

Pinter: the people's playwright

by Walter Plinge

It has been said that Harold Pinter is the world's leading employer of graduate students. There are more theses, dissertations, papers and what have you currently being produced on Pinter had his works than any other single person. The reason for this is really quite simple. Pinter is, in a word, enigmatic. His plays have long puzzled unwary audiences and confused uninformed critics. Pinter, they declare, is always making impossible points and no two critics agree on the point or its interpretation. Into the breach jump the academics and, presto, you have an over-abundance of arguments and explanations. Explanations are the very stuff of academic existence. Pinter confounds them all and says his play is about "the weasel under the cabinet." There is a flurry of

academic gowns but when the dust has settled only one thing is sure: there are no weasels in his plays.

Pinter plays are about one thing, and one thing only, people. Pinter's theatre is built on characters exploring their lives on a stage. They fight for a place in a room or under the sun. The setting doesn't really matter. The story could just as easily play themselves out in any number of locations. What is important is that they are all on stage and what marvelous theatre it is. Edmonton is fortunate to have a crack at two Pinter plays this year. One of these, *The Caretaker* is still running at the Citadel. *Old Times*, alas, has finished its run at Theatre 3 and is now but a memory.

Old Times is the most recent of Pinter's works and shows

some signs of weakness and a tendency to appear rather thin in comparison to his earlier works.

Theatre 3 showed a considerable amount of its customary courage in mounting the play as a season opener. That's one thing I admire about Theatre 3, they never stop gambling on their material and their audience. As always it was a rewarding gamble that justified their faith even if the presentation was flawed.

Pinter has been justifiably noted for his inclination to write pauses into his works. This was especially true in his earlier work but by the time we come to *Old Times* the pauses are punctuated by dialogue. On the printed page the action of *Old Times* is sparse, on stage it has an unexpected rightness but is nonetheless marked with all the

signs of a minor work.

The action revolves around a visit paid to a couple by an old girlfriend of the wife. As the evening progresses they explore old memories that make up the tenuous fabric of their past. Their's is a common thread, it is revealed. It seems that Deeley, the husband, once spent an evening looking up Anna's skirt at Kate's underwear. A good deal of time has passed since that episode and Kate is now married to Deeley and Anna has a marriage of her own.

Pulling these threads together so that they might form some kind of satisfactory illusion, be it theatrical or otherwise is a clever task and Pinter does it with style. But the main action lies in the manner in which the cast of characters uses the tidbits of conversation to put others in their place. Of the

three Anna, fares worst. As the intruder for a weekend she is at a disadvantage in this uncomfortable ménage à trois. She does not know and nor does she understand the character of the games that Kate and Deeley play. As a consequence she very much ends up on the bottom of the heap.

There is something reminiscent of the vicious games Albee's characters played in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* in *Old Times* and director Mark Schoenberg has been careful to give them the proper sting. If the production relied only on interpretation director Schoenberg would get full marks for his efforts but there was something seriously amiss in the staging this time. Perhaps it was just the enlarged space that Theatre 3 now has to play with in its new home in the Centennial Library Theatre but it seemed impossible to see more than one character at a time on this occasion. This became exceptionally irritating after a little while since it was possible to watch only the actor or the reactor in the situation which is rather like seeing only half a play in the vertical sense. Because of this the full impact of the drama was lost while the audience watched the action in a manner resembling that of a tennis tournament. One is tempted to surmise that this has something to do with the *Old Man Out* theme referred to so frequently by Deeley but that is stretching artistic credibility beyond the boundaries of common sense.

In the cast Bill Meilen as Deeley was certainly the most admirable in that he displayed the surest sense of action. He failed to define Deeley adequately as a character offering instead a collage of individually bright moments but he was certainly the most interesting person on stage and in the story. He looked rather like a seedy Voltaire gone in the gums before his time disappointed constantly to find his witty barbs not very pungent at all.

Gloria Perks performance as Kate was at best sphinxlike. This is not a bad thing. Indeed, it is precisely what was called for but her steely nature made it difficult to warm to her as a character. When she spoke she betrayed her character with a mannered voice which seemed rather out of keeping with the inner dull stillness of her character. The occasional shrillness which crept into her part did not seem totally justified in terms of what she was saying in words or between the lines.

Gilley Brand was a disappointment as Anna. The manner in which she gushed forth her lines made it difficult to follow either meaning or the sense of what she was saying at times. The tension inherent in her character was revealed as nervous excitement in an actress and was less than accomplished in its polish. She was hardly the proper foil for the attacks which were flying in the very palpable atmosphere.

The set and costume designs for *Old Times* were totally unacceptable in conception and execution. Ms. Waidmann's set failed miserably to resolve the difficulties to be found in the library theatre. Her set seemed primarily designed to ignore the proscenium and throw up the set on the audience. Unfortunately what happened was the action was thrust against the walls of the auditorium and the richness of the wood panelling would be more appropriate at an executive boardroom meeting. The austerity of the set was Fellinesque in its impact and quite out of keeping with Pinter.

The costumes revealed much the same lack of knowledge, thought and taste reminding one of the possibilities of combining chic and gauche. They would have been at home in a Fuller's