



*The Birthday Party:*  
its origins, reception, themes and relevance for today

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**EPI-REVEL**

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## *The Birthday Party: its origins, reception, themes and relevance for today*

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### The genesis of an idea

Pinter wrote *The Birthday Party*<sup>1</sup> during a flurry of activity in 1957 that also saw the creation of two other plays — *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*. Each of these plays is set in the calculated claustrophobia of a room, a room that provides inadequate protection for its residents, a room that represents a world awaiting or undergoing intrusion.

As with many playwrights, notably his late contemporary, Samuel Beckett, Pinter refuses to explain what his plays are about. They are what they are and he vigorously rebuffs all attempts by actors and directors to draw him into discussion on ‘meaning’. Because Pinter has not given explicit explanations and background briefings to his work, there is a view that his material comes from a tortured imagination, an imagination that draws on a world that has little to do with the every-day life of normal humans and that has little relevance to us.

This view is contradicted by one of the strongest messages to emerge from Michael Billington’s recent biography of Pinter (Billington, 1996), a book based on many hours of discussion with the playwright. Billington maintains that most, if not all of the characters and plots are rooted in real events. This view is reinforced by Pinter’s contention that he does not start with any kind of abstract idea or theory (see Billington, 64). There is good evidence that it was first hand experience that formed the well-spring for *The Birthday Party*.

One example centres on a letter Pinter wrote from lodgings to a friend whilst he was on tour in Eastbourne in the Summer of 1954 in a play called *A Horse, A Horse*. He described his landlady as, “[...] a great bulging scrag of a woman with breasts rolling at her belly, an obscene household, cats, dogs, filth, tea strainers, mess [...]” and mentions another lodger who had been a pianist for a concert party on the pier (Trussler, 43). This vivid context was to form the setting for *The Birthday Party*. In addition to this spur, the structure and flavour of the play owe a lot to the predictable theatrical form of the weekly repertory thrillers and farces in which he was appearing at the time. He finished *The Birthday Party* whilst touring in a production of *Doctor in the House* (Thompson, 25). This play generally observes the structure of the well-made plays that had gone immediately before and of which he had experience through his acting. He respects the three unities and does not vary the three act structure popular at the time of its writing, each act ending with a fairly traditional climax. There is a strong flavour of naturalism, reflecting the predominant style of the period, but there are also strong links to the absurd.

It is thought that the Irish and Catholic references in the play flow chiefly from the period in the early 50s that he spent as an actor with a theatre company in Ireland, a tour directed by one of the last actor-managers, Anew McMaster. Whilst in Ireland he appeared in a play called *The Rope*. Its characters included two males who may have been prototypes for *The Birthday Party*’s McCann and Goldberg, and he is known to have played interrogating detectives whose routines have echoes in *The Birthday Party*.

Violence and menace formed part of the social landscape of Pinter’s teens (Billington, 18). Gangs were a part of the experience of the youth of many parts of Britain’s larger cities. The black market, established during the war but existing also in the period of rationing that followed it, encouraged petty and serious crime. Gangs such as those led by the Kray brothers

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<sup>1</sup> All page references for the written text of the play refer to the 1978 edition published by Eyre Methuen, London.

ruled large tracts of London. Due to his Jewish background, Pinter was also deeply embedded in London's East End, Jewish life. There was significant fascist activity in that part of London and open publication of anti-Jewish sentiment. (Billington, 19) Pinter was not immune from this and got into fights as a result:

I went to a Jewish club, by an old railway arch, and there were quite a lot of people often waiting with broken milk bottles in a particular alley we used to walk through. (Thompson, 4–5)

In one incident in a London bar he punched a man who insulted his Jewish identity. Pinter lived at home until he was twenty five so he had ample experience of 'room as territory' and he would have been acutely aware of the wider territories claimed by the fascists and gangland groups of 1950s London. He would have been influenced by other elements around in the 1950s — the first news of coercive psychiatry being used to 'cure' people of dissident behaviour in the USSR and a diet of films concerning Hollywood hit men and gangsters, for instance (see Billington, 77).

The evidence indicates then that Pinter was drawing on actual incidents and observations from his life experience, culled from his normal living patterns and from those gained as an actor. These were fed through his fertile imagination to produce such plays as *The Birthday Party*. It is possible to identify specific biographical detail that appears in *The Birthday Party*. Pinter went to Hackney Downs Grammar School. Its sports field (Pinter was a promising athlete) was at Lower Edmonton, where Stanley plays his only concert.

Pinter clearly benefited from the 'New Wave' of theatre creation bubbling below the surface in the years after the war. He was caught in the political shifts that rejected the Arts as merely reflectors of middle class experience, signalled in theatre by Osborne's iconoclastic *Look Back in Anger* in 1958. Wider, profound political changes — a National Health Service, new social housing schemes, a new deal in education for all of Britain's children, made possible by developments that gave the working class a voice and an acknowledged place in British society, were part of a social consensus that was to prosper until the relentless attacks made on it by Margaret Thatcher in the early 1980s. It was therefore increasingly unacceptable to show on stage only plays such as Enid Bagnold's *The Chalk Garden* and Noel Coward's *Design for Living*, plays that dramatised the lives of the middle class.

London was the hub of theatrical development at this time — Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Ionesco's *The Lesson* and *The Bald Prima Donna* (all 1956) set the scene for a radical shift in British theatre. Subsidy from the Arts Council (constituted in 1945), and from local government (sanctioned in 1948) was making it possible for new playwrights to break free from the commercial management that dictated the artistic policy of the majority of West End theatres. Although Pinter did not initially benefit directly from such funding, he was the beneficiary of the climate of experiment that it created.

The context in which Pinter was working was therefore one of political, social, educational and theatrical change.

## Some themes and possible interpretations

Once a play is written and released it becomes public property, an artefact to be used and judged through performance, usually independent of its creator. Directors and actors have a perfect right to find interpretations of written texts that have reverberations in the particular time in which they are performed. It is to be expected, therefore, that in searching for meaning in Pinter's plays, directors will find elements and themes that were not intentionally laid there by the playwright. This is so with *The Birthday Party*. Pinter has said, for example:

I've never started a play from any abstract idea or theory and never envisaged my characters as messengers of death, doom heaven or the Milky Way.<sup>2</sup>

And yet one possible interpretation of the play does, plausibly, rest on the notion of Goldberg and McCann as 'messengers of death', as I will later explore.

Theatre of the Absurd, a loose movement characterised (retrospectively) with this title by Martin Esslin, was a formative influence on Pinter. In *Absurdist Theatre*, "because events and actions are unexplained, and apparently illogical or unmotivated, the world seems capricious or malevolent" (Dukore, p 25). Religious certainty, a concept that had received a considerable boost in the simplistic and often hypocritical morality of Victorian England, continued to wane following a transitory boost in the war years, and people were beginning to face up to the prospect of a world where less and less was certain and where a few dominant philosophies gave way to fragmented alternative views.

In 1957, the playwright David Campton coined the phrase 'Comedies of Menace' as the subtitle to his one-act-plays, collectively called "The Lunatic View." The critic Irvine Wardle, applied it to *The Birthday Party* in 1958 (Esslin, 51). In retrospect it appears a particularly apt label for *The Birthday Party*.

More than most, Pinter's plays require of us the facility of inter-textuality, an ability to tap into the meta-stories, myths and archetypes of ubiquitous storymaking that infuse our world. We are shot through with the seminal stories of our culture — the Christian story and the myths of ancient Greece and Rome being some obvious examples. Audiences experiencing Pinter's plays for the first time were often bewildered by what they saw. The major problem was that they could not understand such plays fully through the use of conventional story appreciation and audience reception techniques. The plays made extensive use of subtext and relied on the audience members' ability to let the action drift over and through them, to allow it to touch and brush the stories and references from life that we bring to any play. This was a fresh and demanding requirement of emerging theatre in the 1950s. Language was often poetic with extensive use of metaphor and the whole process relied often on an appreciation of the Kafkaesque.

An example of this intertextuality is the way in which we are able to place the relationship of Meg and Stanley in our knowledge of the Oedipus story, the ambivalence of the lover, mother/son in Meg's and Stanley's relationship being one of the driving forces in the play. The action in Act I that begins with Stanley's sarcastic use of the word 'succulent' to describe his fried-bread-breakfast, developing through Meg's coy application of the word to her own sexuality is one splendid, explicit example (17).

Post-war governments championed the ending of poverty a strategy for improving widespread ill-health and overcoming the privations of war-time Britain. Government information leaflets made extensive use of illustrations showing happy, healthy families making good use of the great outdoors, benefiting from the safety net of the welfare state. Pinter, however, seemed to be interested in the people from the shadows, the loners and misfits, those indoors. As model happy, healthy families skipped, arm in arm, confidently into the future, his plays focused on an investigation of the darker aspects of existence and the tension between solitude and society (see Billington, 70).

Pinter appears to portray a world where there is no exterior authority and no overriding morality. The only value system seems to come from the room in which his protagonists move and the values represented and held by those, often threatening people, who come to it. There may be no 'outside' to which the characters can refer for guidance and help. This phenomenon had echoes in the recent past where 'knocks on the doors' of Jews had been happening in Europe well before and during the 1939–45 War. There is a particularly chilling,

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<sup>2</sup> Harold Pinter, "Writing for the Theatre," *Evergreen Review*, VIII (August–September 1984), p. 80, reprint in Thompson, 1985.

ambiguous echo of this when Goldberg, Lulu on his lap, proposes a toast in German (59). The incongruity of this for a Jew is intriguing and adds further to the questions about Goldberg's roots, affiliations and motivation. Interestingly, Pinter says that he maintains a kind of neutrality towards his play's characters "I love and hate them equally" (Billington, 65). He was aided in his facility to play with the concept of Jewishness by his decision to reject the Jewish religion at the age of thirteen (Billington, 79).

There are strong undertones of death and retribution in the play. The notion of undertakers first occurs when Stanley chooses to frighten Meg with his stories of men in a van arriving at the house with a wheelbarrow, implying that they are there to collect a body. In true thriller style, Stanley's description of the "van men" selecting Meg's house for their visit is interrupted by a real knock at the door as Lulu comes to call. Stanley's wheelbarrow story clearly stays with Meg for at the start of Act III she questions Petey about the "big car" that has appeared outside the house overnight, asking him "is there a wheelbarrow in it?" (69)

Stanley's story is prophetic although it is not death but spiritual and psychological destruction that he suffers as the "men" take him away at the end of the play. The undertaker image is echoed in Goldberg's big, hearse like car, his suit and briefcase, his controlling hand on the situation, and the neat, dark suit in which Stanley leaves the house, dressed well for his final exit. As he sits, spruce but motionless, McCann and Goldberg comment:

MCCANN He looks better doesn't he?

GOLDBERG Much better.

MCCANN A new man. (81)

as though they are viewing Stanley relaxed and well dressed in his coffin (although Stanley later makes some ineffectual movements as his interrogators quiz him once more, and walks from the room).

When Petey protests at Stanley's removal, Goldberg makes an offer to his challenger:

PETEY Leave him alone

*They stop. Goldberg studies him.*

GOLDBERG (insidiously). Why don't you come with us Mr Boles?

MCCANN Yes, why don't you come with us?

GOLDBERG Come with us to Monty. There's plenty of room in the car.

*Petey makes no move.* (85-86)

The ambiguity of the Jewish and Irish identities in this play is intriguing. At one level it is about the Jews and the Irish turning the tables — oppressed peoples getting their own back, the reversal of racial stereotyping (Trussler, 40). This feeling is heightened by the explicit references McCann makes to an Irish Nationalist organisation (which he accuses Stanley of betraying) and by Goldberg's accusation of Stanley's racial impurity (see Trussler, 41) — these are men with a mission and they seek revenge on Stanley.

There is also an ambiguity in the frequent references to the visitors' previous contact with Stanley. In his first, potentially terrifying meeting with McCann at the start of Act II, for instance, Stanley states that he thinks they have met before in Maidenhead. McCann replies "I don't know it" (39). Later in that act, whilst Stanley sits silently, broken by the interrogation of the visitors and destined not to speak again in the play, Goldberg mentions the very places about which Stanley had questioned McCann — Fullers Tea Shop, the Boots Library and the "little Austin" car (56).

The "organisation" that Stanley is accused of having betrayed (48) is not specifically identified although it may be seen to stem from a number of possible sources — criminal, religious, metaphysical, or political (see Williams, 373). During interrogation in particular, references are made to possible interests — in Northern Ireland, for example. But the organisation remains intriguingly unspecified.

In an interview with Jeremy Isaacs in 1997, Pinter gave credence to another widely canvassed interpretation. Stating that our lives in Britain are constrained, he identifies Stanley as a man who will not follow Society's rules. Pinter posited that Stanley is not necessarily a very

pleasant character, but a free one and Society finds this intolerable, so it sends Goldberg and McCann down to “get him.”<sup>3</sup>

There are strong indications that Goldberg and McCann have a mobsters’ job to do. With the typical menace of the Hollywood heavy, Goldberg says:

GOLDBERG What do you think of that, McCann? There’s a gentleman living here. He’s got a birthday today, and he’s forgotten all about it. So we’re going to remind him. We’re going to give him a party... we’ll bring him out of himself. (33)

The threat to Stanley is stepped up by degree. It starts with McCann’s blocking his way (37), progresses through the knock about of the interrogators asking, then forcing him to sit (45–47) and continues until he is broken by the final interrogation (47–52). He is reduced to a gibbering inferior, to be released, his moral sense eradicated, into the ‘party game’ that Goldberg initiates, there to attempt the murder of Meg and the rape of Lulu.

Pinter creates characters that possess a finely judged dramatic tension between their existence as fully drawn individuals and representatives of archetypes. Countering the notion that the three were in the same organisation is the idea that their victimisation of Stanley is an arbitrary decision — that their act represents retribution in general. This view is given strength by the fact that Goldberg is called variously “Nat,” “Simey,” “Benny” — he is an everyman threat. This adds to the feeling that there is an enigmatic other worldliness about them — rather like that to be found in Sartre’s *Huis Clos* (1944). Thompson (1985) comments:

It must be acknowledged that Pinter is, in this play (*The Birthday Party*) as elsewhere, refusing to pin down a character so as to allow him to be viewed in a more symbolic, universal way. (40)

Webber has also changed his name it seems (50). Name and identity are a central theme in Pinter’s work — the Davies/Jenkins ambiguity in *The Caretaker* being a further example.

The domestic setting of the play magnifies the threat and sense of menace. Theatre had previously portrayed a largely middle class world and the situation creates a powerful dissonance between the artist Stanley and his filthy surroundings, heightened by the immaculate appearance of Goldberg.

An interpretation that springs from the post-war themes referred to earlier is that, as ordinary people, Meg and Petey are impotent, powerless in the face of the organised combination of Goldberg’s polish and power and McCann’s raw violence. They are unable to stop Stanley being destroyed and taken from them. Their low social positioning is reflected in their lack of money — Meg cannot give Stanley a piano, only a tin drum, a popular, cheap, post-war toy. In the privation of a post-war Britain, only the middle classes had pianos.

As an ineffectual counter to this fatalism and impotence of the working class, the normally unconcerned Petey strives to assert himself at the end of the play when he questions Goldberg as to where Stanley is being taken. He insists that he will get Stanley to a doctor, and when his protestations come to nothing, he gives a last defiant call to Stanley:

PETEY Stan, don’t let them tell you what to do! (86)

In doing this he pits simple, impotent honesty against corrupt aggression and fate. Significantly, he wasn’t at the party where the harm was done to Stanley.

Extending this interpretation, Meg can be seen as representing the false dawn of the improvement of the working class when she flowers as a “gladiola” at the party. She is seduced by the visitors and deflected by Goldberg’s compliments. She is finally unaware of Stanley’s demise. At the end of the play, even Petey resolves to leave her in her wilful ignorance:

MEG           Where’s Stan?  
                  Pause

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<sup>3</sup> Face to Face, an interview with Pinter, 21 January 1997, BBC 2.

Is Stan down yet Petey?  
 PETEY No... he's...  
 MEG Is he still in bed?  
 PETEY Yes, he's... still asleep.  
 MEG Still? He'll be late for his breakfast.  
 PETEY Let him sleep. (87)

## The play's reception

Art that is at the cutting edge does not usually attract widespread acclaim. The function of much effective Art is not to reinforce the status quo in our society but to question it, to challenge our settled perceptions, to disturb our sense of what is right and proper. Often therefore, it intrigues by the disturbance it provokes and our inability to give it instant meaning, to assign it to the relevant pigeon hole. Only those who enjoy the risk of having their expectations confounded will enjoy such an experience.

In its provincial run *The Birthday Party* attracted puzzlement but also a great deal of admiration, especially at the Cambridge Arts Theatre where resident intellectuals welcomed it. *The Cambridge Daily News* said that:

The great ovation given to this play at its premiere yesterday showed that the audience appreciated the venture even though they were puzzled by it. (see Billington, 83–84)

In its first London run however, it bemused and angered most critics:

Harold Pinter's first play comes in the school of random dottiness deriving from Beckett and Ionesco and before the flourishing continuance of which one quails in slack-jawed dismay. The interest of such pieces as an accepted genre is hardly more than that of some ill-repressed young dauber who feels he can outdo the *école de Paris* by throwing his paint on with a trowel and a bathmat; and indeed— to come back to the terms of playmaking — as good, if not a better result might have been achieved by summoning a get-together of the critics circle of the vegetarians unions, offering each member a notebook and pencil and launching thereafter on an orgiastic bout of 'Consequences', with the winning line to be performed by a star-cast midnight matinee at Drury Lane [...]. The gifted Mr Wood produced, but how the piece claimed the services of anyone is beyond me.<sup>4</sup>

What all this means only Mr Pinter knows, for his characters speak in non-sequiturs, half-gibberish and lunatic ravings.<sup>5</sup>

Alan Brien described *The Birthday Party* as “a Hitchcock movie with the last reel missing” (Billington, 48). In a savage review in *The Spectator*, he stated:

*The Birthday Party* is like a vintage Hitchcock Thriller which has been, in the immortal tear stained words of Orson Welles, 'edited by a cross-eyed studio janitor with a lawn mower.'<sup>6</sup>

The London run closed after one week. Only Harold Hobson of *The Sunday Times* recognised the talent and significance:

[...] Mr Pinter, on the evidence of this work, possesses the most original, disturbing, and arresting talent in theatrical London [...]. Theatrically speaking, *The Birthday Party* is absorbing. It is witty. Its characters [...] are fascinating. The plot, which consists, with all kinds of verbal arabesques and echoing explorations of memory and fancy, of the springboard of a trap, is first rate. The whole play has the same atmosphere as a delicious, impalpable, and hair-raising terror which makes *The Turn of the Screw* one of the best stories in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Hobson saw the play in the company of an audience of six (which included Pinter) at the Thursday matinée on 22 May 1958 at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith at which box office receipts were two pounds six shillings.

<sup>4</sup> Granger, D., *Financial Times* (20 May 1958), reprint in Lloyd Evans, 1985.

<sup>5</sup> M.W.W., *The Guardian* (21 May 1958), reprint in Lloyd Evans, 1985.

<sup>6</sup> Brien, A., *The Spectator* (30 May 1958), reprint in Lloyd Evans, 1985.

<sup>7</sup> Hobson, H., *The Sunday Times* (25 May 1958), reprint in Lloyd Evans, 1985.

There were no directly relevant theatrical traditions to inform it although there was in farce and melodrama which *The Birthday Party* brings together in 'prepared familiarity' (see Williams, 372). The theatrical context of the time was overwhelmingly conventional, with the West End London theatre dominated by accessible drama, conventional plays that revolved around neatly resolved plots.

In a cosy post war situation where most of the population was seeing their lives improving, where the Royal Family still commanded respect as head of a proud and Empire-possessing nation, life was becoming more dependable. Sunday school prizes often comprised books about the Glorious Empire and the strange natives and behaviours to be found there, interspersed with volumes on the adventures of the heroic pilot Biggles. There was also the policy of censorship, typifying the Establishment's paternalistic oversight of what the nation should experience.

But this time of philosophical and religious uniformity was breaking up. The struggle for colonial independence, the growing awareness of the power of nuclear weapons, the ill-fated invasion of Suez by British and French troops, the growth of television that brought graphic representation of the important issues of the world into homes for the first time and the realisation that life was not just about striving to improve the material circumstances of people, all contributed to the fragmentation of the certainties of the time.

British theatre goers were not skilled at reading sub-text. Audiences had been reared on early TV drama and a, mainly Hollywood, diet of films all of which reassuringly relied on the 'well-made' principle. John Osborne's drama *Look Back in Anger* was also a shock as, like Pinter's plays, it was not set in the conventional middle class drawing room and it portrayed people with little 'breeding'. Audiences generally found the heightened language of the working class and the inconsequentiality of everyday speech a radical change from the predictable plots, projected by the well-modulated voices of middle class actors, that they were used to watching.

The immediate failure of *The Birthday Party* did not deter Pinter. Within two years he had written *A Slight Ache*, *The Hothouse*, *A Night Out* and a number of review sketches. In 1960, *The Caretaker*, the play that was to confirm Pinter as one of the most important playwrights of the twentieth century was to open. Six years later, in a changed theatre world stimulated by the work of playwrights such as Arden, Bond and Orton, a revival by the Royal Shakespeare Company, directed by Pinter at the Aldwych Theatre opened on 18 June 1964. This time, audiences were ready to receive it.

## Does the play have relevance and power now and for the future?

With hindsight we appreciate *The Birthday Party* as a cultural icon of the 1950s and 60s. We use it as a bench mark to help chart the progress of theatre in this century. We acknowledge its importance retrospectively, seeing its place in the historical frameworks of theatre and society. Elements of the form have been taken into our drama lexicon — understood, tamed.

As we look back on it from the *fin de siècle* we are more able to understand and absorb many of the play's meanings. In our post-modern world, its themes are part of the mainstream of our complex lives. Absurd Theatre as pure form has run its course, having been absorbed into the theatrical mainstream and, progressively, into our popular culture through creations such as *The Goon Show*, *The Bed Sitting Room*, *Fawlty Towers* and *Red Dwarf*.

And yet, at least in Britain, the play could tap into late twentieth century concerns that would give it fresh relevance. Disturbing uncertainty that followed a period of great post-war optimism was at the root of much artistic activity in the late 1950s and early 1960s. From the mid-1980s to the present day we have witnessed a breakdown in the social and political



consensus that has existed since the end of the last war. Exhortations from our leaders to observe a tight moral code are undermined by the corruption and immoral behaviour of a significant number of them. At the same time we are seeing the political Right asserting a new confidence in its ability to influence our lives, concentrating on ‘family values’ and the place of religion in education whilst the extreme Right’s libertarian wing sees paedophilia in terms of the child’s right to choose.

Mrs Thatcher’s infamous contention that there is no such thing as Society — only families and individuals within them — made selfishness, forever a human propensity, respectable. The privatisation of pensions, health, education, social housing, transport and the public utilities have handed the daily infrastructure of people’s lives to private organisations and, the Conservative Government is contemplating entrusting the care of the most vulnerable sections of British society to private companies.<sup>8</sup> As I write (24 January 1997), hundreds of police and bailiffs are evicting neighbouring road building protesters from their deep tunnels and aerial walkways strung between trees.

There has been a two-facedness about the British government for whilst promising to “free people from the yoke of central government,”<sup>9</sup> it has taken more powers to the centre than at any time in our history, resulting in a severe weakening of local government. More generally, Fascism continues its growth in Europe and, in certain areas, there is a terrifying break-down of morality, typified by the ethnic cleansing of Middle Europe. The knock on the door has returned.

In late twentieth century Britain, the working class still have economic, political, cultural and social power, but in the main they decline to use it. In its ritual battles with the Conservative Party, the party of the Establishment and capital, the increasingly unorganised working class has been trounced and its identity, solidarity and resolve to make a better world scattered to the winds. The working class has been rendered ineffectual — bought off by the attraction of shares in the privatised industries and the promise of lottery wins. Where like Stanley, they chose to stand and fight (the miners, for example, in the early 1980s) they have been beaten and destroyed.

So perhaps there is now no generally agreed moral code in Britain other than that of the market and the individual family in its home — its rooms. The Bishops pop up occasionally and make representations about the practical application of morality (rough sleepers, arms sales, the poor) but they are promptly told by the politicians to stop interfering in politics. And meanwhile, in the wider world, in old Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Burundi, for example, sectarian interests reshape morality to support their genocidal actions.

Perhaps in these contexts the play has a fresh resonance. Perhaps morality has been privatised. Perhaps the small organisations like the one Goldberg and McCann represent, products of sectarian interests, are the guardians of the new morality — the makers of a new code for the twenty first century. Perhaps Meg with her pretty party dress covering her varicose veins is a metaphor for the modern, subdued working class. Perhaps Petey is the decent working man who does care for his fellows but finds himself powerless to resist the drift. Perhaps Stanley is the artist who has been neutralised by the ‘organisation’ that has sought him out as a potential creator of beauty and dissent. Perhaps Lulu is the post-feminist Sindy/Barbie ‘girlie’ fascinated by older men with briefcases and power, but who, once again, is valued only for her sexual favours. And perhaps Goldberg and McCann are the seekers out of dissent.

But this context may be too raw and overt and unambiguous for a successful production of *The Birthday Party*, for true classics escape the particularity of their time in their consideration of the perpetual verities and black holes in our feelings and understandings.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Guardian* (20 January 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Major, J., 1992, Election speech.

Pinter's plays are still regularly staged. *The Homecoming* opened in London last night (23 January 1997) to good notices. It nestles uneasily amongst the twenty one musical shows that currently dominate West End theatres. If *The Birthday Party* is a classic, it will find a resonance in the theatre of the future, representing not a piece of heritage that we view to aid our understanding of the past, but as a vibrant dramatic event that brings meaning to the present and suggests tracks to follow in the future.

Only time will tell.

#### Early chronology

- 1958: 28 April: first performance at the Arts Theatre, Cambridge. Tours to Wolverhampton and Oxford. Well received and reviewed.
- 19 May: first London performance at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. Savaged by London critics.
- 24 May: taken off after one week's run.
- 25 May: Harold Hobson (who had seen the play at the Thursday matinee when it had an audience of six), writes a very supportive review in *The Sunday Times*.
- 1959: 11 May: performed by the Tavistock Players at the Tower Theatre, Canonbury, Islington.
- 10 December: performance at the State Theatre, Braunschweig, Germany.
- 1960: 22 March: Associated Rediffusion television performance.
- 27 July: performance at The Actors' Workshop, San Francisco (first professional performance of a Pinter play in the US).
- 1964: 18 June: Royal Shakespeare Company revival at the Aldwych Theatre, London.
- 1968: Autumn: completion of the film version in London. This is a definitive film. Pinter wrote the filmscript (very close to original), directed by William Friedkin. Dandy Nichols as Meg, Moultrie Kelsall as Petey, Robert Shaw as Stanley, Sydney Taffler as Goldberg, Patrick Magee as McCann, Helen Fraser as Lulu. Exterior shots destroy the room as sole focus for the drama.

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