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

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Introduction

Harold Pinter is usually considered to have quickly transcended the context in which his plays first gained widespread recognition, that of the Theatre of the Absurd. As in the case of Samuel Beckett, Pinter's early identification as an 'Absurdist' is seen as no more than a critical label, never especially helpful and soon outgrown.[1] In part this reflects the many disputes about the nature, value, and even the existence of the Theatre of the Absurd that have taken place since the first publication of Martin Esslin's highly influential book of that title in 1961.[2] These disputes reflect real critical difficulties and, for those who grant its existence, one of these lies in deciding what status to accord the Theatre of the Absurd: that of a movement, a genre, a convention, a trend, a phenomenon? Or are only sceptical terms, such as label or critical construct, fully defensible? In this chapter I suggest that one objectively verifiable manifestation of the Theatre of the Absurd in the late 1950s and early 1960s was as a professional network which greatly aided Pinter's early writing career. Considering it as such is intended to shine a new light on both Pinter's early progress and his career-long negotiations with the critical perceptions that initially defined him; it also looks forward to further work that may be done to repurpose 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'.[3] 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.'[4]

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'.[5] 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'. [6] 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 that came about via an expansive network led to a sustained and successful career supported through a nodal network which came to include highly influential critics and practitioners such as Harold Hobson, Donald McWhinnie, Barbara Bray, Martin Esslin, Peter Hall and Samuel Beckett.

What I will highlight in this chapter is how far Pinter, in making these crucial nodal connections, was joining a pre-existing network of like-minded professionals already engaged in producing and promoting a particular kind of theatre, one with which his work shared identifiable affinities. As Bibby notes, a node is 'the point in a system or network where different paths intersect or branch out', [7] and one way to think about Pinter in these early years might be as a significant node in the extensive network of artists and advocates whose collective efforts would come to be designated (at least by some) Theatre of the Absurd.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first works through more fully what is involved in viewing the Theatre of the Absurd as a network, and why it might make sense to consider Pinter a part of it. The second looks in detail at Pinter's early career, identifying significant opportunities that connected him to strands of the Theatre of the Absurd and considering how each 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, and what might be inferred from the persistence of the association in the twenty first century.

1. The Theatre of the Absurd as network

As is well known, 'The Theatre of the Absurd' is a term which has been used from the 1950s on to refer to a style of drama pioneered by Samuel Beckett, Eugène

Ionesco and others. Plays considered ‘Absurd’ are generally non-naturalistic; may dispense with plot and/or conventional characterisation; may be comic or tragi-comic in tone; and may express or respond to the existentialist proposition that life in a godless universe lacks inherent meaning. Martin Esslin is often credited with coining the phrase ‘Theatre of the Absurd’, though the term pre-exists his book and the ideas he associates with the plays he discusses had been growing in currency since the Parisian debut of *En Attendant Godot* in 1953.[8] In the British theatre of the late 1950s, the plays of the Absurd were an important strand of emerging drama, competing for attention with the growing influence of Brecht and the surge of ‘social realism’ that followed John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*. [9]

In his book, Esslin emphasizes that ‘the dramatists whose work is here discussed do not form part of any self-proclaimed or self-conscious school or movement’.[10] Pressing home his point, he adds:

> 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.[11]

Though it is hard to imagine the authors describing themselves in quite these terms, there is truth in this, but only up to a point. It is clearly problematic to regard those involved in the Theatre of the Absurd, Pinter included, as ‘lone outsider[s], cut off and isolated in [their] private world[s]’ when each was involved in making theatre, a collaborative enterprise necessitating the help of numerous facilitators and practitioners. Almost as significantly, in the wider field of culture each received support 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 discrete one-person cottage industries.

Characterizing it as a network allows the Theatre of the Absurd to be seen as a collective endeavour, at least to the extent that the realisation and acceptance of the various artworks associated with it came about through numerous instances of encouragement, collaboration, patronage and advocacy. The aim was usually to advance the work of individual playwrights rather than to promote a movement, but even so the affinities and connections that can be traced during the ascendance of the Theatre of the Absurd suggest a degree of common cause that I believe should

not be discounted. In this chapter, Pinter's early career serves as a case study in support of this suggestion.

From the beginning Pinter's work was associated with that of other 'Absurdist' writers, though this was not always presented as a positive thing.[12] One of the famously dismissive reviews of *The Birthday Party* (1958) describes the play as coming from 'the school of random dottiness deriving from Beckett and Ionesco'[13] – and even critics of the label Theatre of the Absurd would surely concede its superiority to 'the school of random dottiness'. One very clear reason that this connection was made is the fact that Beckett was indeed an influence on Pinter, and an enduring one as the latter was happy to acknowledge. Speaking in 1961 Pinter described Beckett as 'a writer I admire very much' and said that 'if Beckett's influence shows in my work that's all right with me'.[14] That he was influenced by Ionesco, however, he denied, saying that he had only seen one of his plays, *The New Tenant*.[15] Nonetheless, Pinter's work was included in the first edition of Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* in 1961, the playwright appearing as one of many 'parallels and proselytes'; by the third edition in 1980 he had been given his own chapter, signifying elevation to the status of a major Absurdist alongside Beckett, Ionesco, Arthur Adamov and Jean Genet.

Critics have tended to focus on the way that categorising Pinter's work as Theatre of the Absurd foreclosed and circumscribed interpretation, which it certainly did, but its most immediate effect was as a means of promotion. In her book *The Theatrical Critic as Cultural Agent: Constructing Pinter, Orton and Stoppard as Absurdist Playwrights,* Yael Zarhy-Levo has shown how the categorisation of Pinter's work as absurd contributed towards his acceptance by theatre 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.[16]

As Zarhy-Levo shows, perceiving Pinter's work as affiliated to the Absurd allowed critics to find ways to appreciate its avant garde qualities, so that 'his "puzzling" style [was] evaluated anew and perceived as the attractive feature of his drama'.[17] As she also shows, the perceived affiliation facilitated Pinter's presentation as a British representative of an established continental trend. In both these ways, being linked to the Absurd was a good thing for Pinter the aspiring playwright.

This does not mean, of course, that he liked it. Artists frequently resist categorisation and Pinter repeatedly expressed a general 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.[18]

At the same time, Pinter did not explicitly refuse the 'Absurd' label. In 1960, for instance, he was willing to speak of absurdity in relation to his work, saying in a 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'.[19] Pinter's willingness to use this language might be thought surprising given his later feelings about the reception of his early work, discussed below, but can be accounted for in more than one way. First, as Zarhy-Levo has shown, association with the Absurd had contributed to the acceptance of his work by the critical establishment, so distancing himself from it might have been self-defeating; second, insisting his work should not be thought of as Absurd might also have seemed rather proscriptive from a playwright who preferred not to elaborate on what he had written;[20] third, the idea of the Theatre of the Absurd may have been something to which Pinter felt bound at the level of courtesy through his relationships with numerous colleagues and supporters who were themselves associated with it. While these suggestions, especially the last, are speculative, they are consistent with the picture that emerges from an examination of the professional connections which helped Pinter as an aspiring playwright.

2. Pinter's early connections

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 studying 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, and one which linked him to one of the major writers considered part of the Theatre of the Absurd. A second production of *The Room*, mounted in December 1957, was entered into a student drama competition, and brought Pinter to the attention of Harold Hobson, drama critic of the *Sunday Times*, who was one of the judges. Among Hobson's distinctions was to have been one of only two London reviewers to recognise the importance of *Waiting for Godot*, and he was also quick to spot Pinter's talent. Hobson wrote about *The Room* in his column, bringing Pinter to the attention of West End producer Michael Codron. Codron's production of *The Birthday Party* reached London in May 1958, and though famously panned by some critics, it was equally famously championed by Hobson, who declared himself 'willing to risk whatever reputation I have as a judge of plays'.[21]

Hobson's defence of *The Birthday Party* was in effect a reprise of his outspoken support for *Godot*. In his 1984 book *Theatre in Britain* Hobson does not underplay his influence on critical discourse in relation to Beckett:

> 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.[22]

Hobson evidently relished his role as almost uniquely perceptive evaluator of new and challenging drama and seems to have been more than happy to re-occupy centre stage in defence of Pinter in 1958. 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 surely discouraging for Pinter, but he was offered hope by the BBC, whose radio drama department also had established links to Beckett. At that time the department was staffed by a mixture of traditionalists and progressives, among the latter being producer Donald McWhinnie,

Assistant Head of the Department, and Barbara Bray, Script Editor for Sound Drama. Both had actively supported and promoted Beckett, whose work for the BBC includes *All That Fall* (1957) and *Embers* (1959). 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. [23]

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, which was eventually accepted for broadcasting. [24] This was *A Slight Ache*, which went out in July 1959. It was followed by *A Night Out* in March 1960[25] and *The Dwarfs* in December 1960; as Billington comments, 'at this stage, BBC Radio and commercial television were Pinter's greatest champions.'[26] Moreover, at the BBC Pinter's work was promoted by the same individuals who had earlier made it their mission, as Jennifer Birkett describes it, 'to get Beckett's work before audiences, to explain it, and […] to educate the public ear'. [27] McWhinnie and Bray had become effective additions to Pinter's nodal network, and provided a further link between himself and Beckett.

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, who had been promoted to Head of BBC Radio Drama, and when she moved to Paris in 1963 he took over her post, which he would occupy until 1977.[28] Support for Pinter's work continued during this period, though it became less and less crucial to the playwright, now an established success. September of 1962 saw the broadcast of Pinter 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.[29] Of Esslin's BBC promotion, Zarhy-Levo writes that, 'One can suggest that Esslin's change of position […] enhanced his authority as a drama "theorist"'[30] which is assuredly true; it might equally be thought that Esslin's work in BBC radio drama reinforced his determination as well as his ability to support and promote Pinter and other under-appreciated dramatists. Esslin's writing of *The Theatre of the Absurd*, in other words, can be seen as the continuation via different means of Bray and McWhinnie's

patronage of Beckett and Pinter. In professional terms, Pinter had certainly been fortunate to gain the support of all three nodal contacts in their highly influential institutional positions.

That such connections might be helpful in the theatre as well as on radio and in publishing is shown by the fact that it was Donald McWhinnie who, at Pinter's request, directed the premiere production of *The Caretaker*, Pinter's first major stage success, in 1960.[31] Pinter's work was also presented to the public in other ways that encouraged associations with perceived exponents of the Theatre of the Absurd: in 1961 *A Slight Ache* was first seen on stage as part of a triple bill, imaginatively titled *Three*, which also included work by 'South London Ionesco' N.F. Simpson.[32] 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. Interestingly, despite this pedigree, the Paris production was the only one of the various international premieres of *The Caretaker* not to do very well.[33]

One of the most lasting and significant connections in Pinter's professional career can also be seen to relate strongly to his apparent affiliation 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, was arguably the most influential individual in the British theatre during the 1960s and 70s. Hall had directed the first British productions of Ionesco's *The Lesson* and Beckett's *Godot*, the latter having had, as Sos Eltis has written, a profound impact on his career.[34] 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.[35] He was also one of those who helped put up the money for the film of *The Caretaker*.[36]

Hall and Pinter's first collaboration was to co-direct *The Collection* for the RSC in 1962, and in 1963 the playwright told his West End producer Michael Codron that Hall was 'the director of my dreams' and that he was consequently moving into the subsidised sector.[37] Hall soon established himself as the pre-eminent director of Pinter, directing the lion's share of Pinter premieres between 1965 and the early 80s. He would also integrate the playwright into the wider work of the RSC as a director[38] and then the management structure of the National Theatre as an Associate Director

and formidable boardroom ally.[39] That both Hall and Pinter gained from the association confirms that nodal connections can be mutually beneficial.

One further project that demonstrates Pinter's professional links to the Theatre of the Absurd is a projected film described by Michael Billington as 'a kind of Cinema of the Absurd'.[40] 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.[41] Years later Pinter was to recall a memorable pitch by Ionesco to the producers: he saw a Welsh hillside, covered with peacefully grazing sheep – suddenly they were all blown to pieces! The producers, agog, asked what came next. 'I don't know what happens afterwards', Ionesco said. As Pinter added, 'the film was never made'.[42] 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.[43] 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 project did not come to fruition, Pinter and Beckett's joint involvement may have helped to strengthen the ties between the two writers, who were developing a lasting friendship. James Knowlson describes this 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.[44]

That Beckett sometimes offered comments on Pinter's work suggests a degree of willingness to act as a mentor, no small gift given Beckett's eminence. In practice, this resulted in few changes to the work itself,[45] but Beckett's implied approval might be thought to have functioned like the royal crest on a jar of jam, as an indicator of general approbation that carried great symbolic value.

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. He had, it should be clearly acknowledged, other professional connections too, notably (as indicated by Billington above) with the independent television companies which broadcast five Pinter teleplays between 1960 and 1963. As an ambitious writer with a wife and child to support, Pinter was understandably keen to take advantage of whatever connections he could, whether from his expansive network of boyhood friends or from a nodal network of influential professionals, many of whose existing connections to or advocacy of other perceived exponents of the Absurd, particularly Beckett, complemented their support of Pinter. As this account has indicated, with the help of this highly effective professional network Pinter's career as a playwright soon took off. The moment that he truly arrived is often fixed as the coining (in 1964) of a new critical term, 'Pinteresque' – though, as more than one scholar has noted, this label connotes many of the same things as 'Theatre of the Absurd'. [46] It was not until some years later that his early association with the Theatre of the Absurd was to present Pinter with a problem.

3. Leaving the Absurd behind

As has been shown, Pinter's establishment as a successful playwright had been significantly facilitated by his connections with influential practitioners and commentators associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. Furthermore, though Pinter had never been an admirer of critical labels or, indeed, criticism in general, he had not disavowed the connection; to do so, apart from anything else, would have been discourteous to Martin Esslin, who had supported him both as a critic and as Head of BBC Radio Drama, and who was also the first to publish a monograph on Pinter, *The Peopled Wound* in 1970.[47] However, the playwright's neutral stance was to change at a very particular point in his career and for a very particular reason.

Pinter's 1980s shift into political activism and overtly political playwriting has been much discussed.[48] It surprised many, not only because his earlier work had rarely been considered from a political angle, but because Pinter had repeatedly refused to engage in political debate: for instance, in the 1970s, asked for his opinion on whether Britain should enter the European Common Market, he had replied, 'I have no interest in the matter and do not care what happens'.[49] As he was well aware, this previous policy now left him vulnerable to the suggestion, highly damaging to his credibility, that his new position was not grounded on fixed or lasting

principles. Pinter's counter to this was to demonstrate that the political concerns he was now expressing had been present in his work from the start, specifically in *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party* and the then-obscure *Hothouse*. It may have been as a way of making this point that Pinter named *One for the Road*, his 1984 play about state oppression and torture, after a line spoken by Goldberg in Act Three of *The Birthday Party.*[50] The problem was that this early work had mainly been considered in relation to its perceived association with the Theatre of the Absurd: these plays were believed to be about the futility of existence in a godless universe and man's primal fear of leaving the womb, not the operation of oppressive power. To make his revised position tenable, Pinter needed to change that belief.

The assertion of a political purpose behind his early work was therefore a repeated feature of Pinter's interviews from the 1980s on. 'I must repeat', he said to Michael Billington in in 1995, 'that *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Hothouse* are doing something which can only be described as political'. [51] Stage and television productions of all three pieces invited critics and audiences to acknowledge this as true.[52] However, a response was soon required to an obvious question: if these plays were so obviously political, then why had that not been apparent all along? The answer, soon supplied, was that the plays' political import had been veiled due to their misidentification as examples of the Theatre of the Absurd. Interviewing Pinter 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', to which the playwright replied, 'Absolutely. They were dismissed as absurd rubbish.' [53]

This is the only instance I've identified of Pinter taking direct issue with the term 'absurd', but it forms part of a pattern nonetheless. If we accept, for instance, that Billington's 1996 biography *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter*[54] operates as a subject-sanctioned corrective to what Pinter considered misrepresentations and misconceptions, then we might see some significance in Billington's assertion that *The Room* 'could not be further from the cul-de-sac of absurdism which presupposes that we live in an inexplicable universe'. [55] Even the choice of Billington, chief theatre critic of Britain's leading left wing newspaper the *Guardian*, as appointed author, conveyed the implicit message that Pinter wanted his work to be understood in relation to politics rather than existential philosophy.

From the early 80s, then, Pinter seems to have been looking to disassociate his work from the Theatre of the Absurd. It may be coincidental that it was at around

the same time that Pinter's creative partnership with Peter Hall came to an end, at least temporarily;[56] it is probably less so that Pinter started to look beyond Martin Esslin for sympathetic representation: although Esslin's monograph continued to be revised and updated up to 2000, his enthusiasm for Pinter's new work had noticeably waned[57] and Billington's authorised biography with all of its exclusive new information arguably became the definitive work on Pinter on its publication in 1996.

Pinter's efforts to move critical perceptions on were successful, at least to an extent. It probably helped that the Theatre of the Absurd as a theatrical mode was by this time thoroughly unfashionable,[58] and it certainly helped that Pinter's claims for the political resonance of his early drama came gradually to be accepted.[59] Most important of all was the fact that the longstanding and continuing 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',[60] once an idea is at large in cultural discourse it is very hard to eradicate it altogether.

In the 21st century the Theatre of the Absurd is enjoying an unexpected but sustained resurgence that has been slowly building since Complicite's touring revival of Ionesco's *The Chairs* in 1997. Perhaps not un-coincidentally, a star-studded production of *The Birthday Party* was mounted in January 2018 at the Harold Pinter Theatre in London's West End. The promotional material referred to it as 'Pinter's landmark play about the absurd terrors of the everyday'[61] and the headline of the review in the *Sunday Times* was 'Absurdly brilliant'.[62] Hopefully Pinter would have seen the funny side of this, or at least appreciated the commercial boost presumably provided, though in a darker mood he might have suspected the theatre industry of colluding with the critical establishment to neuter the play's political attack. What is certain is that Pinter, like Michael Corleone in *The Godfather Part Three*, was not fully able to separate himself from the grouping within which he had gained his initial success.

Conclusion

The deep-rooted tenacity of Pinter's association with the Theatre of the Absurd might have proved frustrating for the playwright, and can at least partly be ascribed to laziness on the part of journalists and marketing copy-writers. It might also, however, be accounted for in relation to the dense network of nodal connections that binds Pinter to other significant figures also considered part of the Theatre of the Absurd, a network which provides at least some tangible basis for the continuing association. It is for a future study to provide a comprehensive analysis of the characteristics and status of the Theatre of the Absurd as it has persisted in British theatre and culture more widely, but what this chapter has shown is that it has at least one kind of objectively verifiable existence – not as a self-conscious or coherent artistic movement or genre, but as a professional network operative in the late 1950s and early 1960s through which a particular strand of experimental theatre making was fostered, and from which Pinter's early career received a number of benefits. Considering the Theatre of the Absurd as a network focuses attention on the sustained and collective human activity that brought a number of significant plays to the public and cemented the careers of their talented authors, the value of the term lying in its on-going capacity to identify something important that happened in the late twentieth century British theatre.

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[1] For Yael Zarhy-Levo, Pinter's acceptance as an artist in his own right is signalled by 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.' (Yael Zarhy-Levo, *The Theatrical Critic as Cultural Agent: Constructing Pinter, Orton and Stoppard as Absurdist Playwrights*, Artists and Issues in the Theatre, Vol. 12, New York: Peter Lang, 2001, p. 31)
[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, eds, *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd: Ecology, The Environment and the Greening of the Modern Stage*, Methuen Drama Engage, London: Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 2.
[3] Adrianne Bibby, '5 Types of Professional Networks and How to Use Them', https://www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/types-professional-networks/, accessed 03 April 2018.
[4] Russ Alan Prince, 'You Need Two Types of Professional Networks to Get Super-Rich', https://www.forbes.com/sites/russalanprince/2017/10/27/you-need-two-types-of-professional-networks-to-get-super-rich/#660cca0c4b3c, accessed 08 May 2019.
[5] Bibby, '5 Types of Professional Networks'.
[6] Prince, 'You Need Two Types of Professional Networks'.
[7] Bibby, '5 Types of Professional Networks'.
[8] For instance, Esslin cites a lecture on the Theatre of the Absurd delivered in Munich by the German playwright Wolfgang Hildesheimer in 1960; see Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd edn., London: Methuen, 2001, pp. 295-6.
[9] See Dan Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama*, London: Routledge,1999, especially pp. 127-54.
[10] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 22.
[11] Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 22.
[12] For an alternative, but complementary account of Pinter's early career and its points of intersection with Beckett, see Jonathan Bignell, '"Random Dottiness": Samuel Beckett and the Reception of Harold Pinter's Early Dramas', in Nicholas Johnson, Anita Rakoczy and Mariko Tanaka, eds, *Beckett Influencing / Influencing Beckett*, Budapest and Paris: Károli Gáspár University Press / L'Harmattan, 2020, page range not confirmed at time of going to press.
[13] Quoted in Michael Billington, *Harold Pinter*, 2nd edn., London: Faber, 2007, p. 84.
[14] Quoted in Mark Batty, *About Pinter: The Playwright and the Work*, London: Faber, 2005, p. 108.
[15] See Billington, p. 94.
[16] Zarhy-Levo, p. 11.
[17] Zarhy-Levo, p. 24.
[18] Pinter, 'Introduction' to *Plays: Three*, London: Faber, 1997, p. 11.
[19] Quoted in Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 242.
[20] As Pinter said in 1971, 'a play has to speak for itself'. (Quoted in Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Pinter*, London: Nick Hern, 1994, pp. 42)
[21] Quoted in Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright*, p. 9.
[22] Harold Hobson, *Theatre in Britain: A Personal View*, Oxford: Phaidon, 1984, p. 188.
[23] Quoted in Billington, p. 95.
[24] See Billington, p. 87 and p. 96.
[25] See Billington, p. 111.
[26] Billington, p. 111.
[27] Jennifer Birkett, *Undoing Time: The Life and Work of Samuel Beckett*, Sallins: Irish Academic Press, 2015, p. 166.
[28] See John Calder, 'Martin Esslin', *Guardian*, 27 February 2002, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2002/feb/27/guardianobituaries.booksobituaries (accessed 13 May 2019) and Birkett, p. 178.
[29] See Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright*, p. 15, and Billington p. 156 and pp. 158-9.
[30] Zarhy-Levo, p. 13.
[31] See Billington, p. 126. Beckett also favoured McWhinnie as a director, insisting he direct *Eh Joe* for the BBC in 1966 (see Birkett, p. 188).
[32] Simpson is so described in 'Merlin', 'Mainly About People', *Sunday Times*, 27 December 1959, p. 23. For more on the production, see Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright*, p. 14.
[33] See Essin, *Pinter the Playwright*, p. 14, Billington, p. 130 and http://www.haroldpinter.org/plays/frn_caretaker_fr61.shtml (accessed 11 May 2019).
[34] See Sos Eltis, '"It's all symbiosis": Peter Hall Directing Beckett' in David Tucker and Trish McTighe, eds, *Staging Beckett in Great Britain*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016, pp. 91-4.

[35] See Billington, p. 141.
[36] See Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright*, p. 16.
[37] Quoted in Billington, p. 149.
[38] See Colin Chambers, *Inside the Royal Shakespeare Company: Creativity and the Institution*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 133. See also Billington, pp.156-7.
[39] As detailed in NT Associate Director Michael Blakemore's memoir *Stage Blood: Five Tempestuous Years in the Early Life of the National Theatre*, London: Faber, 2014.
[40] Billington, p. 191.
[41] See James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, London: Bloomsbury, 1996, p. 506; also Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright*, p. 150.
[42] 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 film of *The Caretaker*.
[43] 'The Hard-Boiled Egg' appears in Eugène Ionesco, *Plays*, volume x, trans. Donald Watson, London: Calder, 1976, pp. 97-114.
[44] James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 654. More is generally made of the two writers' friendship in Pinter scholarship than in writing on Beckett, reflecting the Irish writer's seniority and exalted literary status, but it is acknowledged in both. For a look at the relationship in detail, see David Tucker, '"That first last look in the shadows": Beckett's Legacies for Harold Pinter', in David Tucker and Trish McTighe, eds, *Staging Beckett in Great Britain*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016, pp. 193-208.
[45] For one example of Beckett's comments on Pinter's work in typescript and its impact on the play as eventually performed, see Gussow, pp. 28-9.
[46] See Zarhy-Levo, p. 31, and also Catherine Rees, 'Pinter the Absurdist' in Andrew Wyllie and Catherine Rees, *The Plays of Harold Pinter*, Readers' Guides to Essential Criticism, London: Palgrave, 2017, pp. 25-46.
[47] In subsequent editions the book was retitled *Pinter: A Study of his Plays* and then *Pinter the Playwright*.
[48] For instance, in Basil Chiasson, *The Late Harold Pinter*: *Political Dramatist, Poet and Activist*, London: Palgrave, 2017.
[49] Quoted in Benedict Nightingale, 'Harold Pinter/Politics', in Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn, eds, *Around the Absurd: Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama*, Theater: Theory/Text/Performance, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990, p. 131.
[50] Harold Pinter, *Plays: One*, London: Faber, 1991, p. 73.
[51] Quoted in Billington, pp. 286-7.
[52] 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.
[53] 'A Play and its Politics, A conversation between Harold Pinter and Nicholas Hern' in Harold Pinter, *One for the Road*, with production photographs by Ivan Kyncl and an interview on the play and its politics, London: Methuen, 1985, pp. 5-24, p. 10.
[54] For its second edition the book was retitled *Harold Pinter*.
[55] Billington, p. 92.
[56] See Billington, p. 140.
[57] 'The main body of his work seems to lie behind him', wrote Esslin; 'his sorties into committed theatrical pamphleteering […] cannot, as yet, be regarded as more than a minor addition to his *œuvre*'. (Esslin, *Pinter the Playwright*, p. 266)
[58] In a passage which first appeared in the second edition of his famous 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, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 430)
[59] 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*.' (Chiassion, p. 41)
[60] According to John Russell Taylor, Pinter used the phrase as part of an 'exchange at a new writers' brains trust' – see John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama*, rev. edn, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1963, p. 285. Pinter described the remark as a 'great mistake' in a speech given in 1970; see 'Introduction' to Harold Pinter, *Plays: Four*, London: Faber, 1991, p. vi.
[61] http://www.thebirthdayparty.london/ (accessed 6 March 2018).
[62] Christopher Hart, 'Absurdly Brilliant', *Sunday Times*, 21 January 2018, 'Culture', p. 22.