Pinter in Production

"If you press me for a definition, I'd say that what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism."

Harold Pinter began rehearsals for *The Man in the Glass Booth*, written by his friend Robert Shaw, with the following statement: "This is a play about a Jew who pretends to be a Nazi but is really a Jew." According to Lawrence Pressman, one of the play's actors, the statement received a big laugh from the company because the play is obviously about a great deal more, "but that's Harold." An elaboration of "that's Harold" simply meant that Pinter and the cast "went to work like artists" after this brief introduction, and going to work like artists had little to do with analysis of meanings or symbols in the play. Particular attention was placed rather on specific actions, keeping the action clean, precise, and subtle, with concentration on what is done, not why it's done.
Pinter's directorial approach, with its emphasis on action and interaction, is a nontheorizing one in which the actors are urged to concentrate on the play as reality. Pinter had found the young American actor Pressman amusingly over-intellectual in his approach to Glass Booth, and the actor felt that he had learned from Pinter as well as the others in the cast something important about being less theoretical in an effort at self-protection. Theorizing, Pressman suggested, only leads to "showing" things rather than "playing the moment." He himself is a box collector, he explained, and to know why he collects them is irrelevant to the reality of collecting them. A fine actor himself, Pinter understands this and knows how to work with an actor.

Pinter is quite explicit about the reality of the lives of his characters; but the undercurrents beneath the dialogue are not verifiable in his estimation, and the abstracting critic comes under attack for his attempt to pin down the ambiguities. The critic, Pinter complains, puts a character on the shelf as a symbol with the implication that we know what we are up to from birth till death—"an invalid assumption." Perhaps there is something of Socratic humility and pride in this impatience with those who approach the nonverifiable mysterious undercurrents in his plays. The critics think they know what is in the plays, but Pinter is wise because he knows that he does not know. It is important, too, however, to understand Pinter's insistence on his plays as realism as part of the self-protective attitude that Pressman learned from his experience in acting in The Man in the Glass Booth. The playwright's reluctance to theorize beyond the present reality, whether it be his work as an actor, director, or writer, doubtless helps him to preserve the basically intuitive approach he takes to his art, to enter deeply into the life of his characters, which he then allows his audience to see.

Such an attitude on Pinter's part should not discourage the attempts of the critic to approach the writer's work any more than Socrates' approach should discourage the in-
quiring philosopher. It should rather serve as a warning, I believe, to avoid the facile analysis that kills the spirit of a work, or a concentration on symbolic analysis at the expense of the play's reality, which is crucial to the multiple meanings that emerge from a Pinter play. The dramatic critic's task, moreover, it seems to me, should not stop with the script but should follow the writer's work into production. The detection of a ritual counterpoint in Pinter's dramatic world, if it is valid, should have some bearing on the production style of his drama.

Current directors of Pinter's drama tend to agree with his 'realistic' approach. Clive Donner, the director of the film version of The Caretaker, and Martin Esslin, who is not only an important critic of Pinter's writing but also has been closely involved with radio productions of his work, were in total agreement in separate interviews about the need for a basically realistic or naturalistic approach to Pinter's drama in production. On one level, this insistence on a realistic approach may be accounted for as a directorial technique for any play. Miss Kemp-Welch, who directed the first four television productions of Pinter's work, stated in an interview that she did not think Pinter's plays demanded a special type of production. "They themselves have such a distinctive style," she said, "such a life of their own, that the play itself creates the style—this is true of every great playwright and is not unique to Pinter."

Mr. Esslin was suspicious, too, of my attempt to define a Pinter acting style as an over-academic American approach to the theater, while Donner and Kemp-Welch were dubious about an over-theoretical approach to a production that would attempt to extract symbols instead of portraying a reality. "If a play is symbolic," Miss Kemp-Welch explained, "I do not try to emphasize this by any special means of production. If the production and acting are truthful to the author's intention—the symbolism will be clear and as the author intended."

Alan Schneider, an American director who has worked
with Pinter material, clarifies the current approach to Pinter production by a general statement about his own directorial technique. "It is not possible on the stage to be abstract," he explains. "I'm aware of the philosophical implications of the play [The Birthday Party], but I can't direct philosophical implications." We approach the play, he added, not realistically, "but with reality." Clive Donner reflects a similar attitude in his refusal to see anything symbolic in Mick's breaking of his brother's Buddha statue in The Caretaker. To Donner, as a director, this action is an act of anger and frustration. After all, Mick's brother would not get moving, Donner said. Continuing to speak in a "realistic" way about the relationship of the brothers and the tramp, Donner noted that the brothers cannot talk to each other. Mick only speaks to Aston once or twice over the exchange of bags or the dripping from a leak. But at the end they smile at each other—they are fond of each other. Aston, he explained, admires Mick's "go" but finds him a bit pushy, and Mick is fond of Aston but finds him slow. Aston does not talk much, but he says everything in a few speeches; and the tramp smells, but he is a human being. It all works simply. You find the basic emotional values. The main interest is in people. It is only technically difficult.

The echoes of Pinter's own approach are clear. Over-theorizing and symbol hunting can obscure the life of a play and inhibit the basically intuitive directorial approach that will find its clues in the text. Pinter says:

On the whole I would agree that actors and directors searching for legitimate psychological motivation in my characters would get themselves nowhere fast. I suppose I invariably say, "play the text." What they are is implicit in what they say. Certainly it is valid and necessary to examine what they do not say and why they do not say what they cannot say at the particular time of saying and not saying.
Pinter's plays do give the director and actor the clues which are needed for playing the silences as well as the spoken words. Donner's description of the relationship between the brothers in *The Caretaker* is a good example of such a reading of the text. The fact that neither Donner nor Kemp-Welch finds Pinter obscure may be due to the completeness of the line of development in the text. When Donner once complimented the actor, Donald Pleasence, on his portrayal in *The Caretaker*, the actor too insisted that it was all in the text, an attitude reflected as well by the director Peter Hall, who likens Pinter to Shakespeare in this respect. "You can't make your own personal comment as an actor," Hall says of Pinter's plays. "You can't cop out. You can't paraphrase Shakespeare and you can't paraphrase Pinter."

Actors and directors working on Pinter plays often find them quite clear, or at least recognizable as life. "I have never found Pinter's plays obscure," Joan Kemp-Welch says. "To me they are devastatingly true and accurate in their observation of life and people." He catches the kind of conversation or lack of it that we all hear and see in a restaurant, for instance, in which the husband and wife may make one remark to one another in a half hour, or one may carry on a nonstop conversation, or neither may talk, both sending silent messages of hate back and forth. Pinter, she said, "uses what human beings do and feel. It is this that he orchestrates in his plays."

I do not believe any of the directors interviewed would suggest Pinter's dramatic world is not complex or mysterious, only that it is not filled with mystifications and not consciously symbolic. Esslin, for example, as adamant as the others on the need to do a Pinter production naturalistically, has certainly been one of the most important critics of Pinter as a poet-realist or absurdist. When he notes that Pinter insists on the reality of his "fantasy" (Ruth does have three children in America in *The Homecoming*), he
shows an acute critical awareness of the surrealistic dream elements which inform a Pinter script. When he sides with the other producers of Pinter, however, in insisting on naturalism of set and acting (Losey and Pinter work hand in glove because they are both naturalists, he noted), he too is suggesting the need to play the surface reality that Pinter captures, allowing the other values to arise as they will.

This emphasis on a "realistic" production style does not by any means exclude techniques of production that are oblique or suggestive. Miss Kemp-Welch spoke at length about the need for suggestion in productions, so that those in the audience are able to imagine what they want to see and are not restricted in their imagination by what you show them. This kind of suggestion proved very successful with The Lover, she explained, in which many people found the opening hand-play on Bongo drums between the lovers enormously erotic. "In the scene where the lovers crawled under the table to make love, I just showed the top of the table with a bowl of flowers for nearly a minute—many people wrote in to say how dared I show such erotic love making! They had seen nothing but honestly believed they had."

Donner also discusses his own directorial technique as one that makes the audience use their imagination, and Esslin stressed the need for keeping certain ambiguities open in Pinter. One should wonder in A Slight Ache, he thought, whether the matchseller really exists or is only a figment of the couple's imagination; and one should wonder in Night School, which he had just directed as a radio program in Berlin, whether the young man really does or does not sleep with the girl. The German translation had implied "yes" by a sudden change from the formal use of the personal pronoun (Sie) to the intimate form (Du). Though Esslin was convinced of the impotency of the character and might share this interpretation with the actor, he felt that it was important to keep the audience wondering.
Hence, even those directors who insist on a realistic approach to a Pinter production exclude neither suggestion nor ambiguity from their techniques of presentation. Neither do they exclude realism as a technique for bringing out other values in the plays. The generally realistic approach to Pinter in production seems based on the idea that careful attention to what realities are given in the text will give the director clues on how to allow the depths of that reality to emerge.

Reviews of Pinter productions, however, have tended to pay more attention to those depths that emerge than to the realistic surface upon which the directors and actors prefer to dwell. Hence, while the producers of Pinter plays often take a realistic approach, the critics often comment on the results as surrealistic, poetic, and ritualistic. Robert Brustein remarks on the “fascinating secular rituals” in Peter Hall’s direction of *The Homecoming*, such as the cigar-lighting of the four men that opens the second act and reveals them breaking away “from the central match as if they were opening petals of a carnivorous flower.”

Warren Sylvester Smith comments too on the effect of *The Homecoming’s* tea scene in which Ruth serves the family tea in “a remarkable ritual, at once solemn and hilarious, a symbol and a sacrament.” Clurman also admires Hall’s direction of the play because it captures its abstract quality—that quality which goes far beyond the naturalistic. “The pauses or breaks are not elements of character portrayal,” Clurman notes, “they are ‘freezes’ of action to indicate that we are passing from one phase of the material to another, that the play is not continuing in naturalistic order but shifting to a new ‘angle.’” Clurman admires the massive gray setting of the play too, which appears real, but is “almost classically imposing, like that of an imperial mansion gone to seed and turned hollow,” a description of the setting that captures the play’s themes and atmosphere and is suggestive of the profound action that the play reveals.

*The Homecoming* is not the only play, however, in which
reviewers have detected production elements that convey those depths that lie below the naturalistic surface. Miss Kemp-Welch’s television production of Birthday Party was considered masterly by a critic in the Daily Mail because her use of “natural and stylized techniques mostly in swiftly inter-cut close-ups, clarified the individual dialogue and created a menacing atmosphere of unreality,—just what was needed.” The film of The Servant was praised for its “emphasis given to angles and staircases” which the reviewer suggests were used “as a latent symbolism of the complex moral ascendancies and submissions which work as interdependently as the water-levels in a chain of canal locks.” And The Accident was admired for a technique that gives proper emphasis to the Pinter undercurrents. “But the characters refuse to be limited by what we are shown of them. The whole film is put together virtually without transitions, using only direct cuts, and as with Resnais, it is in the gaps that the real story is told.”

One can only conclude, I think, that very often the intuitive playing of the drama’s reality allows the undercurrents of poetry and ritual to emerge—for emerge they do in production. When seeing a rerun of Miss Kemp-Welch’s television production of The Lover, I was struck by the effect one gets of the sex war that emerges from the sex games. The rhythms of the lines along with the use of the drum underscore the ritual content of the piece; and one is faced not so much with realistic lovers as with a ritual of love that is in danger of losing its significance, but receives new life in the course of the play.

Returning to Pinter’s direction of The Man in the Glass Booth, one may find important clues to a desirable production style for his own plays. Like his own drama, the play has elements of mystery and melodrama transmuted into the realm of ritual and myth—a transmutation beautifully realized on stage.

The critical reaction to the Shaw drama and production
seemed to fall into a kind of confusion not unlike the critical response to Pinter’s *Birthday Party* or *Homecoming.* Irving Wardle criticized it as an “over-ambitious melodrama” that hangs on the question of whether the wealthy Jew Arthur Goldman “is a war criminal, or whether he is masquerading as one.” He found Pinter’s direction “painfully slow,” doing “nothing to conceal the inertia of the supporting parts or the childish improbability of the trial scene.”

W. A. Darlington, who found the play more interesting than Wardle did, was baffled by it and made no attempt to answer either question that he thought the play posed. Is Goldman the war criminal Dorf, and if so, why does he pretend to be Jewish; or if he is Jewish, why does he pretend to be Dorf?

Harold Hobson, an early defender of Pinter’s *Birthday Party,* also was able to make some sense of the Shaw play, which he correctly pointed out will be misread if taken as melodrama. The play is about the difficulty of forgiveness, as Hobson sees it, with Goldman enacting the role of an ironical Christ figure, “taking on his own shoulders the sins of other men, not so that they may be washed clean, but in order that the men who committed them may be rendered eternally hateful.” Walter Kerr’s criticism of the play also stressed the danger of accepting the play as melodrama or naturalism alone, and suggested that “the author is teasing us rather than putting a real man together.” Kerr’s attempt to solve the play’s riddle on a purely symbolic plane, however, falls curiously flat and makes it easier to understand Pinter’s impatience with approaches to his own plays as parable, symbol, or allegory.

Perhaps Kerr might have avoided an oversimplified explanation of the play as anti-Christian and anti-martyr if he had not insisted on the drama as parable rather than reality. Surely it is both. The author is not merely teasing us with ideas but is placing a very real man before us and allowing him and his situation to suggest far more than he
or any character in the play explains. I think it is fairly clear that the richness of texture and meaning that emerges both from *The Man in the Glass Booth* and Pinter's plays derives from an insistence by the authors upon the concrete and upon the reality of their vision, whatever symbolic implications are present.

Still Kerr's suggestion that the staging of the play tended to underline the symbolic and ritualistic nature of the drama is entirely valid. When I pointed this out to the actor in the play, Lawrence Pressman, and suggested to him as well that the acting in the play seemed highly theatrical and unrealistic at times, Pressman insisted that the style was at most a heightened realism. It grew, he said, out of the reality of the text, which had to be believed in an imaginative way. I would agree that Pinter as director took his stylistic cues from the play, but there is no doubt that his direction helped to bring out the symbolic as well as the realistic nature of the script. The play's ritual opening complete with Buddha-like praying figure and Verdi Requiem gave the cumulative impression of a Catholic mass, and the Christ-like role of Goldman's character was heightened by the staging of his arrest and the stripping of him on stage. Working both realistically and symbolically, Pinter's direction made very clear an ambiguity in man's struggle for power and for salvation.

The somewhat surrealistic, bizarre setting and staging of the piece not only reflect the bizarre character of Goldman, but also reflect at least an intuitive grasp on Pinter's part of the play as parable as well as reality. The blond and red-headed Israelites in the play are clearly another version of the Hitler youth movement, and Goldman's autocratic behavior with his underlings is a cross between a kind of Hitler and a sentimental gangland boss. Pleasence's intensely human, agonized portrayal of a vindictive and forgiving man, who makes love to his prosecutor and lashes out at his fellow-sufferers, who can hardly forgive himself
for being alive and for loving life, and who locks himself in his glass booth both defeated and victorious, is juxtaposed with the clear voice of Sonia Dresdel, who plays the woman who exposes his masquerade. The Jews, she cries, in answer to his assertion that they too would have followed Hitler if chosen, would not have followed where he led. The woman, however, embraces the man she exposes, and as she reaches out to him so does the audience, trying to understand in this suffering and violent human being the nature of all men who cannot accept the evil in life but who nevertheless continue to love and hate.

Pinter's ability to bring out the real and symbolic movement of the piece was apparently more than intuitive. He had taken Pressman to a pub one afternoon and discussed his film *The Servant* with him, pointing out the love-hate relationship in the film as well as in all master-servant relationships. Pressman, as Goldman's secretarial hireling in the play, was apparently missing the hate, the undercurrent of "back-hall talk of servants." Pressman claimed that this talk with Pinter gave him the clue to an overall outlook that helped him play the cell scene with Goldman in the second act. At this point Pressman remarked too on the fact that Pinter has said that all of his plays are about the question of dominance, which is one reason, perhaps, for his attraction to the Shaw play.

Pinter never lost track of *The Man in the Glass Booth* as he had first defined it to his cast as a play about "a Jew who pretends to be a Nazi but is really a Jew." In finding the humanity of Goldman on stage, though, he found ways as well to portray Goldman's action as a search for the redemption of himself and mankind. The heightened realism he employed as director included those specific rituals that the text suggested and that emerged on stage as both real and symbolic, so that the audience viewed "Goldman" in the glass booth and "the man" in the glass booth. Such heightened realism, often bordering on the surrealistic in
this production, seems to me to be an ideal approach to Pinter's own plays in production. I cannot imagine either that an awareness of the ritual nature of the action in Pinter's drama could be anything but helpful to the director who held on as well to the individual reality of that action, or that an awareness of the nature of his characters as archetype and individual need inhibit the actor if he holds on to the character as individual.

If Pinter's direction of *The Man in the Glass Booth* offers clues to a desirable production style for Pinter's plays, I do not feel as reluctant as some of Pinter's current directors to suggest that that style is a distinctive one. I share their regard for the value of intuition in acting and directing and am aware of the dangers in over-intellectualizing or concentrating on symbols. But when the texts of the plays have so consistently revealed a ritual base, to ignore their ritual counterpoint in production would seem to me to be missing that reality upon which the plays are based. In the light of a ritual reading, *The Homecoming* set, more surrealistic than naturalistic, is suggestive of the dreamlike and ritual plane of action which develops in the play. The pauses in the plays are specifically related to the characters' gradual movement toward the sacrificial rites in which they are involved. The "wasp" episode in *A Slight Ache* would suffer in production if the actors playing Flora and Edward did not regard the wasp as real; but if the actor playing Edward is asked to sacrifice the wasp rather than merely to kill it, the humor and tragedy of the wasp scene may serve as a proper prelude to the larger sacrifice of Edward that the play is about. Certainly the ritual elements in the production of *The Man in the Glass Booth* were quite consciously enhanced by Pinter's direction of that play.

When I suggested to Pinter, however, at a chance meeting with him that this production had cleared up many of my questions about a desirable production style for his plays, he smiled. It had not, he assured me, cleared up his questions.23