

# FROM "NOT FUNNY ENOUGH" TO THE NOBEL PRIZE:

## RECEPTION OF HAROLD PINTER INTERNATIONALLY AND IN SLOVENIA

### 1. INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS OF PINTER'S PLAYS

Apart from several published poems, Harold Pinter started his artistic career as an actor. After dropping out of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and enrolling in the Central School of Speech and Drama, he joined a group of actors on tour in Ireland. He later played in several theatres across Britain, for example in Hammersmith, Colchester, Bournemouth, Torquay, Worthing, Richmond, etc. and only then did he take up playwriting.

In 1957 Pinter wrote his first play, *The Room*. It was staged in the same year, and the reviews of the performance were favourable. Two more plays, *The Birthday Party* and *Dumb Waiter*, appeared in the same year, but their first performances failed to repeat the former success. Today these two plays are among his most frequently staged pieces; some critics even consider *The Birthday Party* one of the best achievements of contemporary British theatre, but its undisputable quality was not recognised immediately. The first production ran only a week, and it took most of the critics some time to realise that there was more to it than mere "verbal anarchy", as Milton Shulman (1958) labelled what later became known as typical pinteresque dialogue. He also reproached this style as one lacking humour, as can be seen from the title of his review in the *Evening Standard*: "Sorry Mr Pinter, you're just not funny enough" (ibid.). *The Cambridge Review* was satisfied with the quality of the production but critical of the text: "Despite the excitement the play generates in performance, the quality of *The Birthday Party* seems debatable" (Pinter 2004). The *Manchester Guardian's* critic ceased trying to disambiguate the plot: "What all this means, only Mr Pinter knows, for as his characters speak in non-sequiturs, half-gibberish, and lunatic ravings, they are unable to explain" (cf. Ellis 2003). Walter Kerr, a respected and influential reviewer in *The New York Times*, denoted *The Birthday Party* as "by and large a bore" (cf. Merritt 1990: 231)

and expressed doubts that the audience would be "turned on" (ibid.) by this play. The only supportive review came from *The Sunday Times* critic, Harold Hobson. Hobson missed the opening night and went to the following day's matinee; however, by the time his review was published, the Lyric Theatre had already closed the play down. Nevertheless, his predictions soon started to prove true:

Deliberately, I am willing to risk whatever reputation I have as a judge of plays by saying that *The Birthday Party* is not a Fourth, not even a Second, but a First; and that Mr. Pinter, on the evidence of his work, possesses the most original, disturbing, and arresting talent in theatrical London (Hobson 1958: 11).

In 1959, Germany saw the world premiere of *The Dumb Waiter*, and in the same year, *The Birthday Party* reappeared in England and abroad. Pinter's successful career was acquiring firm grounds. That is the time when *The Caretaker* (written in 1958) came into existence. The environment, in which the play appeared, was favourable and friendly to its author and to his work. It was premièred in April 1960 at the Arts Theatre in London and moved to the Duchess Theatre a month after the first production. This early play by Harold Pinter was enthusiastically accepted by the general public and the critics.

As the course of events showed, *The Caretaker* was probably one of the most significant turning points in the critics' response to Pinter's writing. After the first production, Alan Pryce-Jones published an encouraging review in *The Observer*: "*The Caretaker* [...] is quite superbly acted and produced. [...] I trust anyone who responds to strict professionalism at the service of an excellent play will hurry to the Arts Theatre" (1960: 21). He also spoke in Pinter's defence regarding earlier less favourable reviews of his earlier plays:

Harold Pinter has been accused of a negative approach to the drama; he has been called obscure – not without reason – and tantalising (*vide* my colleague Maurice Richardson's remarks [...]). His latest play [i.e. *The Caretaker*, T.O.] is not obscure in the least; it is excitingly original, and manages not only to be exceptionally funny but also to touch the heart. [...] I repeat, this play is an event (Pryce-Jones 1960: 21).

Positive judgments started to come from reviewers who had been less approving of Pinter at the beginning. Referring to *The Caretaker*, the *Daily Mail* judged this to be "a play and a production which no one who is concerned with the advance of the British drama can afford to miss" (cf. Jongh 2004). The following quite self-critical opinion by a well known reviewer, Kenneth Tynan, was published in *The Observer*:

With *The Caretaker* which was moved from the Arts Theatre to the Duchess Theatre, Harold Pinter has begun to fulfill the promise that I signally failed to see in *The Birthday Party* (Tynan 1960: 12).

Pinter's comments on the theatrical management of the time show that negative reviews of his early plays might have been, at least partly, the result of

theatrical policies. Despite the fact that Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was staged in London in 1955 (the Paris premiere was in 1953), and that Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* started the 'angry young man' movement in 1957, the theatre space was still to a certain extent sceptical of the new trends. The reviewer in *The Manchester Guardian* even reproached Pinter for not being able to forget Beckett (cf. Hribar 1999: 202). However, Pinter does admit that a few years before the premiere of *The Caretaker*, the theatre situation began to change. According to a conversation with Richard Findlater, published in *The Twentieth Century* in February 1961, this change had a positive impact on the promotion and success of the play:

As far as the state of the theatre is concerned, /.../ I think things will go on more or less as they are for some considerable time. But it seems to me that there has been a certain development in one channel or another in the past three years. *The Caretaker* wouldn't have been put on, and certainly wouldn't have run, before 1957. The old categories of comedy and tragedy and farce are irrelevant, and the fact that managers seem to have realized that is one favourable change (cf. Pinter 1996: xi).

The critics and the general audience have always been interested in what Pinter himself has to say about his writing. Roger Webster, along with many other literary reviewers and scholars of Pinter's works, suggests that the author of *The Caretaker* has always been reluctant to give definite answers or comments about his plays but has preferred to stay in the background taking the role of an observer:

[S]ome contemporary writers such as Samuel Beckett or Harold Pinter have deliberately avoided making statements about their works when interviewed, as if they had no more right than anyone else to comment on them, seeming to deny any responsibility for them once they are in public circulation (Webster 1997: 21).

Many of Pinter's statements unambiguously confirm these remarks – as, for example, a statement taken from his speech in Hamburg in 1970, when he received the prize for *Landscape and Silence*: "I can sum up none of my plays. I can describe none of them, except to say: That is what happened. That is what they said. That is what they did" (Pinter 1971: 4).

Even now, after a few decades, Pinter has not changed this standpoint. In an interview with Mel Gussow that took place just before the *Harold Pinter Festival* in the summer of 2001 in New York, he confirmed his old belief: "I wouldn't even attempt to define it [the meaning of *Ashes to Ashes*] myself. If I could have defined it, I wouldn't have written it. This really applies to everything I write" (Gussow 2001: 8).

It is, however, possible to find Pinter quoting or commenting on his plays in the media as well as in the critical literature. According to Susan Hollis Merritt, Pinter gives statements when the commercial aspect of his occupation requires it (1990: 12). The common point of the majority of his statements is that Pinter usually does not attribute deep philosophical meaning to his plays but rather

thinks about them as simple reflections of everyday life. The same goes for the ground of their existence. Here is, for example, what he once wrote in a letter to Peter Wood:

The germ of my plays? I'll be as accurate as I can about that. I went into a room and saw one person standing up and one person sitting down, and a few weeks later I wrote *The Room*. I went into another room and saw two people sitting down, and a few years later I wrote *The Birthday Party*. I looked through a door into a third room and saw two people standing up, and I wrote *The Caretaker* (Pinter 1981: 5-6).

This sentence, in which Pinter speaks about his inspiration for *The Caretaker*, refers to the time when he lived in a two-room apartment in London with his wife and son. The owner of the house had a mentally retarded brother, whom Pinter once saw through an open door; beside him was standing a tramp with a huge bag. "From that frozen moment came a dynamic play about power, territory, the tramp's manipulation of the two brothers and his eventual expulsion from this squalid Eden" (Billington 2001: 8).

## 2. PINTER ON THE SLOVENE STAGE AND IN SLOVENE TRANSLATIONS

The first of Pinter's piece to appear on the Slovene theatrical scene was *Homecoming*<sup>1</sup> in 1967. Written in 1964 and staged in several world theatres in the following years (1965 London; 1966 Paris and Boston, 1967 New York etc.), the play could be judged to have come to Slovene audiences relatively soon – even though Pinter had been on the scene for over a decade. The reviews were in certain aspects similar to the ones his earlier texts had received before: they proved that there were vast areas of Pinter's style not yet completely understood – let alone accepted – by the theatre circles of the time. The critics mostly praised the performance but openly questioned the quality of the text. Novak (1967: 7) explicitly states that it was the production that mostly drew spectators to the theatres. Vidmar (1967: 5) is even more severe: while admitting that the text is cunningly and carefully constructed, he questions the point of the play as a whole:

In vain I have tried to realise what in this play could be of interest and what emotion could this text possibly evoke in a spectator other than repulsion and reluctance you feel when listening to obscenities and primitive mischief-making. /.../ Also in vain I have tried to figure out why and what for did Pinter write this play. /.../ Excellent performance, reliable directing and acting services of this young cast are the only excuse for putting this comedy on stage, without which the repertory of our institution would feel no loss in its artistic aspect. /.../ (ibid.; transl. T.O.)

*The Caretaker*<sup>2</sup> came to Slovene stages relatively late – in 1970, which is ten years after the world premiere in London. Despite that and the fact it was not the

115

first production of his work in our cultural space, Pinter was still not well known. In attempt to improve the situation, the theatre program of the Celje production (Ž/mavc/ 1970, n. pag.) contained a complete translation of Schechner's essay, published in 1966, which is an extensive analysis of this particular play as well as of Pinter's style in general; moreover, it provided numerous excerpts from his plays illustrating the points Schechner makes.

The Celje production was reviewed in the newspapers *Večer* (Smasek 1970) and *Delo* (Javornik 1970), the latter focusing more on the guest performance in Mestno gledališče ljubljansko. Both reviews were extensive; they both give credit to the director, the actors, and the performance in general. What is more, they both contain much information about the author, his style, his preferred themes, and – of course – about *The Caretaker*. Javornik does not doubt Pinter's mastery of dialogue and dramatic tension; however, the following quotation proves that he has not fully accepted all the dimensions of Pinter's style:

Šedlbauer [the director of production, T.O.] could, without causing any harm, have shortened that typical but tiring repetition of certain phrases, but, on the other hand, he has created a very lively and dynamic mise-en-scène production (Javornik 1970: 10; transl. T.O.).

After this one, there was only one more Slovene production of *The Caretaker*<sup>3</sup> – more than 20 years later. The theatre program (Bremec 1990) was thinner than the Celje one but still bearing sufficient information about the play and the playwright. Vurnik, who wrote the review of the production, was quite severe towards the play in most of its aspects; however, interestingly enough, he found disturbing the very same elements as Javornik had twenty years before. Paradoxically, these are the elements of Pinter's style that his admirers and scholars of his opus most appreciate:

Possibly, some improvement could apply only to the rhythm of the performance. The dim introduction could be dropped, as well as the delays, because both imply some kind of mystery that doesn't exist at all (Vurnik 1990: 7; transl. T.O.).

At the time this review was written, Pinter's plays had been present on the world scene for over three decades and for over two on Slovene stages. Between the two productions of *The Caretaker* (1970 and 1990), the Slovene audience was able to see *The Birthday Party*<sup>4</sup>, *Betrayal*<sup>5</sup> and three productions of *Old Times*<sup>6</sup> (cf. Hribar 1999: 231-3). The reviews of these performances mostly refrain from taking sides or expressing opinion as one would expect, but they rather adopt a sophisticated explanatory tone, which enables them to provide sufficiently neutral and often highly subjective information. Considering this and the fact that in the late eighties sources on Pinter were abundant, it is surprising that Vurnik hazarded such a groundless and, in fact, mistaken opinion. He overlooked many important qualities of the text that were – despite the inconsistent translation by Janko Moder (cf. Onič 2002) – noticeable in the performances (cf. Pinter 1990<sup>7</sup>).

Pinter has remained current in Slovene theatres ever since the early performances. Since the 1990 production of *The Caretaker*, we have also seen new stagings of *The Birthday Party* (1990, AGRFT; 1997, AGRFT; 2003, PG Kranj), *Betrayal* (1991, PG Kranj) and *Homecoming* (1995, MGL), and three new productions: *Ashes to Ashes* (1998, SNG Ljubljana) and *Dumb Waiter* (2004, AGRFT; 2007, SMG).

Apart from these plays that were put on stage, several others have been translated but never staged. Janko Moder has translated *Trouble in the Works* (Obratne težave), *The Black and White* (Belo in črno), *Request Stop* (Pomožno postajališče), *Last to Go* (Zadnji) and *Applicant* (Prosilec); Dušan Tomše produced the translation of *The Hothouse* (Topla greda); Alja Predan of *Some Kind of Alaska* (Neke vrste Aljaska) and Irena Trenc Frelih of *The Dumb Waiter* (Strežni jašek) (cf. Hribar 1999). From these data and from Darja Hribar's research into Pinter's translations into Slovene (cf. Hribar 1999: 193), it can be concluded that Pinter is one of the most often translated contemporary British playwrights in the Slovene space, since seventeen translations of his plays exist, and nine out of these served as a basis for staging, some even twice or three times.

Pinter's plays are – as Hribar later adds – very popular with theatre professionals, particularly directors and actors, but less so with the audience. For the actor Polde Bibič, for example, who played Davies in the 1990 production of *The Caretaker* in Kranj, "Pinter is, by all means, the author that one takes pleasure in" (Mencinger 1990: 17; transl. T.O.). Petan, the first director to produce Pinter on a Slovene stage, told Darja Hribar in an interview that "the way Pinter writes his stories is exceptional; the actors like to play him. He knows how to write for them" (Hribar 1999: 234; transl. T.O.). According to her analysis, the main reason for such popularity is that his texts allow scope for great creativity. On the other hand, she concludes, the same texts are considerably less popular with the general public. Her assumption is that they require a certain degree of active mental participation on the part of the spectators, who are, unfortunately, not always willing to contribute that, since they may have come to the theatre merely to relax and enjoy an easy show (Hribar 1999: 196). Statistical data to support the statement about the lower popularity of Pinter is the number of repeat performances per production; it seldom gets over 30. *The Birthday Party* in 1979 had 43 performances, which was the most ever; *Homecoming* in 1967, 37 performances; *The Caretaker* in 1970, 12 perf.; *Old Times* in 1974, 23 perf.; *Betrayal* in 1979, 25 perf., in 1995, 19 perf. etc. The threshold of popularity is usually perceived as 100 performances.

Since Pinter puts most of his dramatic power into language, this is only possible with a good translation. Some recent research papers on translation of Pinter's texts confirm that Slovene translation practice lacks consistency and translation strategy (cf. Hribar 1999; Onič 2002, 2004, 2006). Moreover, some translations that circulate among Slovene theatre groups are often not authentic but have been severely adjusted for the specific purposes of certain productions, without any note informing the user of this fact, let alone any authorisation from the translator. Research activity on Pinter in Slovene cultural space and the development of Slovene translatology in general will, undoubtedly, contribute to a better quality of translated texts, and consequently to better performances and greater enjoyment of the Slovene theatre audience.



### 3. RESPONSES ON AWARDING PINTER THE NOBEL PRIZE

The news that the 2005 Nobel Prize for Literature went to Harold Pinter triggered various reactions "on both sides of the Atlantic", mostly opposing ones; "[t]hough feted in the UK, the award has angered the political right in America" (Hitchens 2005). One could find comments of approval and satisfaction as well as some very critical or even irrationally hostile ones. Among the most frequent reproaches to the Prize awarding Committee in Stockholm was that Pinter had won the prize for political rather than artistic reasons: "The award to someone who gave up literature for politics decades ago, and whose politics are primitive and hysterically anti-American and pro-dictatorial, is part of the almost complete degradation of the Nobel racket" (Hitchens 2005). Even Pinter himself admits that the award is artistically as well as politically motivated: "Why they've given me this prize I don't know. /.../ I hadn't seen the citation then. But I suspected that they must have taken my political activities into consideration since my political engagement is very much part of my work" (Pinter's reaction to the news about the award, see Billington 2005).

Even more radically hostile than Hitchens' comment is the column by Roger Kimball, editor of the American magazine *The New Criterion*, who attacks not only Pinter's political activism but also his literary achievements – while also sneering at the Stockholm Academy:

The Nobel committee has for some time demonstrated that its prizes are ridiculous but the award going to Harold Pinter is not only ridiculous but repellent. His anti-American rantings have been saved from being merely outrageous by their insanity. He can't take any public platform without a mad raving about the evils of the American empire /.../ The essence of Pinter's drama is adolescent Samuel Beckett – it's warmed-over and second-hand (Kimball 2005).

On the other hand, Jay Parini (2005: 15), a professor at Middlebury College, Vermont, expresses no doubt that Pinter's views are strongly anti-American and anti-imperial; however, he finds Kimball's remark that his plays are warmed-over and second-hand Beckett "woefully misconceived" (ibid.). Moreover, based on his own theatrical experience, he judges Pinter to be a "ferociously gifted actor" (ibid.). Also Pinter's fellow playwrights, Stoppard, Hare, Frayn and others, reacted positively. Rachel Shteir applauds the decision about the prize winner but is also critical of Pinter's later opus: "Finally, the Nobel Committee for Literature got something right: Harold Pinter. But for all the wrong reasons. /.../ The truth is that about five or six of Pinter's plays are works of great genius, but the leftist politics that he has embraced over the last two decades has nothing to do with them" (2005: 3).

Slovene newspapers mainly recorded the Prize winning event as a news item. They more or less either skim or summarise several leading world reviews and occasionally provide a brief commentary, alongside modest data about Slovene productions of Pinter.

Judging by the reaction of Pinter himself, he accepts praise as well as criticism as if he had been expecting both – which must, indeed, be true: it is true

for anyone with such naked political views as Pinter. Despite the fact that he has officially retired from playwriting, as he told Michael Billington in one of the interviews, the 76-year-old Nobel Prize winner remains active on stage: his most recent part was the role of Krapp in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* that took place in The Royal Court Theatre in October 2006. Connoisseurs say that he may still surprise the public – even with a new play.

1 Slov. *Vrnitev*, transl. C. Kosmač; premiere: Oct 27<sup>th</sup> 1967 in Mala drama SNG Ljubljana; directed by Ž. Petan.

2 Slov. *Hišnik*, transl. J. Moder; premiere: Jun 20<sup>th</sup> 1970 in SLG Celje; directed by Z. Šedlbauer.

3 Slov. *Hišnik*, transl. J. Moder; premiere: Sep 27<sup>th</sup> 1990 in PG Kranj; directed by J. Jamnik.

4 Slov. *Zabava za rojstni dan*, transl. J. Žmavc; premiere Mar 14<sup>th</sup> 1979 in MGL; directed by Z. Šedlbauer.

5 Slov. *Prevara*, transl. D. Tomše; premiere: Nov 22<sup>nd</sup> 1979 in SNG Ljubljana; directed by M. Herzog.

6 Slov. *Njega dni*, transl. M. Golob; premiere: Oct 18<sup>th</sup> 1974 in SNG Ljubljana; directed by M. Herzog. Second and third productions bore the Slovene title *Stari časi*, transl. M. Golob; premieres: May 21<sup>st</sup> 1982 in AGRFT; directed by B. Dobravc, and Oct 10<sup>th</sup> 1987 in SLG Celje; directed by D. Mlakar.

7 This conclusion is based on a working video recording of one of the performances. A generalised statement is possible under the presumption that individual performances do not differ among themselves to such an extent as to refute the relevance of the above commentary.

## REFERENCES

Billington, H. 2005. They said you've a call from the Nobel committee. I said, why?: Harold Pinter in his own words. *The Guardian* 14.10., 23.

Billington, M. 2001. His Genius Is to Find The Drama Between The Words. *The New York Times* 15.7., 1 and 8.

Bremec, M. (ed.). 1990. *Hišnik. Gledališki list*. Kranj: PG Kranj.

Ellis, S. 2003. Birthday Party, London 1958. *The Guardian* 2.4., 4.

*Guardian, the*. 2005. Harold Pinter's surprise 75<sup>th</sup> birthday present. 14.10., n. pag.

Gussow, M. 2001. Notes On Pinter, Given By Pinter. *The New York Times* 15.7., 5 and 8.

Hitchens, C. 2005. See *Guardian, the*.

Hobson, H. 1958. The Screw Turns Again. *Sunday Times* 25.5., 11.

Hollis-Merritt, S. 1990. *Pinter in Play*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Hribar, D. 1999. *Sestavine sloga Harolda Pinterja v slovenskih prevodih*. University of Ljubljana. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation.

Javornik, M. 1970. Pinterjeva inačica. *Delo* 16.6., 5.

Jongh, N. de. 2004. The Tramp in the Pleasure Dome. [Internet]. Available at: <http://www.alanbates.com/abarchive/stage/Caretaker/carelondon.html> [3.9.2004].

Kimball, R. 2005. See *Guardian, the*.

Mencinger, L. 1990. Na odru je doma resnica. *Gorenjski glas* 19.10., 17.

Novak, J. 1967. Harold Pinter: Vrnitev. *Mladina* 13.11., 7.

Onič, T. 2002. Drama Harolda Pinterja *Hišnik* v Slovenskem kulturnem prostoru. University of Ljubljana. Unpublished Master's Thesis.

Onič, T. 2004. Mutacije kot najradikalnejši pomenski premiki med izvirnikom in prevodom Pinterjevega *Hišnika*. *Vestnik* 38, no. 1-2, 273-81.

Onič, T. 2006. Translating recurrences in Pinter's plays. *ELOPE* 2, no. 1-2, 293-9.

Parini, J. 2005. Pinter's Plays, Pinter's Politics. *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, issue 12, 15-9.



- Pinter, H. 2004. From the Cambridge Review. [Internet]. Available at: [http://www.haroldpinter.org/plays/plays\\_bdayparty.shtml](http://www.haroldpinter.org/plays/plays_bdayparty.shtml) [3.9.2004].
- Pinter, H. 1996. *Plays 2*. London and Boston: Faber & Faber.
- Pinter, H. 1990. *Hišnik*. Video recording of the performance (unpublished). PG Kranj.
- Pinter, H. 1981. A Letter from Harold Pinter to Peter Wood. *Drama: Quarterly Theatre Review*, Winter, 5-6.
- Pinter, H. 1971. Transcript of a Speech in Hamburg, 1970. *Theatre Quarterly I*, Jul-Sep, 3-4.
- Pryce-Jones, A. 1960. Through the looking-glass. *The Observer* 29.4., 21.
- Shteir, R. 2005. The Nobel Fool: Harold Pinter's strident politics. *Slate Magazine* 17.10., 3.
- Shulman, M. 1958. Sorry Mr Pinter, you're just not funny enough. *Evening Standard* 20.5., 6.
- Smasek, L. 1970. Boj proti osamljenosti. *Večer* 19.6., 10.
- Tynan, K. 1960. A Verbal Wizard in the Suburbs. *Observer* 5.6., 12.
- Vidmar, J. 1967. Harold Pinter: Vrnitev. *Delo* 27.10., 5.
- Vurnik, F. 1990. Malo oddaljena prispodoba. *Gorenjski glas* 2.10., 7.
- Webster, R. 1997. *Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction*. London, New York: Arnold.
- Ž/mavc/, J. (ed.). 1970. *Hišnik. Gledališki list*. Celje: SLG. n. pag.

## SUMMARY

### FROM "NOT FUNNY ENOUGH" TO THE NOBEL PRIZE: RECEPTION OF HAROLD PINTER INTERNATIONALLY AND IN SLOVENIA

Plays by Harold Pinter have always attracted attention from theatre and literary critics. In the last 50 years, his opus received a vast variety of domestic as well as international reviews, the Slovene space being no exception. This article sets out a selection of the most prominent and influential productions of his plays on the world and Slovene stages, and adds selected analyses of and comments on the critical views provided by Pinter himself and by others. Some representative reactions to Pinter's winning the 2005 Nobel Prize for Literature are presented in the last part of the paper.

**KEYWORDS:** Harold Pinter, drama, theatre, reception, translation, Nobel Prize.