

August, 2016

No Man's Land: A Life of a Play
By ©Alexander Lass, Associate Director

I'M GOING TO DO THIS NEWPLAY BY PINTER,' SIR JOHN GIELGUD TOLD ME. 'IT'S WITH RALPH RICHARDSON. I WAS A BIT WORRIED HE WOULDN'T ACCEPT THE PART AS THERE'S A LITTLE DIRTY LANGUAGE IN IT AND RALPH'S A BIT PRIM AND UNWORLDLY.' WHAT SORT OF LANGUAGE I ASKED. 'OH MALE MEMBERS BEING SUCKED IN THE MOUTH AND THAT SORT OF THING' HE SAID VAGUELY. THEN RALPH PHONED AND TOLD ME HE'D ACCEPTED. WONDERFUL RALPHIE, BUT WHAT ABOUT THE DIRTY LANGUAGE – THE MALE MEMBERS BEING SUCKED. RICHARDSON'S RESPONSE WAS REASSURING. 'PERFECTLY ALL RIGHT, COCKIE. PURE FANTASY. COULDN'T HAPPEN IN REAL LIFE.

– Nicholas de Jongh

In early 1974, when Harold Pinter was in America grappling with the screenplay for an adaptation of F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*, the initial image for *No Man's Land* came to him:

'I remember, I was sitting in this taxi and I actually saw two people sitting in a room and one of them was about to pour the other one a drink and he said: "As it is?" and the other character said: "As it is, yes please, absolutely as it is."... It's the way I think writing – in my case, dramatic fiction – works. You have to follow the clue of what you're given...to have a *donnée*, a given fact. If I don't have that, I'm in the desert.'

The rapidity of the time-frame leading up to the first production was highly unusual. Pinter completed the script at the beginning of September and sent it to Peter Hall, the new artistic director of the National Theatre Company. On Friday 13th, Hall read it, admired it, and quickly found a slot for it in the 1975 spring season. The casting process was remarkably stress free, as Hall recounts in his *Diaries*:

'Everyone can always cast a play in ideal terms. The problem is that people aren't always available or don't want to do it. With this play, I read it, gave it instantly to John (Gielgud) and Ralph (Richardson), and within a few days they had accepted. It was one of the most extraordinary experiences I've ever had.'

When the play opened at the Old Vic on 23rd April 1975, it was greeted with a mixture of 'admiration, respect and bewilderment' (Michael Billington), with Irving Wardle in *The Times* stating: '*No Man's Land* remains palpably the work of our best living playwright in its command of language and its power to erect a coherent structure in a twilight zone of confusion and dismay.'

Peter Hall's production, with Michael Feast (Foster) and Terence Rigby (Briggs) acting alongside Gielgud (Spooner) and Richardson (Hirst), was an immense popular success, transferring to the West End – to Wyndham's Theatre no less – and Broadway, before returning to London as one of the first productions at the Lyttelton Theatre at the National's new South Bank headquarters. It was a unique achievement for a contemporary play to have such a long initial lifespan.

A further astonishing feature of the early life of *No Man's Land* is that the entire period of its preparation and rehearsal overlapped with the most profound turmoil in Pinter's personal life: the beginning of the relationship with Antonia Fraser (they lived together from July 1975 and they married in 1980) and the collapse of his marriage to the actress Vivien Merchant.

August, 2016

The play features significantly in Pinter and Fraser's early courtship, as Fraser recalls:

'23rd January 1975. Met Harold at 5:30 in the Royal Lancaster Hotel... Discussed among other things *No Man's Land*, his new play... and how he started to write it. At first he thought he was echoing himself ("What, two old men together again..."), then he thought: "You are what you are."... I liked the character of Spooner, the failed poet. So I asked him: "Did Spooner get the job?" On the whole he thought: No. "But Spooner is an optimist and there will be other jobs." I said I would have to stop my ears at the first night for the dark of the ending: Winter/Night forever. But I liked "I'll drink to that" at the end. "That's the point," Harold said, delighted.'

'27th March 1975... Met Harold at the Royal Lancaster as once before. He gave me the first bound copy of *No Man's Land* with such a romantic inscription I shall hardly be able to leave it about.'

Since the original 1975–7 production, *No Man's Land* has attracted some of the most talented actors and directors to its beguiling poetry, unpredictable characters and mordant humour.

In 1993, Janet Whitaker directed a recording of the play for BBC Radio 3. The cast featured Dirk Bogarde (Hirst), Michael Hordern (Spooner), Keith Allen (Foster) and Bernard Hill (Briggs).

The first major London revival was at the same time, in 1992/3 at the Almeida. It was directed by David Leveaux, with Pinter himself as Hirst, Paul Eddington as Spooner, Gawn Grainger as Briggs and Douglas Hodge as Foster. This production was another critical and popular success, transferring to the Comedy Theatre (renamed the Harold Pinter Theatre in 2011).

A year later (1994) in New York, a Roundabout Theatre Company revival played on Broadway. Directed by David Jones, the production starred Jason Robards as Hirst, Christopher Plummer as Spooner, Tom Wood as Foster and John Seitz as Briggs.

No Man's Land returned once more to the National in 2001, again at the Lyttelton Theatre, but this time directed by Pinter. Corin Redgrave played Hirst, John Wood played Spooner, Danny Dyer played Foster and Andy de la Tour played Briggs.

In 2008, *No Man's Land* was revived at Dublin's Gate before transferring to the West End. It was directed by Rupert Goold, with Michael Gambon as Hirst, David Bradley as Spooner, David Walliams as Foster and Nick Dunning as Briggs. Although Pinter was not directly involved in this production – aside from his role as the playwright – and despite nearing the end of a long battle with terminal cancer, he nevertheless travelled to Dublin for the opening, as Antonia Fraser recalls:

'Summer 2008. Harold adored the production... This great play about age and memory – and death and drink – was the last play he actually saw... At the end... Michael Gambon gestured from the stage to Harold and he managed to stand up. The whole audience then stood up and clapped. Harold look very genial... but he was visibly moved.'

'7th October 2008. Fabulous opening night of *No Man's Land* at the Duke of York's Theatre in London. We began by sitting in a box together, for ease of access for Harold, but in order to spy Gambon's second act entrance, that extraordinarily sprightly tread which takes one by

August, 2016

surprise after the weakness of his gait and the falls in the first act, I moved to an empty seat in the dress circle.' (This took place a mere ten weeks before Pinter's death.)

The current production had its origin at Berkeley Rep in California in 2013, before its season, in repertoire with *Waiting for Godot*, on Broadway. And although Pinter is no longer with us in body, he lives on through the characters and language of *No Man's Land*.

Sources

- Harold Pinter, *No Man's Land*, Eyre Methuen (London, 1975).
- Michael Billington, *Harold Pinter*, Faber and Faber (London, 2007, revised edition).
- Antonia Fraser, *Must You Go?: My Life With Harold Pinter*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson (London, 2011, paperback edition).
- Peter Hall, *Peter Hall's Diaries: the Story of a Dramatic Battle*, Oberon Books (London, 2000, new edition).
- Peter Hall, *The Autobiography of Peter Hall: Making an Exhibition of Myself*, Oberon Books (London, 2000).