

Michael Billington

## Pinter Plays Beckett

Harold Pinter's performance of *Krapps Last Tape* took place at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs in October 2006. It was a momentous event for all sorts of reasons. Here was Pinter, Britain's greatest living playwright, paying tribute to his great friend and fellow Nobel laureate, Samuel Beckett. There was also a sense, given Pinter's frailty and battle with cancer of the oesophagus, that we were watching his final performance as an actor: the profession in which he started his theatrical career. The limited number of performances, in a tiny theatre seating no more than seventy or eighty people, also meant that each performance was a special occasion. The production had sold out within seventeen minutes of the booking office opening; and, as I wrote at the time, it was easier to get a ticket for the FA cup final than for *Krapps Last Tape*. Fortunately the production, beautifully directed by Ian Rickson, was recorded by the BBC in one of its rare moments of cultural enlightenment and we can now enjoy that performance today.

Pinter's discovery of Beckett dates back to the early 1950s when he was a young actor touring Ireland's small towns with a company led by Anew McMaster. Pinter came across an extract from Beckett's novel, *Watt*, in a magazine called Poetry Ireland. He was stunned by what he read and even tried to ring the magazine's number to find out more about the writer. As is so often the case with small literary magazines, there was no reply. And when Pinter got back to London in 1953 he tried to find out more about Beckett. No bookshop had ever heard of

him so Pinter went to the Westminster Library who came up with a copy of Beckett's *Murphy*. Pinter borrowed it, devoured it and, in one of his few consciously illegal acts, has kept it to this day. Pinter once told me «I suddenly felt that what Beckett's writing was doing was walking through a mirror into the other side of the world which was, in fact, the real world. What I seemed to be confronted with was a writer inhabiting his innermost self.»<sup>1</sup>

Pinter explored his admiration for Beckett in a prose piece dating from 1954 and quoted in the Royal Court programme. It's so vividly written that it's worth quoting in full. This is Pinter on Beckett:

«The farther he goes the more good it does me. I don't want philosophies, tracts, dogmas, creeds, ways out, truths, answers, nothing from the bargain basement. He is the most courageous, remorseless writer going and the more he grinds my nose in the shit the more I am grateful to him. He's not fucking me about, he's not leading me up any garden path, he's not slipping me any wink, he's not flogging me a remedy or path or a revelation or a basinful of breadcrumbs, he's not selling me anything I don't want to buy, he hasn't got his hand over his heart. Well, I'll buy his goods hook line and sinker, because he leaves no stone unturned and no maggot lonely. He brings forth a body of beauty. His work is beautiful.»<sup>2</sup>

What is fascinating is that Pinter seizes on Beckett's remorseless regard for truth, his total lack of sentimentality, his refusal to ingratiate himself with the reader or spectator. All those qualities characterise Pinter's own work; and it was almost inevitable that the two men would strike up a firm friendship. Indeed there's a very famous story of how that friendship was cemented. In 1961 Pinter was in Paris for the French premiere of *The Caretaker* and the two writers went on a prolonged drinking bout that ended up in a restaurant at Les Halles at four o'clock in the morning. Pinter passed out at the table and awoke

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Billington, *Harold Pinter*, London, Faber & Faber, 2007 (1996), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Pinter, *Various Voices*, London, Faber & Faber, 2009 (1998), p. 67.

to find that Beckett had gone. But he came back shortly after with a tin of bicarbonate of soda that Beckett had scoured all of Paris to find. It's a story that says a lot, not just about the two men's capacity for drink but about Beckett's practicality, kindness and genuine affection for the younger writer.

Beckett's actual influence on Pinter's work is a vast subject which there isn't time to fully explore here, but I would agree with Peter Hall who once said: «I believe Beckett and Pinter are poetic dramatists in the proper sense of the word: they have a linear structure and a formal structure which you'd better just observe: don't learn it wrong, don't speak it wrong». I also detect a similar pattern in their writing careers. Beckett once said: «The only possible development for the artist is in the sense of depth. The artistic tendency is not expansion but a contraction»<sup>3</sup>. Just as Beckett's plays, from *Waiting For Godot* onwards, are a steady process of elimination, so Pinter's work gradually refines the central image and narrows the focus. There is a vast difference between Pinter's *The Birthday Party* written in 1958, which observes a traditional three-act structure, and his final play, *Celebration*, set in the course of a meal in a restaurant. But while Pinter undoubtedly absorbed a lot from Beckett – especially a belief that it is not up to the writer to provide a play with a formal resolution – I think there are also tangible distinctions between the two writers. Pinter's work is, I believe, more grounded in a world of observed daily reality than Beckett's. I find it very significant that Pinter has also discouraged revivals of a short play he wrote in 1968, *Silence*, because he regards it as too consciously and studiously Beckettian. I'd say there is a deep affinity between the two dramatists but that Pinter has always been aware of the need to escape from his friend's hypnotic influence.

Which brings us to his performance in *Krapp's Last Tape*, a work Beckett wrote in English in 1958 for the Irish actor Patrick Magee with

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Proust, and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, London, John Calder, 1987, p. 64.

whom he had worked on various BBC projects and who was, incidentally, a close friend of Pinter's. Although there is only one person in the play, Beckett manages to have two characters: the 69-year-old Krapp and his younger 39-year-old self. The older man listens to the recorded voice of his younger being and plays back his distant memories. Many critics have seen this as a comment on Beckett's concern with man's basic dualism, with the Cartesian separation of mind and body. The play thus becomes about Krapp's attempt to reconcile the apparently incompatible worlds of sense and spirit. But I prefer to see the play as a more specific comment on the dilemma of the creative artist: the younger Krapp has renounced love, life, religion and human relationships in order to concentrate on the solitary act of writing only to find that, in his old age, he has nothing left to write about. On top of that, the play is also a Proustian study of the human condition: a search for lost time in which we found our present condition mocked by our past wishes and dreams. However you interpret the play, what is certain is that it provides an unforgettable theatrical image and its ironies have only increased as we have gone far beyond clumsy tape-recorders and can now, if we choose, survey our past selves through the lens of a camcorder.

But what did Pinter bring to the role? I have seen many other actors play Krapp over the years. They include the great German actor, Martin Held, in Beckett's own production and the British actors, Albert Finney, John Hurt and Max Wall. Each had his own quality: one of my favourites was Max Wall who was a Buster Keaton-style comedian of great delicacy who gave the word "spool" extraordinary resonance. Wall's comic presence reminds us of certain things that Pinter, because of his physical frailty, couldn't do. He couldn't gorge bananas and then slip on their discarded skins and he also couldn't totter in and out of the room or scurry about as I've seen many actors do. But that, I felt, worked to Pinter's advantage, as he was forced to do the play in a motorised wheelchair which he uses to propel himself in and out of the

room. This emphasised Krapp's decrepitude and impotent helplessness and also heightened the contrast between past and present, between the active man whose voice we hear on the tape-recorder and the prematurely aged figure we see living in the shadow of death. The physical image Pinter presented was clear and powerful. He was also aided, both on stage and in the TV version, by a magnificent design by Hildegard Bechtler and superb lighting by Paul Constable. One critic, Alastair Macaulay, commented that Pinter's face and hands were lit so that they looked like Rembrandt's great oil paintings of old people and that his eyes looked out from pools of shadow. The set also had a wonderful gaunt vacancy evoking not just the barrenness of Krapp's existence but a strangely depopulated world. Aside from the tape-filled desk, the only visible objects were shelves filled with dusty manuscripts and a fireplace that, as a friend said, looked as if it had never been lit. Sound also played a crucial part in this production, from the winds that howled round this desolate house to the tolling church bells suggesting impending death.

And what of Pinter's own performance? There was too much stress on his apparent identification with the role. Here, after all, was one ailing old man who had looked death in the face playing another in the terminal stage of his existence. But Pinter's life, vastly rich in achievement and filled with love and laughter, could hardly be less like that of Beckett's hero. What Pinter gives us is a real performance, that of a man shrouded, towards the end of his days, in disillusion and disappointment. And, watching it again on screen, one sees how many different facets of Krapp Pinter catches. At first, there is great emphasis on Pinter's brooding features which seem to be sculpted out of darkness: notice how the camera lingers on his shadowed eyes and heavy, silver-flecked eyebrows. There is also a scratchy, impatient anger in the way he searches amongst the heap of metal boxes on his table and rifles through his ledgers looking for the appropriate tape. Amongst many other things, the play seems to be a comment on the futility of at-

tempting to codify life rather than actually living it. Alongside the anger, Pinter also reveals Krapp's delight in the sound and texture of words: not just «spool» but also «viduity» which, of course, Krapp has to look up in a dictionary. When he comes to the definition of it as not simply «the condition of being a widow or widower» but also «black plumage of male» Pinter expresses the relish of even a failed writer in the unexpected oddities of language.

The art of playing Krapp, of course, is that it demands endless reaction as well as action. In that the play resembles Beckett's *Endgame* where the performer has to respond to the voice of a woman from his past that he hears in his head. In this instance, Krapp is reacting to his own younger self and here Pinter gives us an astonishing repertoire of reactions. At times, his fingers drum impatiently on the table. When he hears his resolution to lead a «less engrossing sexual life» his features display puzzlement. At another time, he recalls a young woman he met who threatened to call a policeman when he spoke to her «as if», he says, «I had designs on her virtue». At this Pinter lets out a sinister, cackling laugh. This is what makes the performance so strong: Pinter suggests that there was a power and sexual energy in the 39-year-old Krapp which makes the retreat into solitude all the more painful and melancholy. There was a life, you feel, in the younger man which has been pointlessly repressed in the interests of a failed creative dream.

Pinter reacts vividly to Krapp's recorded past, but he also captures the mixture of bitterness and fear that pervades Krapp in the present. Pinter suggests the sheer physical effort required to get the equipment ready to make a new recording. He also snatches vehemently at the whisky bottle from which he takes copious drinks. He hurls his copy of Theodor Fontane's great German novel, *Effi Briest*, off his table as if to banish all memories of transgressive passion. And, as he bears distant bells chiming, he looks anxiously over his shoulder unto the surrounding darkness as if he could actually sense the presence of death in the room. As he listens to the final recollections, where Krapp talks of «the

fire in me now,» Pinter's face stares outwards as if haunted forever by the vanity of his memories. I repeat that this is a tremendous performance; and one over which I know Pinter took great care and trouble. I recall going to visit him one day in his London study several months before the production was due to start rehearsal. I shall never forget the image of Pinter hunched over a Grundig tape-recorder making sure that he had mastered the business of swapping reels and punching the appropriate buttons. The performance also proves that, if Pinter hadn't been a brilliant playwright, he could have been a first-rate actor. I've seen him several times on stage in recent years playing Hirst in *No Man's Land* and Colonel Roote in *The Hothouse*; and only this week I was watching a showing of a TV film called *Langrishe, Go Home*, in which Pinter plays a drunken, irascible Irishman. Pinter has always had a formidable weight, authority and presence on stage and a voice capable of hitting the deepest notes. With age and sickness, the voice has inevitably lost a little of its resonance, but Pinter still subtly contrasts the two voices of Beckett's hero separated by a gap of thirty years.

So, in Jan Rickson's fine film there is something more than a record of a performance. This version of *Krapp's Last Tape* was staged partly to honour the Beckett centenary and partly to celebrate the Royal Court's own fiftieth anniversary, yet it becomes something more than that. It is an unforgettable and deeply moving tribute in which an actor-playwright pays homage to a loved colleague, mentor and friend who, as he said fifty four years ago, never «sells me anything I don't want to buy.»<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Harold Pinter, *Various Voices*, London, Faber & Faber, 2009 (1998), p. 67.