THE DRAMATIC WORLD OF HAROLD PINTER
THE DRAMATIC WORLD
OF HAROLD PINTER:
ITS BASIS IN RITUAL

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For my mother
and in memory of my father
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Harold Pinter was born in 1930 and grew up in Hackney, a working-class area in the East End of London. His parents were Jewish, his father a tailor and an air-raid warden during the war. During the war years the boy was evacuated to the country twice; at other times, he would open the back door to find his garden in flames.

Although such exterior threats would be enough to make the playwright “the morose little boy” he says he was, the anti-semitic atmosphere of Hackney was as threatening as the war. According to Charles Marowitz, “Pinter remembers scary walks through ill-lit alleys with ornery-looking toughs standing around clutching broken milk bottles.”

Pinter refused military service as a conscientious ob-
jector, studied briefly at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, and in 1949 became a repertory actor under the name of David Baron. He toured Ireland for eighteen months with Anew McMaster and later toured England with Sir Donald Wolfit. As a young actor, Pinter read modern novels, wrote poetry and prose pieces, and was an early admirer of Samuel Beckett.

He met the actress Vivien Merchant on tour and married her in 1956. She was later to create brilliant interpretations of some of her husband's heroines, such as Sarah in *The Lover* and Ruth in *The Homecoming*. Working at many jobs, from caretaker to doorman at a dancehall, Pinter wrote his first play, a one-acter called *The Room*, in 1957 on commission from a friend at the University of Bristol drama department. *The Birthday Party* soon followed but did not find a large public until Joan Kemp-Welch's television production of it. Though critical response to this production was mixed, beneath the reactions of shock, confusion, praise, and blame ran a strain of universal amazement at the power of the drama. Since that time, Pinter's dramatic world has remained an area of considerable critical interest and dispute.

Pinter has subsequently written scripts for radio, television, and film, as well as revue sketches, one-act plays, and two more full-length dramas for the theater. Active too as an actor and director, he is, in short, very much a man of the theater. He now lives with his wife and son Daniel in a five-story, period house overlooking London's Regent Park. Though not politically committed, he has associated himself with two causes: "I'm categorically anti the Americans in Viet Nam. And I feel strongly in favour of Israel."

When still in his thirties, Pinter spoke of life with the weariness of age. "It's a short life. And I have no wish to be eighty-eight. I feel pretty exhausted now that I'm thirty-six," the playwright told an interviewer on a visit to New
York. Although he insisted that he could enjoy life greatly, his reflections on its burdensome nature help account for his sympathetic treatment of the characters that populate his dramas. "It's very difficult to feel contempt for others when you see yourself in the mirror," he commented in the same interview.⁵

The insecurity of Pinter's wartime childhood in Hackney, his subsequent lonely existence as a traveling actor living in furnished rooms and seaside boarding houses, the endless jobs that the acting life imposed, all may have contributed to the sense of menace and the theme of dispossession that dominate his dramatic world. The theme, moreover, continues to draw him. When entering a more successful phase of his playwrighting career in 1960, he spoke nostalgically of the time he spent, and had time to spend, at Fleet-Street's milk bar in the East End, listening to the talk of the kind of dispossessed people who appear in his revue sketches and waiting for the all-night bus. "The all-night buses used to fascinate me," he said. "They still do. The way they connect. The way you can get anywhere."⁶

Not all his critics like Harold Pinter's dramas or agree with the world view they contain, but the majority consider him an important playwright. He is often cited as the most original writer in England today and as one of the most significant of all living modern dramatists. In 1967 Harold Clurman said of him, for example:

I do not see life as Pinter does. But it is imperative that he reveal his view of it; it is part of the truth. He is an artist, one of the most astute to have entered upon the world stage in the past ten years. Those who do not respect and appreciate his talent understand little of our times or its theatre.⁷