

# Subtextual realms create a challenge in *Other Places*

By PAULETTE PEIROL

A script almost void of stage directions can either be a nightmare or a challenge for a director. Case in point: Harold Pinter's most recent short plays, collectively titled "Other Places." Director Ken Livingston has accepted the challenge and has staged "Other Places," currently running at the Tarragon Theatre. What is Livingston up against?

The three plays, *Victoria Station*, *One for the Road* and *A Kind of Alaska*, while being topically quite diversified, border on plotless. Instead, the plays dramatize premises which are explored but are never conclusive. This in itself can be exciting and amusing, as Pinter's previous plays have illustrated. Yet what is lacking in "Other Places," with the exception of *A Kind of Alaska*, is enough background information to provide context.

*Victoria Station*, for example, is a conversation between a taxi driver and his dispatcher. What happens, or rather *has* happened between them is left up to the audience to infer. On stage there is more static from the microphones than real physical action. In the latter part of the play we are told that there is a female POB (passenger on board) in the back seat of the car. Whether she is dead, alive, or merely snoozing we never find out for sure.

*One for the Road* is a sharp edged study of right wing terrorism and

sublimation. While physical violence is implied by the victims' bruised and tattered appearance, verbal abuse is the primary tool of torture that the diplomatic Nicholas wields against them. The victims are a family; Victor, Sheila and their son Nicky. Their crime and Nicholas' reasons for prosecution are not apparent, except that Nicholas claims "the voice of God speaks through me."

*A Kind of Alaska* has a very clear historical context. It is about a woman, Deborah, who awakes after 'sleeping' for 29 years. The play is based on Oliver Sack's *Awakenings*, a true account of the epidemic sleeping sickness (encephalitis lethargica) which infiltrated Europe in 1916-17. A cure, ironically called L-DOPA was not found until fifty years later, at which point afflicted people suddenly 'came to life' again.

Despite the apparent differences, the three plays are unified in that they are situation dramas enclosed by psychological boundaries. Characters are defined not so much by their actions or their 'history'/symbolism as by what they say, infer, and most importantly, by what they *don't* say. "Other Places" is drama of subtext; drama of omission.

Fortunately, director Ken Livingston offers effective solutions to Pinter's challenges. The three plays have been linked by the clever sets of John Ferguson and lighting of Jeffrey Dallas. The stage itself is square, but turned on a right angle to the audience.



I SPY . . . something that begins with "P": David Hemblen and Diana Leblanc in Tarragon's production of Pinter's *One for the Road*, one of a trilogy from "Other Places." The production explores dramatic premises while maintaining Pinter's sense of the oblique.

There are no "wings" per se; the characters trapped by the two walls joined at a right angle behind them and by the audience before them. The walls are dark mirrored glass yet the characters never actually turn to see themselves in them. The audience is shown three distinct angles on each character; the living flesh and profiles from either reflection. From your theatre seat, you begin to feel that you are spying on the drama

before you through a two-way mirror.

The name of the game in props for this production is Minimal. They are fixed on stage to illustrate spatial relationships between characters. In *Victoria Station* for example, the dispatcher sits on a platform directly above the taxi driver. He is illuminated by a bare lightbulb and acts as a central questioning consciousness for the mesmerized driver. In *One for the Road* (see photo) characters stand or sit at cross angles, facing each other only to punctuate specific statements and silences.

The costumes are unobtrusive; conservative street-clothes for the most part. This offers the characters accessibility; any one of them could be your next door neighbour. And you in turn could be involved in their drama.

What's left for the actors? Intensity, for a start. Pinter's texts call for very little physical action, so dialogue and nuances must be exploited to their fullest. Otherwise, there is the potential danger of characters becoming merely 'talking heads' reciting lines. Unfortunately, this was often the case in this Tarragon Theatre production.

The worst example of the talking head syndrome (which incidentally somehow *works* in such Pinter films as *Betrayal*), was David Hemblen playing Nicholas in *One for the Road*. Especially in the opening scene his voice was flat and exceptionally monotone: one uses more intonation talking to one's pet cactus than Hemblen did interrogating Victor. It seems that Hemblen has grasped his diplomatic role from one rung too high. His poker faced delivery did however act as perfect counterpoint to many cut-throat lines such as: "I'm prepared to be frank, as a true friend should. I love death. What about you?" The emotional stance of Diana Leblanc playing Gila helped to compensate for Hemblen's flat delivery.

In *Victoria Station* Hemblen was allowed free-reign on sarcasm and wit, which suited his character (the Controller) extremely well. His performance was offset however by the static acting of Wayne Burnett behind the wheel. Granted, the taxi driver was supposed to be somewhat stunned, but Burnett exaggerated the role to the point of creating a caricature.

Clare Coulter's portrayal of Deborah in *A Kind of Alaska* was complex and challenging. Her character is hard enough to imagine, let alone become. Deborah is a woman in her mid-forties, yet when she

awakes her mind is still that of a precocious adolescent. While her voice is young and animated, she can barely walk without stumbling and has epileptic-type seizures. In addition to this, Deborah must face the shocking fact that she has become a middle aged woman. Coulter was utterly convincing in her role; the audience felt as bewildered as her character.

Maurice Good and Diana Leblanc were strong in the supporting roles of (Doctor) Hornby and Pauline. However there were a few too many tableaux, which disrupted the continuity of the action rather than intensifying it.

The overall effect of "Other Places" is at least provocative. Because the sets are unified in structure, one has the sense of "place" being defined in relational values by the characters alone. Pinter's "places" are not foreign, only oblique. The Tarragon Theatre's production of "Other Places" is equally oblique, which may be good or bad depending on your vantage point.

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better. Perhaps sexual politics have been high on others' agendas lately—but we know better than to take Fyfe literally. In fact, this painting marks the artist's movement into positive control of expression, surpassing any obedience to the given photographic composition. He does not compromise his technical facility with the advent of greater abstraction; rather, he reinforces it.

The most recent painting, "Dog Walking After Man Watching Dog" bodes well for the future. It comes with the full recommended dosage of angst that attends all Fyfe's pieces, and, as evoked by the title, the same amount of humor. But it possesses an assured looseness and confidence which supercedes the frivolousness wholly. The space is subtly implied by masterful brushwork and carefully attenuated colors, tinting and shading, not didactically imposed by the transferred means of the photograph. The figures similarly benefit from the separation—hopefully it is an irremediable one—between the photograph and the literal interpretation thereof.

If last week's show proved anything, it underscored the need to take Peter Fyfe seriously. While I will not prescribe that viewers disregard the humor in his art, I will respectfully advise that they give due regard to his substantial formal and narrative talents. And pack a lunch—it does require some time.

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