

THE ART OF THEATER NO.3

HAROLD PINTER

Harold Pinter had recently moved into a five-story 1820 Nash house facing Regent's Park in London. The view from the floor-through top floor where he has installed his office overlooks a duck pond and a long stretch of wooded parkland; his desk faces this view, and in late October 1966, when the interview took place, the changing leaves and the hazy London sun constantly distracted him as he thought over questions or began to give answers. He speaks in a deep, theater-trained voice that comes rather surprisingly from him, and indeed is the most remarkable thing about him physically. When speaking he almost always tends to excessive qualification of any statement, as if coming to a final definition of things were obviously impossible. One gets the impression—as one does with many of the characters in his plays—of a man so deeply involved with what he's thinking that roughing it into speech is a painful necessity.

He was not working at any writing projects when the interview took place, and questions about his involuntary idleness (many questions came back to it without meaning to) were particularly uncomfortable for him. His own work is alternatively a source of mystery, amusement, joy, and anger to him; in looking

it over he often discovered possibilities and ambiguities that he had not noticed or had forgotten. One felt that if only he would rip out his telephone and hang black curtains across the wide windows he would be much happier, though he insists that the “great boredom one has with oneself” is unrelated to his environment or his obligations.

When he wrote his first plays, in 1957, he was homeless, constantly on tour as an actor with a repertory stage company, playing all sorts of parts in obscure seaside resorts and provincial cities. His wife, the actress Vivien Merchant, toured with him, but when she became pregnant in 1958 it was necessary for them to find a home, and they took a basement room in London’s shabby Notting Hill Gate section, in a building where Mr. Pinter worked as a caretaker to pay his rent. When their son was born they borrowed enough money to move to a less shabby district in Chiswick, but both had to return to full-time acting when Mr. Pinter’s first full-length play, *The Birthday Party*, was a full-scale flop in 1958. The production of *The Caretaker* in 1960 produced enough money for a move to the middle-class district of Kew, and then, thinking he could live on his writings, Mr. Pinter moved his family to a bowfronted Regency house in the south-coast seaside town of Worthing. But the two-hour drive to London became imperative too often, and so they moved once again, to a rented flat in Kensington, until Mr. Pinter’s lucrative film scripts made it possible for them to buy the Regent’s Park house. Though it is not yet completely renovated, the size and comfort of it are impressive, as is Mr. Pinter’s office, with a separate room nearby for his secretary and a small bar equally nearby for the beer and Scotch that he drinks steadily during the day, whether working or not. Bookshelves line one-half the area, and a velvet chaise longue faces the small rear garden. On the walls are a series of Feliks Topolski sketches of London theater scenes; a poster of the Montevideo production of *El Cuidador*; a small financial balance sheet indicating that his first West End production, *The Birthday Party*, earned two hundred sixty pounds in its disastrous week’s run; a Picasso

drawing; and his citation from when he was named to the Order of the British Empire last spring. “The year after the Beatles,” he emphasizes.

—Lawrence M. Bensky, 1966

INTERVIEWER

When did you start writing plays, and why?

HAROLD PINTER

My first play was *The Room*, written when I was twenty-seven. A friend of mine called Henry Woolf was a student in the drama department at Bristol University at the time when it was the only drama department in the country. He had the opportunity to direct a play, and as he was my oldest friend he knew I'd been writing, and he knew I had an idea for a play, though I hadn't written any of it. I was acting in rep at the time, and he told me he had to have the play the next week to meet his schedule. I said this was ridiculous; he might get it in six months. And then I wrote it in four days.

INTERVIEWER

Has writing always been so easy for you?

PINTER

Well, I had been writing for years, hundreds of poems and short pieces of prose. About a dozen had been published in little magazines. I wrote a novel as well; it's not good enough to be published, really, and never has been. After I wrote *The Room*, which I didn't see performed for a few weeks, I started to work immediately on *The Birthday Party*.

INTERVIEWER

What led you to do that so quickly?

PINTER

It was the process of writing a play that had started me going. Then I went to see *The Room*, which was a remarkable experience. Since I'd never written a play before, I'd of course never seen one of mine performed, never had an audience sitting there. The only people who'd ever seen what I'd written had been a few friends and my wife. So to sit in the audience—well, I wanted to piss very badly throughout the whole thing, and at the end I dashed out behind the bicycle shed.

INTERVIEWER

What other effect did contact with an audience have on you?

PINTER

I was very encouraged by the response of that university audience, though no matter what the response had been I would have written *The Birthday Party*, I know that. Watching first nights, though I've seen quite a few by now, is never any better. It's a nerve-racking experience. It's not a question of whether the play goes well or badly. It's not the audience reaction, it's *my* reaction. I'm rather hostile toward audiences—I don't much care for large bodies of people collected together. Everyone knows that audiences vary enormously; it's a mistake to care too much about them. The thing one should be concerned with is whether the performance has expressed what one set out to express in writing the play. It sometimes does.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that without the impetus provided by your friend at Bristol you would have gotten down to writing plays?

PINTER

Yes, I think I was going to write *The Room*. I just wrote it a bit quicker under the circumstances; he just triggered something off. *The Birthday Party* had also been in my mind for a long time. It was sparked off from a very distinct situation in digs when I was on tour. In fact, the other day a friend of mine gave me a letter I wrote to him in nineteen-fifty-something, Christ knows when it was. This is what it says: "I have filthy insane digs, a great bulging scrag of a woman with breasts rolling at her belly, an obscene household, cats, dogs, filth, tea strainers, mess, oh bullocks, talk, chat rubbish shit scratch dung poison, infantility, deficient order in the upper fretwork, fucking roll on." Now the thing about this is *that* was *The Birthday Party*—I was in those digs, and this woman was Meg in the play, and there was a fellow staying there in Eastbourne, on the coast. The whole thing remained with me, and three years later I wrote the play.

INTERVIEWER

Why wasn't there a character representing you in the play?

PINTER

I had—I have—nothing to say about myself, directly. I wouldn't know where to begin. Particularly since I often look at myself in the mirror and say, "Who the hell's that?"

INTERVIEWER

And you don't think being represented as a character on stage would help you find out?

PINTER

No.

INTERVIEWER

Have your plays usually been drawn from situations you've been in? *The Caretaker*, for example.

PINTER

I'd met a few, quite a few, tramps—you know, just in the normal course of events, and I think there was one particular one . . . I didn't know him very well, he did most of the talking when I saw him. I bumped into him a few times, and about a year or so afterward he sparked this thing off.

INTERVIEWER

Had it occurred to you to act in *The Room*?

PINTER

No, no—the acting was a separate activity altogether. Though I wrote *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, and *The Dumb Waiter* in 1957, I was acting all the time in a repertory company, doing all kinds of jobs, traveling to Bournemouth and Torquay and Birmingham. I finished *The Birthday Party* while I was touring in some kind of farce, I don't remember the name.

INTERVIEWER

As an actor, do you find yourself with a compelling sense of how roles in your plays should be performed?

PINTER

Quite often I have a compelling sense of how a role should be played. And I'm proved—equally as often—quite wrong.

INTERVIEWER

Do you see yourself in each role as you write? And does your acting help you as a playwright?

PINTER

I read them all aloud to myself while writing. But I don't see myself in each role—I couldn't play most of them. My acting doesn't impede my playwriting because of these limitations. For example,

I'd like to write a play—I've frequently thought of this—entirely about women.

INTERVIEWER

Your wife, Vivien Merchant, frequently appears in your plays. Do you write parts for her?

PINTER

No. I've never written any part for any actor, and the same applies to my wife. I just think she's a very good actress and a very interesting actress to work with, and I want her in my plays.

INTERVIEWER

Acting was your profession when you first started to write plays?

PINTER

Oh, yes, it was all I ever did. I didn't go to university. I left school at sixteen—I was fed up and restless. The only thing that interested me at school was English language and literature, but I didn't have Latin and so couldn't go on to university. So I went to a few drama schools, not studying seriously; I was mostly in love at the time and tied up with that.

INTERVIEWER

Were the drama schools of any use to you as a playwright?

PINTER

None whatsoever. It was just living.

INTERVIEWER

Did you go to a lot of plays in your youth?

PINTER

No, very few. The only person I really liked to see was Donald

Wolfit, in a Shakespeare company at the time. I admired him tremendously; his *Lear* is still the best I've ever seen. And then I was reading, for years, a great deal of modern literature, mostly novels.

INTERVIEWER

No playwrights—Brecht, Pirandello . . . ?

PINTER

Oh, certainly not, not for years. I read Hemingway, Dostoyevsky, Joyce, and Henry Miller at a very early age, and Kafka. I'd read Beckett's novels, too, but I'd never heard of Ionesco until after I'd written the first few plays.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think these writers had any influence on your writing?

PINTER

I've been influenced *personally* by everyone I've ever read—and I read all the time—but none of these writers particularly influenced my writing. Beckett and Kafka stayed with me the most—I think Beckett is the best prose writer living. My world is still bound up by other writers—that's one of the best things in it.

INTERVIEWER

Has music influenced your writing, do you think?

PINTER

I don't know how music can influence writing; but it has been very important for me, both jazz and classical music. I feel a sense of music continually in writing, which is a different matter from having been influenced by it. Boulez and Webern are now composers I listen to a great deal.

ill chop your spine off

F. - I'll knock you out off, away Jim. My word of honour. I'll have you for ~~eatment~~ / you talk to me like that, son. Talking to your filthy louzy father like that.

3. - You know what, youre getting demented.

P. What do you think of Second Wind^{dr} the fourth race ?

F. - Second Wind ? What race ?

3. - The fourth.

F. - Dont stand a chance.

3. - Sure he does.

F. - Not a chance.

3. - Thats all you know.

P. He talks to me about horses.

3. - ~~I'll tell you one thing, its about time you learned to cook.~~

F. - Yes ?

3. - ~~Thats what I want to ask you something. The dinner we had before, whats the name of it ? What do you call it ?~~

P. Why dont you buy a dog ? Youre a dog cook. Honest. You think youre cooking for a lot of dogs.

F. - If you dont like it get out.

3. - I am going out. I'm going out to buy myself a proper dinner.

Choke. Suffocate

F. - ~~Go~~ Leave me alone.

3. - Yes, but I'm not going until I decide the exact moment I want to go, you see. You dont tell me to do anything, Dad. I go when I like, I come back when I like. ~~You wouldnt be here only because of me, whose money keeps you here ?~~

~~If it wasnt for me and Joey xxxxxxxx who gives you the monet to do the cooking ? Get it ? You dont even come into it.~~

F. - Its my house. *Get it ? You dont even come into it.*

3. - Dont make me laugh. You're dead if I say so.

F. - ~~Yes~~ Yes, dont let you ~~he wont let you ...~~

3. - ~~Joey~~ You dont think ~~Joey~~ F. Get burnt. *Burn ?*

Here, Daddy, you going to use your stick on me ? Dont use your stick on me, Daddy. I havent done nothing wrong. Dont clout me with that stick Dad.

F. I know what you do every night. I know all about sticking

silence. 3. wraps his paper, puts it in his pocket. ~~Dear, Joey comes in. Daddy Com.~~

filler tykes

Eh, Dad, I forgot. One thing. Been meaning to ask you.

filler tykes

That night ... that night you .. got me .. with mum ... what was it like ? When I was just a glint in your naughty old eye. ~~you had me in mind, did you ?~~ *you had me in mind.*

F. - ~~Out yourself to pieces. Stuff your face into glass xxxxx~~ Into broken glass.

F - Drown in your own bastard blood

Shove it into a plate of glass.

is that a fact that you had me in mind or is it a fact that I was the last thing you had in mind.

INTERVIEWER

Do you get impatient with the limitations of writing for the theater?

PINTER

No. It's quite different; the theater's much the most difficult kind of writing for me, the most naked kind, you're so entirely restricted. I've done some film work, but for some reason or other I haven't found it very easy to satisfy myself on an original idea for a film. *Tea Party*, which I did for television, is actually a film, cinematic, I wrote it like that. Television and films are simpler than the theater—if you get tired of a scene you just drop it and go on to another one. (I'm exaggerating, of course.) What *is* so different about the stage is that you're just *there*, stuck—there are your characters stuck on the stage, you've got to live with them and deal with them. I'm not a very inventive writer in the sense of using the technical devices other playwrights do—look at Brecht! I can't use the stage the way he does, I just haven't got that kind of imagination, so I find myself stuck with these characters who are either sitting or standing, and they've either got to walk out of a door, or come in through a door, and that's about all they can do.

INTERVIEWER

And talk.

PINTER

Or keep silent.

INTERVIEWER

After *The Room*, what effect did the production of your next plays have on your writing?

PINTER

The Birthday Party was put on at the Lyric, Hammersmith in London. It went on a little tour of Oxford and Cambridge first,

and was very successful. When it came to London it was completely massacred by the critics—absolutely slaughtered. I’ve never really known why, nor am I particularly interested. It ran a week. I’ve framed the statement of the box-office takings: two hundred sixty pounds, including a first night of one hundred forty pounds and the Thursday matinee of two pounds, nine shillings—there were six people there. I was completely new to writing for the professional theater, and it was rather a shock when it happened. But I went on writing—the BBC were very helpful. I wrote *A Slight Ache* on commission from them. In 1960 *The Dumb Waiter* was produced, and then *The Caretaker*. The only really bad experience I’ve had was *The Birthday Party*; I was so green and gauche—not that I’m rosy and confident now, but comparatively . . . Anyway, for things like stage design I didn’t know how to cope, and I didn’t know how to talk to the director.

INTERVIEWER

What was the effect of this adversity on you? How was it different from unfavorable criticism of your acting, which surely you’d had before?

PINTER

It was a great shock, and I was very depressed for about forty-eight hours. It was my wife, actually, who said just that to me: “You’ve had bad notices before,” et cetera. There’s no question but that her common sense and practical help got me over that depression, and I’ve never felt anything like that again.

INTERVIEWER

You’ve directed several of your plays. Will you continue to do so?

PINTER

No. I’ve come to think it’s a mistake. I work much as I write, just moving from one thing to another to see what’s going to happen next. One tries to get the thing . . . *true*. But I rarely get it.

I think I'm more useful as the author closely involved with a play: as a director I think I tend to inhibit the actors, because however objective I am about the text and try not to insist that *this is what's meant*, I think there is an obligation on the actors too heavy to bear.

INTERVIEWER

Since you are an actor, do actors in your plays ever approach you and ask you to change lines or aspects of their roles?

PINTER

Sometimes, quite rarely, lines are changed when we're working together. I don't at all believe in the anarchic theater of so-called creative actors—the actors can do that in someone else's plays. Which wouldn't, however, at all affect their ability to play in mine.

INTERVIEWER

Which of your plays did you first direct?

PINTER

I codirected *The Collection* with Peter Hall. And then I directed *The Lover* and *The Dwarfs* on the same bill at the Arts. *The Lover* didn't stand much of a chance because it was my decision, regretted by everyone—except me—to do *The Dwarfs*, which is apparently the most intractable, impossible piece of work. Apparently ninety-nine people out of a hundred feel it's a waste of time, and the audience hated it.

INTERVIEWER

It seems the densest of your plays in the sense that there's quite a bit of talk and very little action. Did this represent an experiment for you?

PINTER

No. The fact is that *The Dwarfs* came from my unpublished

novel, which was written a long time ago. I took a great deal from it, particularly the kind of state of mind that the characters were in.

INTERVIEWER

So this circumstance of composition is not likely to be repeated?

PINTER

No. I should add that even though it is, as you say, more dense, it had great value, great interest for me. From my point of view, the general delirium and states of mind and reactions and relationships in the play—although terribly sparse—are clear to me. I know all the things that aren't said, and the way the characters actually look at each other, and what they mean by looking at each other. It's a play about betrayal and distrust. It does seem very confusing and obviously it can't be successful. But it was good for me to do.

INTERVIEWER

Is there more than one way to direct your plays successfully?

PINTER

Oh, yes, but always around the same central truth of the play—if that's distorted, then it's bad. The main difference in interpretation comes from the actors. The director can certainly be responsible for a disaster, too—the first performance of *The Caretaker* in Germany was heavy and posturized. There's no blueprint for any play, and several have been done entirely successfully without me helping in the production at all.

INTERVIEWER

When you are working on one, what is the key to a good writer-director relationship?

PINTER

What is absolutely essential is avoiding all defensiveness

between author and director. It's a matter of mutual trust and openness. If that isn't there, it's just a waste of time.

INTERVIEWER

Peter Hall, who has directed many of your plays, says that they rely on precise verbal form and rhythm, and when you write "pause" it means something other than "silence," and three dots are different from a full stop. Is his sensitivity to this kind of writing responsible for your working well together?

PINTER

Yes, it is, very much so. I do pay great attention to those points you just mentioned. Hall once held a dot and pause rehearsal for the actors in *The Homecoming*. Although it sounds bloody pretentious, it was apparently very valuable.

INTERVIEWER

Do you outline plays before you start to write them?

PINTER

Not at all. I don't know what kind of characters my plays will have until they . . . well, until they *are*. Until they indicate to me what they are. I don't conceptualize in any way. Once I've got the clues I follow them—that's my job, really, to follow the clues.

INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by clues? Can you remember how one of your plays developed in your mind—or was it a line-by-line progression?

PINTER

Of course I can't remember exactly how a given play developed in my mind. I think what happens is that I write in a very high state of excitement and frustration. I follow what I see on the paper in front of me—one sentence after another. That doesn't mean I don't have a dim, possible overall idea—the image

that starts off doesn't just engender what happens immediately, it engenders the possibility of an overall happening, which carries me through. I've got an idea of what *might* happen—sometimes I'm absolutely right, but on many occasions I've been proved wrong by what does actually happen. Sometimes I'm going along and I find myself writing "C. comes in" when I didn't know that he was going to come in; he *had* to come in at that point, that's all.

INTERVIEWER

In *The Homecoming*, Sam, a character who hasn't been very active for a while, suddenly cries out and collapses several minutes from the end of the play. Is this an example of what you mean? It seems abrupt.

PINTER

It suddenly seemed to me right. It just came. I knew he'd have to say something at one time in this section and this is what happened, that's what he said.

INTERVIEWER

Might characters therefore develop beyond your control of them, changing your idea—even if it's a vague idea—of what the play's about?

PINTER

I'm ultimately holding the ropes, so they never get too far away.

INTERVIEWER

Do you sense when you should bring down the curtain, or do you work the text consciously toward a moment you've already determined?

PINTER

It's pure instinct. The curtain comes down when the rhythm

seems right—when the action calls for a finish. I'm very fond of curtain lines, of doing them properly.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel your plays are therefore structurally successful? That you're able to communicate this instinct for rhythm to the play?

PINTER

No, not really, and that's my main concern, to get the structure right. I always write three drafts, but you have to leave it eventually. There comes a point when you say, That's it, I can't do anything more. The only play that gets remotely near to a structural entity which satisfies me is *The Homecoming*. *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker* have too much writing. I want to iron it down, eliminate things. Too many words irritate me sometimes, but I can't help them, they just seem to come out—out of the fellow's mouth. I don't really examine my works too much, but I'm aware that quite often in what I write, some fellow at some point says an awful lot.

INTERVIEWER

Most people would agree that the strength in your plays lies in just this verbal aspect, the patterns and force of character you can get from it. Do you get these words from people you've heard talking—do you eavesdrop?

PINTER

I spend *no* time listening in that sense. Occasionally I hear something, as we all do, walking about. But the words come as I'm writing the characters, not before.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you think the conversations in your plays are so effective?

PINTER

I don't know. I think possibly it's because people fall back on anything they can lay their hands on verbally to keep away from the danger of knowing, and of being known.

INTERVIEWER

What areas in writing plays give you the most trouble?

PINTER

They're all so inextricably interrelated I couldn't possibly judge.

INTERVIEWER

Several years ago, *Encounter* had an extensive series of quotations from people in the arts about the advisability of Britain's joining the Common Market. Your statement was the shortest anyone made: "I have no interest in the matter and do not care what happens." Does this sum up your feeling about politics, or current affairs?

PINTER

Not really. Though that's exactly what I feel about the Common Market—I just don't care a damn about the Common Market. But it isn't quite true to say that I'm in any way indifferent to current affairs. I'm in the normal state of being very confused—uncertain, irritated, and indignant in turns, sometimes indifferent. Generally, I try to get on with what I can do and leave it at that. I don't think I've got any kind of social function that's of any value, and politically there's no question of my getting involved because the issues are by no means simple—to be a politician you have to be able to present a simple picture even if you don't see things that way.

INTERVIEWER

Has it ever occurred to you to express political opinions through your characters?

PINTER

No. Ultimately, politics do bore me, though I recognize they are responsible for a good deal of suffering. I distrust ideological statements of any kind.

INTERVIEWER

But do you think that the picture of personal threat that is sometimes presented on your stage is troubling in a larger sense, a political sense, or doesn't this have any relevance?

PINTER

I don't feel myself threatened by *any* political body or activity at all. I like living in England. I don't care about political structures—they don't alarm me, but they cause a great deal of suffering to millions of people.

I'll tell you what I really think about politicians. The other night I watched some politicians on television talking about Vietnam. I wanted very much to burst through the screen with a flamethrower and burn their eyes out and their balls off and then inquire from them how they would assess this action from a political point of view.

INTERVIEWER

Would you ever use this anger in a politically oriented play?

PINTER

I have occasionally out of irritation thought about writing a play with a satirical point. I once did, actually, a play that no one knows about. A full-length play written after *The Caretaker*. Wrote the whole damn thing in three drafts. It was called *The Hothouse* and was about an institution in which patients were kept: all that was presented was the hierarchy, the people who ran the institution; one never knew what happened to the patients or what they were there for or who they were. It was heavily satirical, and it was quite useless. I never began to like any of the

characters; they really didn't live at all. So I discarded the play at once. The characters were so purely cardboard. I was intentionally—for the only time, I think—trying to make a point, an explicit point, that these were nasty people and I disapproved of them. And therefore they didn't begin to live. Whereas in other plays of mine every single character, even a bastard like Goldberg in *The Birthday Party*, I care for.

INTERVIEWER

You often speak of your characters as living beings. Do they become so after you've written a play? While you're writing it?

PINTER

Both.

INTERVIEWER

As real as people you know?

PINTER

No, but different. I had a terrible dream, after I'd written *The Caretaker*, about the two brothers. My house burned down in the dream, and I tried to find out who was responsible. I was led through all sorts of alleys and cafés and eventually I arrived at an inner room somewhere and there were the two brothers from the play. And I said, So you burned down my house. They said, Don't be too worried about it, and I said, I've got everything in there, everything, you don't realize what you've done, and they said, It's all right, we'll compensate you for it, we'll look after you all right—the younger brother was talking—and thereupon I wrote them out a check for fifty quid . . . I gave *them* a check for fifty quid!

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a particular interest in psychology?

PINTER

No.

INTERVIEWER

None at all? Did you have some purpose in mind in writing the speech where the older brother describes his troubles in a mental hospital at the end of Act II in *The Caretaker*?

PINTER

Well, I had a purpose in the sense that Aston suddenly opened his mouth. My purpose was to let him go on talking until he was finished and then . . . bring the curtain down. I had no ax to grind there. And the one thing that people have missed is that it isn't necessary to conclude that everything Aston says about his experiences in the mental hospital is true.

INTERVIEWER

There's a sense of terror and a threat of violence in most of your plays. Do you see the world as an essentially violent place?

PINTER

The world *is* a pretty violent place, it's as simple as that, so any violence in the plays comes out quite naturally. It seems to me an essential and inevitable factor.

I think what you're talking about began in *The Dumb Waiter*, which from my point of view is a relatively simple piece of work. The violence is really only an expression of the question of dominance and subservience, which is possibly a repeated theme in my plays. I wrote a short story a long time ago called "The Examination," and my ideas of violence carried on from there. That short story dealt very explicitly with two people in one room having a battle of an unspecified nature, in which the question was one of who was dominant at what point and how they were going to be dominant and what tools they would use to achieve dominance and how they would try to undermine the other

person's dominance. A threat is constantly there: it's got to do with this question of being in the uppermost position, or attempting to be. That's something of what attracted me to do the screenplay of *The Servant*, which was someone else's story, you know. I wouldn't call this violence so much as a battle for positions; it's a very common, everyday thing.

INTERVIEWER

Do these ideas of everyday battles, or of violence, come from any experiences you've had yourself?

PINTER

Everyone encounters violence in some way or other. It so happens I did encounter it in quite an extreme form after the war, in the East End, when the Fascists were coming back to life in England. I got into quite a few fights down there. If you looked remotely like a Jew you might be in trouble. Also, 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. There were one or two ways of getting out of it—one was a purely physical way, of course, but you couldn't do anything about the milk bottles—we didn't have any milk bottles. The best way was to talk to them, you know, sort of "Are you all right?" "Yes, I'm all right." "Well, that's all right then, isn't it?" And all the time keep walking toward the lights of the main road.

Another thing: we were often taken for communists. If you went by, or happened to be passing, a Fascist street meeting and looked in any way antagonistic—this was in Ridley Road market, near Dalston Junction—they'd interpret your very being, especially if you had books under your arms, as evidence of your being a Communist. There was a good deal of violence there, in those days.

INTERVIEWER

Did this lead you toward some kind of pacifism?

PINTER

I was fifteen when the war ended. There was never any question of my going when I was called up for military service three years later: I couldn't see any point in it at all. I refused to go. So I was taken in a police car to the medical examination. Then I had two tribunals and two trials. I could have gone to prison—I took my toothbrush to the trials—but it so happened that the magistrate was slightly sympathetic, so I was fined instead, thirty pounds in all. Perhaps I'll be called up again in the next war, but I won't go.

INTERVIEWER

Robert Brustein has said of modern drama, "The rebel dramatist becomes an evangelist proselytizing for his faith." Do you see yourself in that role?

PINTER

I don't know what he's talking about. I don't know for what faith I could possibly be proselytizing.

INTERVIEWER

The theater is a very competitive business. Are you, as a writer, conscious of competing against other playwrights?

PINTER

Good writing excites me, and makes life worth living. I'm never conscious of any competition going on here.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read things written about you?

PINTER

Yes. Most of the time I don't know what they're talking about; I don't really read them all the way through. Or I read it and it goes—if you asked me what had been said, I would have very little idea. But there are exceptions, mainly nonprofessional critics.

INTERVIEWER

How much are you aware of an audience when you write?

PINTER

Not very much. But I'm aware that this is a public medium. I don't want to *bore* the audience, I want to keep them glued to what happens. So I try to write as *exactly* as possible. I would try to do that anyway, audience or no audience.

INTERVIEWER

There is a story—mentioned by Brustein in *The Theater of Revolt*—that Ionesco once left a performance of Genet's *The Blacks* because he felt he was being attacked, and the actors were enjoying it. Would you ever hope for a similar reaction in your audience? Would you react this way yourself?

PINTER

I've had that reaction—it's happened to me recently here in London, when I went to see *US*, the Royal Shakespeare Company's anti-Vietnam-War production. There was a kind of attack—I don't like being subjected to propaganda, and I detest soapboxes. I want to present things clearly in my own plays, and sometimes this does make an audience very uncomfortable, but there's no question about causing offense for its own sake.

INTERVIEWER

Do you therefore feel the play failed to achieve its purpose—inspiring opposition to the war?

PINTER

Certainly. The chasm between the reality of the war in Vietnam and the image of what *US* presented on the stage was so enormous as to be quite preposterous. If it was meant to lecture or shock the audience I think it was most presumptuous. It's impossible

to make a major theatrical statement about such a matter when television and the press have made everything so clear.

INTERVIEWER

Do you consciously make crisis situations humorous? Often an audience at your plays finds its laughter turning against itself as it realizes what the situation in the play actually is.

PINTER

Yes, that's very true, yes. I'm rarely consciously writing humor, but sometimes I find myself laughing at some particular point that has suddenly struck me as being funny. I agree that more often than not the speech only *seems* to be funny—the man in question is actually fighting a battle for his life.

INTERVIEWER

There are sexual undertones in many of these crisis situations, aren't there? How do you see the use of sex in the theater today?

PINTER

I do object to one thing to do with sex: this scheme afoot on the part of many "liberal-minded" persons to open up obscene language to general commerce. It should be the dark secret language of the underworld. There are very few words—you shouldn't kill them by overuse. I have used such words once or twice in my plays, but I couldn't get them through the Lord Chamberlain. They're great, wonderful words, but must be used very sparingly. The pure publicity of freedom of language fatigues me, because it's a demonstration rather than something said.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you've inspired any imitations? Have you ever seen anything in a film or theater that struck you as, well, Pinteresque?

PINTER

That word! These damn words and that word *Pinteresque* particularly—I don't know what they're bloody well talking about! I think it's a great burden for me to carry, and for other writers to carry. Oh, very occasionally I've thought listening to something, Hello, that rings a bell. But it goes no further than that. I really do think that writers write on . . . just write, and I find it difficult to believe I'm any kind of influence on other writers. I've seen very little evidence of it, anyway; other people seem to see more evidence of it than I do.

INTERVIEWER

The critics?

PINTER

It's a great mistake to pay any attention to *them*. I think, you see, that this is an age of such overblown publicity and overemphatic pinning down. I'm a very good example of a writer who can write, but I'm not as good as all that. I'm just a writer; and I think that I've been overblown tremendously because there's a dearth of really fine writing, and people tend to make too much of a meal. All you can do is try to write as well as you can.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think your plays will be performed fifty years from now? Is universality a quality you consciously strive for?

PINTER

I have no idea whether my plays will be performed in fifty years, and it's of no moment to me. I'm pleased when what I write makes sense in South America or Yugoslavia—it's gratifying. But I certainly don't strive for universality—I've got enough to strive for just writing a bloody play!

INTERVIEWER

Do you think the success you've known has changed your writing?

PINTER

No, but it did become more difficult. I think I've gone beyond something now. When I wrote the first three plays in 1957 I wrote them from the point of view of *writing* them; the whole world of putting on plays was quite remote—I knew they could never be done in the reps I was acting in, and the West End and London were somewhere on the other side of the moon. So I wrote these plays completely unself-consciously. There's no question that over the years it's become more difficult to preserve the kind of freedom that's essential to writing, but when I do write, it's there. For a while it became more difficult to avoid the searchlights and all that. And it took me five years to write a stage play, *The Homecoming*, after *The Caretaker*. I did a lot of things in the meantime, but writing a stage play, which is what I really wanted to do, I couldn't. Then I wrote *The Homecoming*, for good or bad, and I felt much better. But *now* I'm back in the same boat—I want to write a play, it buzzes all the time in me, and I can't put pen to paper. Something people don't realize is the great boredom one has with oneself, and just to see those words come down again on paper, I think: Oh Christ, everything I do seems to be predictable, unsatisfactory, and hopeless. It keeps me awake. Distractions don't matter to me—if I had something to write I would write it. Don't ask me why I want to keep on with plays at all!

INTERVIEWER

Do you think you'd ever use freer techniques as a way of starting writing again?

PINTER

I can enjoy them in other people's plays—I thought the *Marat/Sade* was a damn good evening, and other very different

plays like *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* I've also enjoyed. But I'd never use such stage techniques myself.

INTERVIEWER

Does this make you feel behind the times in any way?

PINTER

I *am* a very traditional playwright—for instance I insist on having a curtain in all my plays. I write curtain lines for that reason! And even when directors like Peter Hall or Claude Regy in Paris want to do away with them, I insist they stay. For me everything has to do with shape, structure, and overall unity. All this jamboree in happenings and eight-hour movies is great fun for the people concerned, I'm sure.

INTERVIEWER

Shouldn't they be having fun?

PINTER

If they're all having fun I'm delighted, but count me out completely, I wouldn't stay more than five minutes. The trouble is I find it all so *noisy*, and I like quiet things. There seems to be such a jazz and jaggedness in so much modern art, and a great deal of it is inferior to its models: Joyce contains so much of Burroughs, for example, in his experimental techniques, though Burroughs is a fine writer on his own. This doesn't mean I don't regard myself as a contemporary writer: I mean, I'm *here*.

