

# Pinter's *The Caretaker* at the Harvey Theater in Brooklyn: A classic has lost none of its power

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The new production of Harold Pinter's 1960 play *The Caretaker* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater is a wonderful opportunity to see one of the classic works by this outstanding dramatist and politically outspoken creative thinker who died three and a half years ago at the age of 78.

It has been more than half a century since *The Caretaker* first appeared, but it has lost none of its power and also its relevance to modern life. The current production originated in London and is now concluding an international tour that has taken it to Adelaide, South Australia and then to San Francisco and Columbus, Ohio, before arriving in Brooklyn earlier this month.

The play was Pinter's sixth, and was his first critical as well as commercial success. As is the case with all of Pinter's work, *The Caretaker* consists of only a few characters and the scene is a somewhat claustrophobic and narrow one, but that is deceptive. The rapid dialogue, comic in many cases, including numerous miscommunications, non sequiturs and seemingly unintentional witticisms, nevertheless coheres into a riveting psychological portrait that also touches on important social themes. The repartee and the rhythmic quality of the dialogue remind one that Pinter was a poet before he became a playwright.

*The Caretaker* tells the story of two brothers and a homeless man who has been rescued from a fight at a neighborhood pub by one of them and invited to spend the night in their flat. Aston (Alan Cox), the good Samaritan brother, turns out to be a man of relatively few words, someone who spent some time in a mental

institution and was subjected to electroshock treatment, which has left him in his present, somewhat disabled, state.

The other brother, Mick (Alex Hassell), is in some ways the opposite of Aston, but also troubled. Mick is a man of many words, not all of which make sense as they are spoken. It appears that the house is his, and also that he is responsible for caring for his brother. This is something that conflicts with Mick's ambitions, but it remains unspoken. Mick, with his sometimes taunting manner and physical action, introduces the note of menace that is characteristic of many Pinter plays.

The homeless man, who never describes himself as such, is Davies (Jonathan Pryce), and he is very much at the center of the story. He is clearly in difficulty, even desperate in some respects, but puts on a brave face and is continuously scheming and attempting, in ways that are fairly obvious to the audience, to manipulate both of the brothers.

There are some truly farcical moments, such as the point at which Aston comes back from the pub with the bag that Davies has left there. After all three characters tussle over control of this bag, Davies discloses that it "ain't my bag" at all. The plot, in its brief development, turns on the fact that each of the brothers, who barely communicate with one another, offers Davies the job of "caretaker" of the house.

In the end, the manipulative Davies winds up trying the patience of first Aston and then Mick, and the uncommunicative pair exchange a wordless faint smile as they come together to repulse the efforts of Davies. The play ends slightly ambiguously, as Aston refuses to

reply to Davies' pleas to be allowed to stay on.

This very brief summary barely begins to convey the mixture of wit and depth that Pinter provides. The play has been related to the theatre of the absurd, the post-World War II dramatic school associated with such names as Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. Pinter was friendly with Beckett, who was an early influence on his work. Pinter was not simply part of this or any another tendency, however, and he did not share the absurdist's emphasis on what they considered the meaninglessness of human existence.

*The Caretaker* has also been called, with some aptness, a tragicomedy. The comic elements are certainly there, and very effective. At the same time, tragedy is always present—in the difficulties of these men, their self-delusion, their failed hopes; and more specifically in Aston's condition, as well as in Davies' homelessness and self-sabotage of his opportunity to find a place to stay.

As the late British director David Jones, who put on a production of this play in 2003, wrote: "The trap with Harold's work, for performers and audiences, is to approach it too earnestly or portentously. I have always tried to interpret his plays with as much humor and humanity as possible. There is always mischief lurking in the darkest corners. The world of *The Caretaker* is a bleak one, its characters damaged and lonely. But they are all going to survive. And in their dance to that end they show a frenetic vitality and a wry sense of the ridiculous that balance heartache and laughter."

The performances in this revival, under the direction of Christopher Morahan, are uniformly superb. Jonathan Pryce as Davies is particularly effective, portraying the character's antic and pathetic sides as a coherent whole. Alex Hassell and Alan Cox are also successful. Cox inevitably does not have the same "frenetic vitality" as the other characters, but the monologue in which he tells the story of his mental illness is one of the play's high points. "I've often thought of going back and trying to find the man who did that to me," he says about the electroshock therapy.

Pinter himself wrote, in 1960: "As far as I am concerned *The Caretaker* IS funny, up to a point. Beyond that point, it ceases to be funny, and it is because of that point that I wrote it."

What is "that point"? It is here that broader questions are touched on, and they are dramatically effective

precisely because they are not spelled out in any sort of didactic fashion. What are the causes of Davies' homelessness, or of the mistreatment of Aston for his mental problems? Why are they alone, and what is it about mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Britain that leaves them flailing for some purpose in life?

The play emphasizes the self-delusion of all the characters. Aston has plans to build a shed in the back of the house, but he never seems to make any progress. Mick's ambitions include dreams for renovating the house, and Davies' talks of finding his lost identity papers so that he can somehow straighten out his status. The more the characters talk about these matters, the more uncertain, if not unreal, they become.

The self-delusions are not simply eccentricities or objects of derision. They are the ways that these powerless individuals cope with their powerlessness. It is here that Pinter's comment about his reason for writing *The Caretaker* applies, and why they emerge as fully human characters—individuals who engage our sympathy.

As has been pointed out, there is a link between Pinter's plays that brought him fame as a young man, and the political commitment and courage that became very prominent in the last 20 years of his life. He began as a fearless and independent thinker and dramatist, with an oppositional stance. In *The Caretaker* and elsewhere he dissected an aspect of life at its most elemental level, and one leaves a performance both moved and stimulated to consider all of Pinter's themes.



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