

The Homecoming

by Harold Pinter

Working for Meaning

From time to time a playwright coins a use of language that is so distinct and marks such a shift in style or content that they are forever associated with the idiom that they have constructed. So it is with Harold Pinter. Even people who have not seen one of his plays will identify moments in real life that are somehow Pinteresque. Such instants are coloured by a dialogue that is slightly or oddly challenging to follow, where what is not said is almost as important as that which is said, where hesitation, pause or silence is as significant as if that space was filled with words. Pinter does not make things easy for us because his writing is sparse and we often have to work at the meaning for ourselves; we wonder what particular references mean and what the past that might be hinted at was really about.

The director Sir Peter Hall suggests that the hesitations, pauses and silences that characterise Pinter's work serve a very particular purpose and that in the pauses there is a sense of strategy being worked through where a character reconsiders what is being said. In a silence, he suggests, there is a sense that the character comes out the other end quite another person. Certainly as we listen or watch the interplay between characters in **The Homecoming** there is often a sense that the pauses and silences are filled with meaning. The dialogue is often one which we think we have heard before - in our front rooms, in the dinner queue or on the bus - snatches of discussion where the speakers know one another well enough to not have to spell out what might be said in the gaps. Yet for us as an audience there is the task of doing the filling in and of working with the writer to find sense.

Why Not?

■ Consider the following dialogue from the beginning of **The Homecoming**: Who are the two characters and what do we understand about their attitude and feelings for one another? Try writing in the things that you think are unsaid by Max and Lenny. Who are these two men? What is their relationship? How do you know this from what little is said? Remember that whilst there are

scripted pauses for the person who is speaking, there is also the silence of the person to whom the words are addressed.

Max: What have you done with the scissors? *Pause* I said I'm looking for the scissors. What have you done with them? *Pause* Did you hear me? I want to cut something out of the paper.

Lenny: I'm reading the paper.

Max: Not that paper. I haven't even read that paper. I'm talking about last Sunday's paper. I was just having a look at it in the kitchen. *Pause* Do you hear what I'm saying? I'm talking to you. Where's the scissors?

Lenny: [*Looking up, quietly*]

Why don't you shut up, you daft prat?

MAX lifts his stick and points it at him

- Try discreetly eavesdropping on a conversation between people you do not know. What clues do you get about their relationship and the context of their lives? What are the clues that you use for making your judgements?
- With a partner, agree a subtext (things unsaid, the deeper meaning in a conversation or a relationship) and see if you can improvise a dialogue where you can convey these ideas whilst discussing quite something else. Play with the idea of hesitation, pause and silence.

A Sense of Place

The Homecoming, like many of Harold Pinter's earlier plays, provides us with a strong sense of a place, but the playwright never quite tells us where that place is. There is, however, a myriad of clues. In some plays the 73 bus and references to the Ball's Pond Road lead us to Hackney where the playwright grew up and went to school. Hackney is not just a place; it is imbued with particular histories of working class lives and Jewish families. There are those who would argue that **The Homecoming** is Pinter's Jewish play and that Teddy's secret marriage to Ruth is about marrying out of the faith. It is a suggestion that the writer denies.

Though we may not know Hackney or, indeed London, there are strong contrasts in the place

names that evoke a mental picture. The ring of *Eaton Square*, of a restaurant called *Caprice* and the chauffeuring of a cigar-touting American to London Airport are indicators that we should be impressed by Sam's work. We react quite differently to the idea of the young men's activities in brothels on Greek Street, or of grubby sex on a forlorn bombsite in the Scrubs.

Why not?

- Consider what the descriptions of *Arizona*, where *Teddy* and *Ruth* live, suggest about the quality of their lives, and how the two characters perceive the place. *Teddy* talks about the lovely house, the successful university department and the swimming pool, whilst *Ruth* refers to insects, sand and rock.
- In a group improvise a scene where the references to places you know create a contrast between the lives of the characters and the world at large. Try to explore the ideas of success and ambition, alienation and enclosure through the use of place names, and the sense of the place, rather than directly telling your audience about these issues.

Plumbing the Unconscious

It is sometimes a misguided temptation to see Pinter's work as part of a repertoire of the Theatre of the Absurd - a form of drama where the language and the action does not make an obvious connection with reality, and wherein the situations are removed from our everyday experience. On the immediate surface,

The Homecoming does confront some of our perceptions of any reality. This is a very male household of father, uncle and sons who take it upon themselves to employ the wife of one of the sons, and the only female cast member, as a prostitute. There is a brutal intimacy between the men. The characters know, or demand to know, the most personal of facts about each other. They are often abusive of one another and there is little warmth in their relationships. Sometimes these facts, because of the starkness of their behaviour, seem no longer to be personal but animalistic. There is, too, a sense of these men being alienated from the conformist,

bigger world, outside the house. They are not men of conventional success therefore violence, menace, fighting, pimping and loveless sex become the measure of some kind of status and a fragile sense of making a mark.

In staging this production at the Royal Exchange Theatre the director Greg Hervo explores a sense of unreality and wants little by way of a set. He suggests that these are characters caught in space rather than in any environment, "I don't want a set...I don't want to do a period. There is in our theatre space a womb,

damp and submerged...it's a place for walking into another side of a mirror." Greg expands on this idea suggesting that "...the outside world is represented by sounds, adding mystery...this is a dream like room, which is tied to the audience." The reality of the play as suggested by Greg Hervo is in the recesses of our unconscious where unsayable or undoable things lurk in murky corners.

Why not?

- Think about the idea that this play is a dark study of unconscious thinking and the dangerous territory of private fantasy. How might you plan a set for this in a space that you know? Think about your use of space and the relationship that you want your audience to have with the action. Draw sketches and plans and make notes to flesh out your ideas.
- Work on your own sound plot for a scene for this play, or another play of your choice, where you are making reference to an outside reality. Think about the atmosphere and ideas that you want to prompt in your audience's response. What sounds might you use and at what points in the action will you employ them?

Oedipus or Feminism?

The Homecoming offers us an uncomfortable exploration of misogyny (a hatred of women). The men speak of their dead wife / mother as either *Madonna*, a caring and exalted woman, or *Whore*, a slutish sex object who betrayed her husband with his best friend. *Ruth*, described at one stage as *slopbucket* and a *dirty tart*, is elsewhere called *kith and kin* who it is thought should *live in the bosom of the family*. *Lenny*, in his monologue about an old lady and a mangle, brutally conflates sexuality and women with violence; *I had a good mind to give her a workover there and then, but as I was jubilant with the snow clearing I just gave her a sharp arm jab to the belly...*

Two major British critics disagree on the thrust of this play. *Martin Esslin* suggests that this is an Oedipal study of men wanting to sexually possess the women within the family regardless of ties of blood. *Michael Billington*, however, suggests that this is a feminist study in which *Ruth* claims her economic freedom and liberty through exploiting the very sexuality that the men want to use against her.

Why Not?

- In discussion think about what you think this play is principally about. What do you make of *Ruth's* collusion with the men and their plans for her as a prostitute? What do you make of the fact that whilst she tangles physically with *Lenny* and *Joey*, things do not progress beyond love play? What do you think is in *Teddy's* mind as he turns towards the men and his wife before finally leaving the household?

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