

Pinter and style by **Harry Derbyshire**

Harold Pinter's style is both impressive and contagious, and the dramatists who have emerged in his wake have often wrestled to free themselves from his influence, just as he himself has been periodically accused of self-parody. What was at first taken to be hyper-realistic or 'tape-recorder' dialogue, capturing the manifold hesitations, inaccuracies and repetitions of everyday speech, has become an ever-more recognisable mode of writing which maximises the allusive power of language while, often, denuding it of literal meaning. Pinter's particular way with words is exemplified by his early revue sketches, as much exercises in style as studies in character, arguably the best of them being 'Last to Go'. The sketch treats its audiences to a desultory conversation between the barman of an all-night coffee stall and his only customer, a newspaper seller who has recently packed up for the night. Their subject is which newspaper was the last to be sold:

Man Yes, it was the 'Evening News' that was the last to go tonight.

Barman Not always the last though, is it, though?

Man No. Oh no. I mean sometimes it's the 'News'. Other times it's one of the others.
No way of telling beforehand. Until you've got your last one left, of course.
Then you can tell which one it's going to be.

Barman Yes.

Pause.

Man Oh yes.[i]

The pointlessness of the conversation is the point of the drama: the need for human contact, rather than any looked-for practical outcome, is what is driving the dialogue. The precision of Pinter's writing allows us to hear the workings of the newspaper seller's mind as he searches for ways to stretch the discussion out; the inanity of what he finds to say might prompt derision or incredulity, but equally it may remind us of some of our own less well-chosen utterances. On a technical level, the rhythms of real speech are well captured, but it is the way those rhythms convey an emotional subtext that gives this mode of dialogue such artistic potential.

The elements of the Pinter style have been repeatedly catalogued. Kenneth Tynan was one of the earliest critics to attempt a definition of what he called the playwright's 'new small talk' in a review of *The Dumb Waiter*:

Its distinguishing features can be easily listed. First, the aimlessly iterated phrases: what I tell you three times is art. Next the sudden use of an outlandish word in a sentence otherwise drab and demotic... And thirdly, a calculated gulf between the dramatic situation – usually one of undefined threat – and the language, numb and inexpressive, in which the characters respond to it.[ii]

Tynan's description may have been somewhat reductive, but the traits he identified were nonetheless to be an intermittent feature of Pinter's work for more than forty years, augmented, following the abolition of stage censorship, by what Ian Herbert has called 'that trick of dropping a crashing obscenity into a genteel stretch of dialogue'.[iii]

There have been other, more concise characterisations: *Bluff Your Way in Theatre* defines 'Pinteresque' as referring to 'scanty monosyllabic dialogue with pauses you could drive a train through'[iv], and of course the 'Pinter pause' is the most widely remarked element of his style. This has been so much the case – despite its inventor turning on his creation and describing it as 'the curse of my life' [v] and 'a bloody pain in the arse'[vi] – that the pause has sometimes been presented as the only essential element of Pinter's drama: in a 1985 sketch Victoria Wood has a director say to an actor who is misremembering her lines in *Hamlet*, 'You see, this is our marvellous bard, Barbara, you cannot paraphrase. It's not like Pinter where you can more or less say what you like as long as you leave enough gaps'.[vii]

Pinter's dialogue has been widely admired and, of course, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. As early as 1961, Tynan was remarking on a 'flock of Pinter mimics – or *Pinteretti*, as I sometimes think of them', although he also noted that these same writers 'have made no impact at all in the theatre'[viii]. Owing, as he does, a lot to Beckett, Pinter himself has never been so ungracious as to object to familiar linguistic constructions when he hears them in the plays of others. Indeed, he has responded favourably to David Mamet, probably the most eminent playwright to show the influence of Pinter, directing the 1993 UK premiere of Mamet's *Oleanna*. A brief illustration should establish the connection. Pinter's best known play *The Caretaker* ends with the following speech:

Listen... if I... got down... if I was to... get my papers... would you... would you let... would you... if I got down... and got my....

Long silence.[ix]

Whereas Mamet's best known play *Glengarry Glen Ross* (dedicated, incidentally, to Pinter) opens with:

John... John... John. Okay. John. John. Look: (*Pause*) The Glengarry Highland's leads, you're sending Roma out. Fine.[x]

What both writers understand is the way we use words less to communicate information than to jockey for position, whether successfully or otherwise: both of these characters are failing to convince, and their recognition that this is so is signalled in both cases by interruption or cessation. However, where the speech of Davies in *The Caretaker* trails away in defeat, evoking a bleak and existential sense of hopelessness, Levene in *Glengarry* recovers and pushes forward, propelled by coffee and masculinity. Mamet's dialogue is Pinter supercharged.

The enduring influence of Pinter's style in the twenty-first century was detected in 2006 in both Mark Ravenhill's *The Cut* and Jez Butterworth's *The Winterling*. In the latter, a character says of

a plucked duck:

It's a juicy piece that. I know a recipe. If you were peckish, I could cook it here. I'm a good cook, me. I've cooked all over. I once cooked for fifty-six turf accountants.[xi]

There is an acknowledged connection here, too, in that Butterworth cast Pinter as a predatory gangster in the film of his 1996 play *Mojo*, but in this case there are doubts as to just how benign the influence is. As seasoned Pinter-watcher Michael Billington commented, 'the biggest influence [on *The Winterling*] is that of Pinter, whose distinctive voice is currently reverberating through British drama... after seeing this and *The Cut*, I'm concerned that too many writers are imitating the master's voice rather than discovering their own'.[xii]

Such a distinctive style, of course, is easy to replicate, and Pinter has been parodied as well as emulated. Tynan, again, was among the first to do this, showing off to his readers with a seasonal pastiche:

You don't want to come the idiomatic over me, if that's what you think you're doing. I've bought and sold better men than you with one hand held behind my back, any day of the week, right, left and centre, until it's coming out of my ears.[xiii]

Bill Greenwell does rather better in his attempt to re-tell the story of Paddington Bear in the Pinter style:

He comes here, label round his neck, big label, says he's got an Aunt Lucy, what about Aunt Lucy, then? Come on, where's this Aunt Lucy? She was a goer, I can tell.
(Pause)[xiv]

Some parodists are content to hit the broadest of targets; N.J. Warburton, contributing a shortened version of *The Caretaker* to the book *How to Become Ridiculously Well-Read in One Evening*, gives his readers the impression that the play is one long, occasionally interrupted pause.[xv] More imaginatively, in his 'Pinter in Belgravia' Colin O'Brien puts Pinter himself in the role of the interloper Davies, interrogated by his own suspicious butler: what is this unshaven Jew from Hackney doing in a palatial house in London's smartest area? [xvi] Reflecting on the journey he has taken from his working class roots to his present wealth and eminence, Pinter may find himself asking the same question. More recently, Craig Brown has enjoyed himself exaggerating the use Pinter now makes of scatological language, coining the memorable accusation 'you're the shittiest shit who ever shat shit'[xvii].

A more serious matter is an accusation that has been made of Pinter himself at various points in his career, that of inadvertent self-parody. Style is something by which a writer can sometimes be carried away, and this is a particular danger where there may be a deficit in some other aspect of the work from which a stylistic flourish might distract. Pinter has acknowledged as much, distancing himself from an early TV play, *Night School*, because in his view it was 'too mechanically "Pinteresque"'. [xviii] Certainly the play contains exchanges that show Pinter's dexterity with language running away with itself:

Solto I killed a man with my bare hands, a six-foot-ten Lascar from Madagascar.

Annie From Madagascar?

Solto Sure. A Lascar.

Annie Alaska?

Solto Madagascar.[xix]

Night School is a minor work; a more controversial piece is the 1993 stage play *Moonlight*. Though welcomed by many critics as a return to vintage form following Pinter's short, blunt political dramas of the 1980s, several others levelled the charge of self parody, the most vociferous of them Martin Hoyle of the *Mail on Sunday* who wrote that the play:

emerges as a collection of Pinterisms to order. Evasive gentility, shock four-letter words, mysterious codified exchanges, private games... For the first time, the mechanics show; you can see him joining the dots.[xx]

Pinter scholars, keen to fall upon *Moonlight* as fresh material for academic exploration, brushed aside these criticisms; Ronald Knowles, for instance, wrote that 'the distinction between complex realms of experience constantly re-examined in plays, and the empty mannerism of repetition, is evidently a problematic one for several critics of Pinter'.[xxi] The fact that *Moonlight* has yet to be professionally revived in the UK, however, might be thought to tell its own story.

If *Moonlight* is mannered, recent years have also seen some late flowerings of the Pinter style. In *Ashes to Ashes* (1996), a characteristic exchange about the innocence or otherwise of a pencil provided a chilling, if oblique, perspective on the Holocaust; in *Celebration* (2000), Pinter used his powers of dialogue to expose the failings of *nouveau-riche* types who annoy him in restaurants to surprisingly bracing effect. In *Press Conference* (2003) Pinter once more used his ability to turn a particular kind of phrase to make a political point. Here the Minister for Culture in an unnamed dictatorship is asked:

Press As the head of the Secret Police what was your policy towards children?

Minister We saw children as a threat if – that is – they were the children of subversive families.[xxii]

Unspectacular on the page, in performance the line acquired a highly effective comic dynamic through the deployment of the shortest of pauses following the word 'threat'. The actor who so shrewdly brought out the line's latent absurdity? Pinter himself.

Pinter's style, then, has been anatomised, imitated and parodied. His achievement is to give vivid theatrical expression to the idea that 'under what is said, another thing is being said', and the notion that that speech is 'a constant stratagem to cover nakedness'.[xxiii] As has been shown by imitators and parodists, and in some of the playwright's own, less distinguished work, the Pinter style is at its most effective when it expresses and allows insight into recognisable human behaviour and emotions; where the language is used purely for effect it loses its dramatic charge and becomes playful at best, self-indulgent at worst. The paradox is that the supremely successful Pinter style only works when it is used to express genuine insight; where a master of eloquence such as Oscar Wilde could say very little to great effect, Harold Pinter has to have something to

articulate if his characters are, in their uniquely inarticulate way, to speak to us.

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- [i] 'Last to Go', in Harold Pinter, *Plays: Two* (London: Faber, 1991), p. 236.
 - [ii] Kenneth Tynan, *A View of the English Stage* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 312.
 - [iii] 'Prompt Corner', *Theatre Record*, vol. XVI, no. 19, 9-22 Sep 1996, p. 1146.
 - [iv] Fidelis Morgan, *Bluff Your Way in Theatre, Bluffers' Guides* (London: Ravette, 1986), p. 51.
 - [v] Pinter, speaking at the National Film Theatre, 25th October 1996.
 - [vi] Quoted in Sue Summers, 'Breaking the Silence', *London Daily News*, 19th June 1987, p. 19.
 - [vii] Victoria Wood, *Up to You, Porky* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 91.
 - [viii] Tynan, p. 319.
 - [ix] *The Caretaker*, in Harold Pinter, *Plays: Two* (London: Faber, 1991), p. 76.
 - [x] David Mamet, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 3.
 - [xi] Jez Butterworth, *The Winterling* (London: Nick Hern, 2006), p. 9.
 - [xii] Michael Billington, review of *The Winterling*, *Guardian*, 10th March 2006.
 - [xiii] Tynan, p. 308.
 - [xiv] Bill Greenwell, 'A Bear Called Paddington in E.O. Parrott (ed.), *Imitations of Immortality: A Book of Literary Parodies* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 320.
 - [xv] See E.O. Parrott (ed.), *How to Become Ridiculously Well-Read in One Evening: A Collection of Literary Encapsulations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 123-5.
 - [xvi] See Simon Brett (ed.), *The Faber Book of Parodies* (London: Faber, 1984), pp. 270-1.
 - [xvii] As heard on the CD *40 Glorious Minutes* given away with the 40th anniversary edition of *Private Eye* in 2001.
 - [xviii] As we are reliably informed by Michael Billington in Harold Pinter, 2nd edn (London: Faber, 2007), p. 135.
 - [xix] *Night School* in Harold Pinter, *Plays: Two* (London: Faber, 1991), p. 200.
 - [xx] Martin Hoyle, review of *Moonlight*, *Mail on Sunday*, 12th September 1993.
 - [xxi] Ronald Knowles, 'From London: Harold Pinter 1996-1997 and 1997-1998', in *The Pinter Review: Annual Essays 1997-98* (Tampa: University of Tampa Press, 1999), p. 172.
 - [xxii] Harold Pinter, *Press Conference* (London: Faber, 2003), pp. 9-10.
 - [xxiii] Pinter, 'Writing for the Theatre', in Pinter: *Plays One* (London: Faber, 1991), pp. xii-xiii.