

Gianfranco Capitta

Radio Londra

Watching the video recording of the show *Krapp's Last Tape* was extremely emotional for me because I knew Pinter, I had been reading him for years, and in the last fifteen years I had been lucky enough to meet him at regular intervals: seeing him in a wheelchair when the curtain rose, intent on listening to his own voice which had been recorded a long time before, inevitably leads me to think about an existential fracture, which Pinter himself spoke about when he went public with his battle against illness, about which he wrote some wonderful works, such as the poem *Cancer Cells*.

His voice, not the one recorded in the video of *Krapp's Last Tape*, but his voice from years ago, which we can hear in films or in other recordings, was wonderful, full of authority: the voice of a great seducer. His illness had obviously softened the tone and blunted its complexity and richness, but it was probably the effects of the chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatments rather than the illness itself that had blunted the charm of those Shakespearian tones, honed by his early years on gruelling tours, bringing Shakespeare or detective plays to provincial theatres.

His being in a wheelchair and listening to the tapes seemed to me like the time after and before an illness, which might be an illness relating to the theatre. There's no need for medical records because this 'disease' is really a passion for the theatre, a 'disease' that prevented him from enjoying what could have been the biggest moment of his life, which was when he should have gone to Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize.

How terrible for an actor and writer not being able to be there in person! He did, however, send a video, in which he recorded a speech that will go down in history for its harshness, ruthlessness and political clarity, a speech that no intellectual worth his salt will be able to disregard. It must have been truly terrible for him to miss out on that moment of crowning glory.

His voice, recorded in *Krapp's Last Tape* on an old-fashioned tape-recorder, croaks and crackles like those voices that we sometimes hear on an old radio: a depository and a place for the transmission of an art, which is the art of writing, of theatre, and therefore, of a life. These may seem to be clichés, but there is so much in them, including the motivation to be a great writer.

Perhaps this impression of mine is distorted by the fact that I've been working on Rai Radio 3 for thirty years, I work with the theatre and I often have to handle tapes with the voices of actors that the Rai archives bring back to life, and which can be very emotional to listen to. This is where the title for my article comes from, which, while not wishing to emulate the dramatic function of Radio Londra in wartime, is an attempt to recount my feelings about what happens beyond our cultural confines and also to try and break down the autarky that we build around us.

Someone who was very important in keeping alive the memory of the theatre was Martin Esslin, who worked for the BBC. When I was lucky enough to meet him he was a very distinguished and adorable old man, who spoke English, German and also a little Italian. I met him in a café in Trieste and he looked like an old sepia photograph of the classic Middle European. Esslin was in fact born in Austria and was of Jewish origin. In 1939, when he was about twenty, he travelled to Brussels and, fortunately for him, he took a train to London instead of going back to Germany, where he would almost certainly have been rounded up and sent to a concentration camp. Like many Middle European intellectuals who headed west, as far afield as America, Esslin was a well-educated,

intelligent and brilliant man and joined the BBC staff, where he was responsible for theatre programming. Here he demonstrated a great talent for commissioning radio plays from up-and-coming writers, some of whom were very young, and that nobody imagined would one day become Beckett, Pinter or one of the others who followed in their footsteps, and who were able to survive thanks to those texts. Pinter acknowledged that the money he had earned from the BBC had allowed him to continue writing. The names of these writers began to be heard, but more importantly the words they wrote began to be heard. Many of his works, such as *A Slight Ache* or other radio plays and sketches, made their debut on the radio and many of them were later staged in the theatre and achieved great success in the West End too.

Esslin told me that while travelling in France he discovered Ionesco, Adamov and the French playwrights of that time who were not at all appreciated in England. On returning to London, he decided to write *The Theatre of the Absurd*, which would become a classic essay on the subject, whose praiseworthy aim was to try and put this unfair treatment right. Esslin analysed the work of writers who were actually very different from one another such as Beckett, Pinter, Adamov, Genet and Ionesco, writers who apart from a few incidental episodes had almost nothing in common. The book was a bestseller both in Europe and in America, and although it was mostly read by academics, its title became a kind of trademark, a slogan that became part of the common language in many countries. It clearly demonstrated Esslin's foresight and the way he understood Pinter and helped him by launching him on the radio too.

The 'radio', or rather the voice, is Pinter's voice, recorded during the performance of *Krapp's Last Tape*: today this seems to me the most precious legacy, the essence of theatre itself. As a spectator I was present at the birth and development of 'stage writing', 'image theatre', 'post avant-garde' and 'dance theatre', to name but a few of the most well-known labels, up until the new frontiers of the latest theatrical

generations which often use a lot of technology, a phenomenon that is also worthy of interest and attention.

The word is what remains though, both in Beckett and in Pinter, with its sound, its scanning, its choice, its meanness and its 'bonds'. It is not by chance that after many years, the strict judges from the Stockholm Science Academy have given increasing prominence to the field of literature (Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1969), and in a relatively short space of time they have rewarded the work of Dario Fo, Harold Pinter and even Elfriede Jelinek, writer of works that are hard-hitting rather than captivating and strongly, even aggressively theatrical. It is, as I said, not by chance, since these very different plays share a greatness of style and a strong opposition to the establishment, and obviously seemed to be the most important for a very reliable jury, uninfluenced either by the publishing industry or by politics.

In short, the word 'said' is central, and in Pinter's interpretation of *Krapp's Last Tape* there is a kind of interpenetration, a 'Pinterisation' of Beckett's writing, which remains, however, an untouchable style and closely linked to its author. But when Pinter recites and recounts Krapp's three moments, of his awareness of the world, and says goodbye to love with the extraordinary and moving line «farewell *to* – pause – *love*» we feel that it includes all his poetry and his writing and that we are watching a meeting between two masters on the common ground of the text.

In Italy Pinter's plays have been staged since the beginning of the 1960s, shortly after they had appeared in Great Britain. Pinter was of course closely connected to great actors who could communicate with his words. Some interpreters of his works were his *alter egos*: Patrick Magee, Ian Holm, Alan Bates and Telly Savalas, stars of auteur cinema and adventure films, familiar faces for the general public thanks to some popular TV series. In Great Britain there is more flexibility compared to Italy, in the sense that you can work in experimental or 'poor' theatre and at the same time be the leading character in a TV police series.

Pinter's great success in Italy was also due to the choice of certain actors. It is a curious thing that in the century of directors, whenever 'Pinter is on stage', it's difficult to remember the director's name, with the possible exception of Visconti. We remember the actors though, as in the case of Umberto Orsini who has made a comeback recently to act in *Old Times* after the daring performance of 1972 directed by Visconti, which caused a scandal. The occasion for staging the play was to inaugurate the Teatro Argentina season. The theatre had just been renovated and was all in yellow velvet, and they chose a great contemporary writer, Harold Pinter, and a great director, Luchino Visconti. The latter had always alternated between cinema, opera and theatre (where thanks to him the Italians discovered the contemporary world after the obscurantism of Fascism). He was, in short, a sort of 'father of the performing arts', but by that time he was already quite ill. For *Old Times* (renamed *Tanto tempo fa* or *Once Upon a Time*) he called three important actors: Umberto Orsini, Valentina Cortese (in that period the star of the Piccolo Teatro di Milano and Strehler's muse) and a young but already famous actress, Adriana Asti. Visconti dismantled the restored eighteenth-century theatre, put a ring in the centre and placed the audience in their chairs around what thus became a kind of arena where the actors 'played' the text as if it were a kind of match or even a fight.

Visconti was a master, the director of *Death in Venice*, a consummate specialist in certain ambiguities, and for this very reason he was chosen to direct Pinter's work. All his films are full of a very ambiguous and elusive eroticism. For the performance of *Old Times* he probably accentuated certain aspects that are also present in Pinter's original version, such as the attraction between the two women who do actually hide behind their apparent friendship the fact that they are each others' double. Umberto Orsini was a young and very handsome actor, the 'sweetheart' of Italian theatre, who carried on a shameless seduction of both the ladies. Visconti was not keen on the official translation of the play authorised by Pinter and asked Gerardo Guerrieri to do the job instead. Guerrieri was a great

man of the theatre, with whom Visconti had often worked, and he produced a version that was perhaps closer to the original, but it was this very translation at the root of what happened later on. Pinter arrived in Rome incognito, bought a ticket at the ticket office, and according to legend, in a moment of silence during the performance (which was perhaps the twentieth performance) let fly a loud whistle from the gallery. What *is* certain, however, is that the following morning he called a press conference and announced that he was going to withdraw the production rights. This was a huge scandal, which marked a clampdown on copyright. The fact is, however, that to define Visconti as a ‘Pinteresque director’ is out of place since in reality he is remembered as such only because he was involved in such a regrettable incident.

In the history of theatre everything is based on memory, where the word and its sound are crucial. We have our memories of two great Italian actors who are part of the Italian history of Pinter. We have already mentioned Orsini, whose name is linked to an important work, and while the performances of Valerio Binasco and Paolo Rossi (who made his first appearance in *The Dumb Waiter* several years ago in Milan) were memorable, Carlo Cecchi and Paolo Bonacelli are the ones who have really cultivated and even matured Pinter’s plays over the years. These two actors are completely different from each other, but both have given superb performances also in roles that Pinter himself had played with masterly skill. Let’s take, for example, the story of the lunatic asylum in *The Hothouse*, in which Cecchi played the part of director of this institution. It is he who is the real madman, even though those techniques of manipulation, control and conditioning have turned out to be less science fiction than they seemed. It is not by chance that Pinter, who had written that same story several years previously, later felt the need to make a play out of it, almost as if he felt that he’d been overtaken by events, at a time in which certain practices were becoming everyday

occurrences. Before *The Hothouse* Cecchi had also been unforgettable in the leading role in *The Birthday Party*, and in *The Homecoming*.

This is the confirmation that Pinter's word is remembered, even though it's very different from Italian theatrical language, because there are worthy actors such as Bonacelli, who in plays like *No Man's Land* (I was lucky enough to see Pinter in that play in 1993 in London) managed to make his own translation and at the same time give it a new and personal rhythm. Another interesting performance by Bonacelli was in *Party Time*. The performance, which was for a live radio show directed by Cesare Lievi, was presented to the general public in 1994 at the Festival of Parma with an excellent cast of actors. *Party Time* could be defined as a conversation piece, but it is one of three of Pinter's plays that critics have lazily labelled as being 'political', since it stages scenes of horrors that are very close to home. Here the scene takes place in a living room where there is a party in full swing where a group of rich and powerful people make small talk about fitness, sex, and the snobbiest food fads. Bonacelli played the master of the house, the head of a sort of mafia clan, a Masonic lodge or totalitarian party, which gathers together in an area that is tightly defended by the police, a high-security 'red zone' that the guests themselves mention: «My driver had to stop at a... you know... what do you call it?... a roadblock. We had to say who we were». While we are listening to the most awful and yet trendy chatter, we can hear the noise of clashes and fighting, and finally of something irreparable, the death of Jimmy, a young man who later appears on stage as a ghost. This play, written in 1992, went on stage in Parma in 1994, while in Italy the interweaving of political relations with social ones paved the way for a new party created by a club. A few years later, in 2001, terrible things happened at the G8 in Genoa. Once again the theatre provided the tools for understanding, foreshadowing and representing what was happening in reality, with more effective results than any rally or talk show.

In the autumn of 2006, during that memorable evening of the performance of *Krapp's Last Tape* at the Royal Court, the last blow below

the belt was still to come. For just under an hour Pinter/Krapp, confined to a wheelchair, majestic despite wearing a dressing gown, had flipped through those tapes of memories, provoking emotions that gave you the shivers. Then, at the end, it goes dark. A few seconds go by, because it's difficult for the audience to recover and come back from semi-darkness to reality, and finally, thunderous applause. We had seen Pinter ill, in a wheelchair, and each of us had 'imagined', had yielded to feelings of compassion and pity, but when the lights came back on, Pinter stood up, thanked us contritely, and walked off stage. It was a liberating, wonderful and very meaningful moment. It was a victory for the word, for memory and for the experience of the coming end over Krapp's agony. And the fact that we continue to live with words and memories is a sign of great hope.