 ('The Ionesco-Tynan Controversy'), p. 14; and July 20th, 1958 ('The Ionesco Controversy: Some Readers' Views'), p. 15.
[11] For instance, in Basil Chiasson's 2017 book, *The Late Harold Pinter*: *Political Dramatist, Poet and Activist* (Chiasson 2017).
[12] In the second edition of his book, published in 1968, Esslin asked if the Theatre of the Absurd had 'become no more than yesterday's fashion', concluding that 'in so far as it was a fashion, this is certainly so' (Esslin 2001: 430).

[13] As acknowledged, for instance, by Chiasson, who writes of Pinter's 'earlier dramas which are taken to be political in the metaphorical sense, for example *The Birthday Party* and *The Dumb Waiter*.' (Chiasson 2017: 41)
[14] According to Taylor, Pinter used the phrase as part of an 'exchange at a new writers' brains trust' (Taylor 1963: 285). Pinter described the remark as a 'great mistake' in a speech given in 1970 (Pinter 1991b: vi).
[15] For instance, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd* includes the chapter ''The Pinteresque Oedipal Household: The Interrogation Scene(s) in *The Birthday Party*' (Bennett 2013: 53-69) and *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd* includes 'The Secluded Voice: The Impossible Call Home in Early Pinter' by Mark Taylor-Batty and Carl Lavery (Lavery and Finburgh 2015: 219-239).
[16] As advertised at http://www.thebirthdayparty.london/, accessed 6 March 2018.