

# THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

## On-line Resources

Welcome to Part 1 of TAG's on-line resources for our production of **The Birthday Party** by Harold Pinter.

These resources are divided into 2 parts. Part 1 is intended to give an insight into Pinter, his style of writing and the play itself by looking at previous productions of **The Birthday Party**. Generally aimed at Higher Drama students, this pack complements units 1, 2 and 3 of the syllabus. However, these resources are also useful for the Knowledge and Understanding elements of Standard Grade as well as the Special Study for Advanced Higher Drama. I have collated information from various sources in order to provide material for use before your students see TAG's production.

In September 2003, Part 2 will be available to download from TAG's website. This section of the resources will focus on the process of creating our production of **The Birthday Party**. It will include contributions from the Director, the Designer, the Performers and other members of the creative team. I hope that Part 2 will open up TAG's working methods and provide a real insight into how a theatre company works.

Please feel free to reproduce any section of the on-line resources for your use in the classroom.

We are always aiming to provide the most effective and beneficial resources for teachers and so please do offer any comments you have regarding either part of this pack. We welcome and appreciate all feedback.











I very much hope that you and your pupils find the resources useful and enjoy TAG's production of **The Birthday Party**.



Emily Ballard  
Education Officer



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## Characters

<b>PETEY</b>	a man in his sixties
<b>MEG</b>	a woman in her sixties
<b>STANLEY</b>	a man in his late thirties
<b>LULU</b>	a girl in her twenties
<b>GOLDBERG</b>	a man in his fifties
<b>McCANN</b>	a man of thirty

All the action takes place in the living room of a house in a seaside town. Meg runs the house as a guest-house and her husband Petey works as a deck chair attendant on the beach. Stanley Webber is their only guest.

## Act 1

Breakfast. Petey tells Meg that he was approached by two men last night who want to stay at the house. Meg assumes that they have read about the guest-house on “the list”. She calls up to Stanley and addresses him as if he were a child. She returns to the living room, breathless and arranging her hair. Stanley enters in his pyjamas. Petey goes back to work.

Meg is flirtatious yet motherly with Stanley who appears to be in a bad mood. Meg mentions the two men and Stanley does not believe her - “it’s a false alarm”. Stanley says that he is going on a world tour as a pianist. Meg asks him not to go – she wants him to stay with her. Stanley then suddenly starts to tease Meg. He becomes threatening and she is frightened.

Lulu enters and accuses Stanley of getting under Meg’s feet all day. Stanley suddenly asks her to come away with him but he has nowhere to take her. She declares, “You’re a bit of a washout, aren’t you?” and leaves. Stanley goes to wash his face. He sees Goldberg and McCann and slips out of the back door.

Goldberg and McCann enter. McCann seems nervous about “the job” they have come to do. Goldberg, his superior, is relaxed. Meg enters and they introduce themselves. Meg tells them that it is Stanley’s birthday today and Goldberg decides that they will have a party for him. They go up to their room and Stanley enters. He knows Goldberg. Meg presents him with a birthday gift – a toy drum. Stanley begins to play the drum, becoming more and more “savage and possessed”.



## Act 2

That evening, McCann is sitting at the table tearing a sheet of newspaper into strips. Stanley enters. They talk about the party planned for this evening. McCann starts to whistle “The Mountains of Mourne” and Stanley joins in. Stanley recognises McCann but McCann denies it. Stanley then denies it is his birthday. He seems desperate to tell McCann that he hasn’t caused any trouble, that it is all a mistake. He grabs McCann’s arm and McCann savagely hits him.

Petey enters and introduces Goldberg to Stanley, but Stanley says nothing until Petey has left to go to a chess game. Stanley tells Goldberg to leave and not to cause any trouble. Goldberg and McCann interrogate Stanley, their questions becoming gradually more ridiculous. Stanley kicks Goldberg in the stomach and they prepare to fight.

There is the sound of a drum beating and Meg enters, wearing her evening dress for the party. Goldberg asks Meg to toast Stanley and they switch off the lights and shine a torch in his face. Lulu enters and Goldberg makes a speech. Stanley is silent while Lulu talks with Goldberg and Meg talks nostalgically with McCann. Lulu is infatuated with Goldberg and they become close throughout the scene. They play Blind Man’s Buff. When Stanley is blindfolded, he tries to strangle Meg. The lights go out and he assaults Lulu. As Goldberg and McCann approach him he backs away giggling uncontrollably.

## Act 3

The next morning. Meg serves Petey breakfast. They talk about Goldberg’s car which is now parked outside the house. Meg wants to wake Stanley but Petey tells her to leave him - “let him sleep...this morning”. Goldberg enters and Meg leaves. Petey questions him about Stanley. Petey is concerned about what happened at the party. Petey wants Stanley to see a doctor. Goldberg assures him that they are going to take him to “Monty”.

McCann enters with two suitcases. Petey goes out to tend his peas while he waits for Stanley to come down. Goldberg tells McCann that he feels “knocked out”. He is not his usual lucid, charming self. He seems lost. McCann wants to leave. Lulu enters after spending the night with Goldberg. She feels used and is outraged that he is leaving. McCann insults her and she leaves.

Stanley enters. He is now clean-shaven and wearing a suit. He is silent. Goldberg and McCann are going to take him away. He tries to speak but can only make sounds. Petey pleads with them to leave him alone. They go. Meg enters. Petey tells her that Stanley is still in bed and goes back to his newspaper. Meg loses herself in her memories of the “lovely party” last night, where she was “the belle of the ball”.



## Pinter's Style

Pinter's impact on the theatre and on literature in general has led to his name passing into general use as a byword for his style. "Pinteresque" is the label often given to sum up something English, tense and ambiguous. It came into usage in 1960, just 3 years after the first performance of his first play.

Below are a few elements of this style:

- Not realism yet he shows a dislike of symbolism and abstraction.
- Pinter writes for a proscenium arch stage.
- Avoidance of communication – expression through silence.
- Audience insecurity parallels that of the characters. Pinter frustrates the audience's need for the "truth".
- Mixture of comic and tragic, but there is no humour at the end of Pinter's plays.
- Recognised for his use of silences.
- Conflict between surface appearance and deeper reality is basis for subject matter and dramatic technique.
- Many of his plays develop from the moment of intrusion into a room – privacy is invaded and a threatening situation ensues.
- Territory is coveted, but there is always more at stake.
- Characters do not always operate according to reason. The individual is affected by the past which cannot be defined by certainty. The past is a continuous mystery – it leaves us in the present in a state of insecurity.
- Personal insecurity of characters leads them to use language games to protect themselves.

- Character study in Pinter is difficult – his characters do not want to be known and rarely offer a convincing explanation of themselves.
- Character's perception of him/herself can be at once both false and true – true to the character but seemingly false to everyone else.
- Threats are subtle – victim must never be sure that the antagonist is his enemy yet the presence of imminent violence haunts all Pinter's plays.

**Can you think of any examples of when this style is seen in *The Birthday Party*?**

Ronald Knowles suggests that the characteristic concerns of Pinter's plays are as follows:

**Security and menace**

**Pattern and shapelessness**

**Game and disorder**

**Identity and anonymity**

**Familiar and strange**

**Friendship and loneliness**

**How do these themes relate to *The Birthday Party*?**





### DRAMA EXERCISE

#### Pinteresque Impros

- Take some of these ideas about Pinter's concerns and his writing style and create your own Pinteresque scene through improvisation.
- What kinds of situations and characters did you create?
- How did the rest of the group feel when watching this scene?

### DRAMA EXERCISE

#### Notorious Silences

Director Peter Hall, who directed his first of many Pinter plays in 1964, explains his interpretation of the different kinds of silences Pinter uses.

- . . . Three dots signifies a pressure point. A search for a word – the character is unable to express him/herself clearly.
- **Pause** Where lack of speech becomes a form of speech – a threat. A moment of tension.
- **Silence** Extreme crisis point. Often a character emerges from a silence completely changed. This change is often unexpected and highly dramatic – the actor must fill the pause with intention.

- In pairs, look at Extract A (page 22 Stanley's first meeting with Goldberg, or Extract B (page 23) where Petey questions Goldberg after the party. Work out exactly what is happening at each of the pressure points, pauses and silences, i.e. what is going on under the surface – what is the *subtext*?
- Perform the scene, once you have found the subtext.
- If you were watching this scene, what do you think was happening during the silences?
- Try re-working the scene so that instead of the printed lines, the characters say what they are thinking – reveal the subtext that the characters are hiding.



Here are some suggestions from Peter Hall about how Pinter's plays should be directed:

- Text is as considered as a poet's – you must pay rigorous respect to the form.
- There is a rhythm to the text.
- Directors of Pinter must preserve the ambiguity, but they must always know what they are hiding.
- Basis of much of Pinter is the “cockney piss-take” – mocking someone, making them feel insecure. A primary weapon in the jungle of life, this mockery should be masked by grace and concern.
- Very occasionally, the high passions under the surface erupt and a violent fit seizes the violator.
- This underlying violence needs to be confronted in rehearsal – it is necessary to go through each scene exposing the crude emotions as if the actors were playing a melodrama. You need to find out what your character wants.
- When these emotions have been found they must be completely hidden - contain them and bottle them up.
- The set must also be masked with understatement, yet it must not be abstract. Only what is necessary should be there.

### Consider this process:

#### 1 Study the text

- Study form and rhythm as one would if directing Shakespeare.
- Notice Pinter's disciplined use of language.
- Listen to how Pinter speaks – a benefit of working with a living playwright!

#### 2 Rehearsals

- Concentrate on the psychological processes of the characters.
- Release the melodrama.
- Hide the melodrama and contain the emotion.

#### 3 Staging

- Avoid excess – the design must be restrained.
- Make sure you are not making a statement.
- The production needs to be completely convincing – not mannered, self-consciously restrained or inhuman.



### BECOMING DIRECTOR & DESIGNER

#### Blind Man's Buff

At the end of Act 2, the characters play a game of Blind Man's Buff for Stanley's birthday. Starting from the blindfolding of Stanley to the end of the act, consider the section as if you were a director.

- Experiment with Peter Hall's advice and work through his process.
- Using your findings from this process, write a dramatic commentary for the extract. Indicate direction to actors on movement, positioning, gesture etc, with justification, bearing in mind pivotal moments in the scene. Include details of any important technical effects required and their importance to the meaning and shape of the scene.
- Create a ground plan for this extract – considering Peter Hall's advice, what would your design be like?
- Disregarding Peter Hall – how would you design *The Birthday Party*? How would it differ from his ideas?





- Pinter's early plays are very different from the typical theatre of the late 50s/early 60s when all theatre was commercial, no public subsidy existed and drama was not taught in schools or universities – there was no real room for experimentation.
- No plays were written that reflected contemporary life in Britain.
- However, the establishment of new theatre companies assisted a renaissance of new plays. The most notable company was The Royal Court in London, contributing to the emergence of playwrights such as Osborne, Arden, Bond, Wesker and Orton.
- George Devine was Artistic Director of The Royal Court. He allowed writers the right to fail and believed that theatre should not be dedicated to the West End notion of success, i.e. star names and long runs - plays should be immediately relevant.
- Young writers emerged who were prepared to shock their audiences. They were largely anti-establishment and there was a strong sense of post-war disenchantment.
- In 1968 censorship was abolished.
- British theatre started to take notice of European developments such as Samuel Beckett and the Theatre of the Absurd and Bertolt Brecht and his Berliner Ensemble.

Mark Batty writes:

*"Playwrights were increasingly expected to come down either:*

*a) on the side of the new, political drama that sought to dissect historical and sociological models*

or

*b) on the side of the avant-garde, those who would conjure allegories of the human condition.*

*Pinter felt comfortable in neither".*

## DRAMA EXERCISE

### Mixing Styles

*It is difficult to categorise Pinter. Look at the following quote from Ronald Knowles about The Birthday Party:*

*"Realism of set and naturalism of character are combined with revue sketch material and comic timing;*

*aspects of the gangster thriller are modified by music-hall comedy;*

*Hitchcockian domestic suspense is undermined by farce;*

*a tragic sense is split apart by comic one liners,*

*while melodrama is subverted by domestic realism".*

- Research the underlined styles.
- How are they used in **The Birthday Party**?
- Think of a situation from which you could create a scene, e.g. a dinner party.
- Improvise around this situation incorporating one of the above combinations of styles, e.g. tragic sense and comic one-liners.
- What effect does this mix have on the scene?



- If you were director or actor, how would you interpret the characters in **The Birthday Party**?
- How should the actors look?
- How should they be dressed?

### Consider this quote:

*"It is one of the triumphs of the play that Meg and Petey can at times appear as outlandish as Goldberg and McCann and that Goldberg and McCann and Stanley can be as acceptable as if nothing extraordinary were happening to and with them."*

(The Stage, 25 June 1964)

- List what you think is "outlandish" about each character in the play?
- What is "acceptable" about them?
- How do the lists compare for each character?
- What do these lists tell you about the role of each character in the play?

### Past Productions

The following section looks at how the characters have been interpreted in past productions of **The Birthday Party**. How does your interpretation compare?

#### MEG

- How comic should Meg be?
- Does she chatter away randomly or is she trying to get attention from the others?
- How aware is she of what is going on?
- What exactly is her relationship with Stanley – how does she view him?

#### Beatrix Lehmann

(*First prod. 1958, Lyric Theatre, dir. Peter Wood*)

- Played Meg with touching pathos and frightening realism.
- Her angular and macabre performance made the opening dialogue entirely acceptable.
- Ordinarity characterised Meg and Petey in this production with "the feeling of long standing and taken for granted affection between the two".

#### Doris Hare

(*1964, Aldwych Theatre, dir. Harold Pinter*)

- Pinter stressed the theatricality with an extremely slow pace, emphasizing the revue sketch quality of Meg's opening scene.
- John Russell Taylor felt that Doris Hare was altogether too "acute" for the part. "Not at all the vague, silly, motherly, sensual bundle of mindless instincts required by the play".
- She was criticised for not being simple minded enough and consciously playing for laughs.



### Dandy Nichols

(1968 film, dir. William Friedkin)

- She was described as “a matchless triumph” – at no time did she run the risk of patronising the character and no lines were simply played for laughs.
- Saw the maternal instinct as the root of Meg’s relationship with Stanley.
- This was brought out in facial expression and head movement and nothing was overplayed.
- Stanley was treated as a small child whom Meg manages with restraint.
- Presented Meg as a human being yet limited, unintelligent and irritating.
- She demonstrated a fundamental need for Stanley to be the child she wishes him to be.
- More playful than purposeful in her erotic suggestion to Stanley.

### Joan Plowright

(1987, BBC2 Production, dir. Kenneth Ives)

- Lower middle class respectability of a landlady whose house is “on the list”.
- Aware of her station as a married woman, whom Stanley should address aware of his place as a lodger.
- Kept up appearances.
- Flirtatious sexuality.
- Superficial, almost abstract presence.

### PETEY

- Why do you think Pinter frames the play with Meg and Petey?
- How do you think Petey feels towards Meg?
- How does Petey feel towards Stanley?
- How much does he know about what is happening?

### Willoughby Gray

(1958, Lyric Theatre, dir. Peter Wood)

- Alan Brien described Gray’s Petey as a “stick-figure, a hollow, cardboard creature... a newspaper-reading, cornflake-consuming automaton.” (New Statesman, 17 January 1975)

### Moultrie Kelsall

(1968 film, dir. William Friedkin)

- In his portrayal a resigned fatherly forbearance informed every word, gesture and pause.

### Basil Lord

(1975, Shaw Theatre, dir. Kevin Billington)

- Dramatic dignity, consequently his failure at the end of the play was almost noble.
- Petey as an intelligent man – this increased the feeling of terror as he was aware of what was happening but powerless to stop it.

### Robert Lang

(1987, BBC 2, dir. Kenneth Ives)

- Schoolmasterly, humoured Meg like a little girl, patiently explaining things to her.
- Definite and self-assured.

### LULU

- How comic should Lulu be?
- How naïve is she?
- How should the audience view Lulu at the end of the play?
- What is Lulu's purpose in the play?

#### Paula Wilcox

(1975, *Shaw Theatre*, dir. Kevin Billington)

- Critics complained that Wilcox had a sophistication that undermined Lulu's credibility.
- "Lulu should be as vulgar and threatening to Stanley as Meg, not petite and pretty and harmless." (Plays & Players, March 1975)

#### Helen Fraser

(1968 film, dir. William Friedkin)

- Very well cast, demonstrating a saucy knowingness and simple mindedness as a sexual counterpart to Meg.

#### Julie Walters

(1987, *BBC 2*, dir. Kenneth Ives)

- Played Lulu with a "frothily inane" Merseyside accent.
- "A garish coquette who giggled through the part."
- Lulu's final dialogue was acted with absolutely straight naturalism and no allowance was made for Lulu's catalogue of comic cliché – psychology of the abused rather than the comedy of stilted outrage.

### STANLEY

- How guilty do you think Stanley is?
- How does he feel towards the other characters?
- Does he delude the others, or himself?
- How much power does Stanley have throughout the play?

#### Richard Pearson

(1958, *Lyric Theatre*, dir. Peter Wood and 1960 *ATV production*, dir. Joan Kemp Welch)

- Pearson established the role of Stanley as the archetypal victim – fat boy with glasses.
- Tended to remain the standard of comparison until radical reinterpretation of the part in 1975.
- Idle, sweaty, suspicious, edgy and highly sympathetic.
- "An intelligent man who looked stupid, partly out of self-defence." (The Observer, 21 June 1964)
- Soft, rosy and self-indulgent.
- Bitterly hurt when Meg gives him a boy's drum.
- Alarming degree of self-delusion and psychological confusion – deluding himself, not Meg.

#### Bryan Pringle

(1964, *Aldwych Theatre*, dir. Harold Pinter)

- "Tall, gaunt, awkward, a little waspish and altogether more of a handful for Meg to smother with concern."
- There was a certain authority in his confusion.
- Critics complained that Pringle's silences were "only silences". "There is little or no sense of what is going on in Stanley, so one is left with a semi-lifeless character in vital passages of the play". (The Stage, 25 June 1964)
- At the heart of the matter was the fact that Pinter directed the play here. As Peter Hall suggested, the spirit of the play is to be found in performance in the dynamic fluidity of feeling which has to be personally discovered by the actor in collaboration with the director. The actors in this production took Pinter's words as



the answer – they therefore acted results and simplifications – they didn't find it for themselves. After this production, Pinter decided not to direct any more of his own plays.

### John Alderton

(1975, *Shaw Theatre*, dir. Kevin Billington)

- John Elsom wrote, "Billington has now directed three early Pinter plays; and, in each case, he has refused to dwell upon what used to be regarded as Pinter's distinctive style – the long ambiguous pauses, the hints of distant menace, "the weasel under the cocktail cabinet". If there is a weasel in a Billington production, he is on the dining room table, snarling and biting quite openly"
- In line with this Catherine Itzin saw Stanley as guilty – he knows it, Goldberg and McCann know that he knows it - "It is to diminish the play to have a Stanley who is a helpless victim. Victim, yes, but guilty and deserving"
- Resolutely unsentimental Stanley – "gruff when he gets the chance, whining when he doesn't." (The Observer, 19 January 1975)

### Kenneth Cranham

(1987, *BBC 2*, dir. Kenneth Ives)

- This production was very fast, very funny and very harrowing.
- Stanley was portrayed as precariously unstable right from the start, before Goldberg and McCann enter.
- Stanley as a "bohemian", with a Franz Liszt-like mane of dyed hair.
- Ability to suggest concrete happenings and actual situations of the past in the seemingly distraught ramblings gave his performance fearful dramatic power.

### GOLDBERG AND MCCANN

- How realistic do you think Goldberg and McCann should be?
- How grotesque can they be?
- How clear is the division between victim and persecutors?
- How much should Goldberg's Jewish background and McCann's Irish background be emphasized?
- What exactly is their relationship and how is power distributed between them? (Consider the post-war cross-talk double act Jimmy Jewel and Ben Warris on which the characters are based.)
- How much of what they say can be believed?

### John Slater (G) and John Stratton (M)

(1958, *Lyric Theatre*, dir. Peter Wood and 1960 *ATV Production*, dir. Joan Kemp Welch)

- Slater threw himself into the music hall tradition.
- A critic described them as "balanced on a tightrope between burlesque and bizarre" (Evening Standard, 20 May 1958)

### Brewster Mason (G) and Patrick Magee (M)

(1964, *Aldwych Theatre*, dir. Harold Pinter)

- Mason "enriches his lines with subtle variations of accent to chime with Goldberg's subtle variations of personality" (Financial Times, 19 June 1964)
- "His relish for the language is a pleasure to share" (The Times, 19 June 1964)
- Pinter played down the horror aspect in this production, so Goldberg was "more grandiloquent than ghoulish." (Sunday Telegraph 21 June 64)
- Perhaps a little too "upperclassish" for Goldberg.
- "Patrick Magee's McCann, a lantern-jawed ghoul who – as the text requires – can take on the likeness of a thug, a defrocked priest, a brain-washing sadist and a sentimental drunk". (The Times, 19 June 1964)
- Mason and Magee's alliance was worked out



“in terms of movement, speech and silence with a thrilling balance” (Sunday Times, 21 June 1964)

### **Sydney Tafler (G) and Patrick Magee (M)** **(1968 film, dir. William Friedkin)**

- Tafler was an established film actor very familiar to British audiences for his character parts and shared Pinter's East End background.
- Performance as Goldberg crowned his career. Used highly specific Jewish speech rhythms.
- Completely natural performance, yet this deprived the character of his larger than life quality.
- Magee used a concentrated economy of facial expressions, savage karate chops and intensity. He visibly shook with anger and drank heavily at the party.

### **Sydney Tafler (G) and Tony Doyle (M)** **(1975, Shaw Theatre, dir. Kevin Billington)**

- “McCann, the Irish Inquisitor, sometimes has been in danger of overbalancing the brain-washing scenes – especially when played by Patrick Magee. Here Tony Doyle is always clearly No. 2 yet he manages to encapsulate a coiled, spring-heel violence. All the more disturbing for being under painful control.”  
(New Statesman, 17 January 1975)
- This realism underplayed the humour.
- In the whistling contest Stanley aggressively matched McCann.

### **Harold Pinter (G) and Colin Blakely (M)** **(1987, BBC 2, dir. Kenneth Ives)**

- Pinter revealed an inner uneasiness in Goldberg.
- Complex portrayal of a Jewish trader – putting on a show with licensed extravagance.
- The very gestures in the confident presentation of the public self were those which betrayed the uneasiness.
- Constantly adjusted clothing, accent and smile.
- His near breakdown in Act 3 is an emergence of the condition that is hinted at throughout.
- His “acidulous smile was more like a sneer masquerading as a smile”.
- Strong parallel with Stanley in Goldberg's near breakdown.
- Not as simple as victims and persecutors.
- Blakely did not try to outdo Magee (1968) – his McCann was understated and restrained, a gaping automaton, “an Ulster sphinx of stone-like antipathy”
- A soured mask made a perfect contrast with Pinter's mobile features. Permanent hunch, ready to wade in and absorb blows.
- His earlier restraint allowed him to lose control in Act 3 – Magee could add nothing here as he had no more to give to the performance.



The first production of **The Birthday Party** in 1958 received such scathing reviews, it only played for one week! Only a few critics recognised Pinter as the master playwright he would become.

*"The latest recruit to the school of dramatic obscurity"* (*Jewish Chronicle*, 23 May 1958)

*"A member of the school of random dottiness"* (*Financial Times*, 20 May 1958)

*"The moral would seem to be that every man-jack of us is a raving lunatic"* (*News Chronicle*, 20 May 1958)

- Do you agree with the original critics?
- Can you justify their arguments?
- Why do you think people sometimes feel like this about new plays?

## What did Pinter think?

The day before the start of rehearsals, Peter Wood, the first director of **The Birthday Party** and a highly regarded director in the English theatre, had asked Pinter to give Stanley some lines that would help the audience to understand his situation and motivations.

Pinter refused to do this:

*"To put such words as we discussed into Stanley's mouth would be an inexcusable imposition and falsity on my part. Stanley cannot perceive his only valid justification – which is that he is what he is – therefore he certainly can never be articulate about it. He knows only to attempt to justify himself by dream, by pretence and by bluff, through fright. If he had cottoned on to the fact that he need only admit to himself what he actually is and is not – then Goldberg and McCann would not have paid their visit, or*

*if they had, the same course of events would have been by no means assured. Stanley would have been another man. The play would have been another play."*

In a way, Peter Wood was right – the audiences of the first production were baffled by the piece and it puzzled even the professional critics, because the play didn't easily fit into an established genre. However, Pinter refused to impose any kind of self interpretation on the play. He wanted the audience to make up their own minds.

- What do you think about Pinter's ideas?
- Do you think playwrights should provide a message in their plays?
- Think of a play you have seen or read that appeared to have a clear message from the playwright – how does it compare with **The Birthday Party**?
- Do you prefer to be given a message or do you enjoy the freedom of making up your own mind?



### How does Pinter write?

Martin Esslin points out that there are wide differences in the way playwrights work. He talks about a spectrum:

Those who view writing as an intellectual process to be planned and worked out by strict reasoning

Those who rely on subconscious process of "inspiration"

For Pinter, the text is not a product of planned and conscious reasoning. He developed the play from one image that he imagined – a kitchen and the characters he saw there.

*"The thing germinated and bred itself...The characters sounded in my ears - it was apparent to me what one might say and what would be the other's response, at any given point...My task was not to damage their consistency at any time – through any external notion of my own."*

Yet...

*"None of what I have said means that I disclaim responsibility for my characters. The play dictated itself but I confess that I wrote it – with intent, maliciously, purposefully, in command of its growth. Does this appear to contradict all that I have said earlier? Splendid. You may suggest that this command was not strict enough and not lucid enough but who supposes I am striving for lucidity?"*

### So, he is an inspirational writer? Yes, but...

It is no coincidence that Pinter started to produce plays of the quality of **The Birthday Party** after having spent many years as a repertory actor who, by having to rehearse a different play each week, had to know all the techniques of playwriting – the techniques, in this case, of the then current middle-class drawing room comedy or detective play that dominated the English provincial repertory theatres in the fifties.

The curious nature of Pinter's plays is due to the combination of:

- a) the obsessive image that springs from his subconscious
- with**
- b) the technical skills that have become second nature to him.

By taste and inclination, Pinter is a poet deeply influenced by artists such as Beckett and Kafka. But his technical skills come from the well-made play – with one set, few characters, carefully planned exits and entrances and dialogue stemming from the tradition of English comic timing as seen in the plays of Wilde and Coward.



### Inspiration or Planning?

Try writing short scenes using the two methods on the spectrum.

#### 1. Writing as an intellectual process

Consider the following questions, then write your scene.

- Where does the scene take place?
- What kinds of characters would be at this place?
- Where would they have come from?
- What are they doing here?
- What is their relationship to one another?
- What happens in the scene?
- How does the scene end?

#### 2. Writing as a subconscious process of inspiration

Consider the following:

- Imagine a place.
- Visualise the characters in this place.

**Begin to write and see what happens!**

**Compare your scenes. Which process do you prefer and why?**

Just as it is difficult to categorise Pinter in terms of genre and creative process, so it is left up to the audience to decide to what extent Pinter's plays are "political".

Pinter has always been an outspoken political activist, from being arrested for refusing to do military service in 1949 to vocally opposing the attack on Iraq in 2003.

*"Everyone has a quite essential obligation to subject the society in which we live to moral scrutiny. We must pay attention to what is being done in our name."*

However, this doesn't mean that his plays offer any constructive actions for us to take against the injustices in his plays! Again, any response is up to the individual!

*"I do happen to have strong political views, but they simply do not come into my work as far as I can see."*

In his letter to Peter Wood, Pinter gives a typically vague interpretation of *The Birthday Party*:

*"We've agreed: the hierarchy, the Establishment, the arbiters, the socioreligious monsters arrive to affect censure and alteration upon a member of the club who has discarded responsibility (that word again) towards himself and others...He does possess, however, for my money, a certain fibre—he does fight for his life. It doesn't last long, this fight. His core being a quagmire of delusion, his mind a tenuous fusebox, he collapses under the weight of their accusation—an accusation compounded of the shitstained strictures of centuries of 'tradition'."*



Pinter's chief political concerns are essentially humanitarian –

1. Relationship between the state and the individual and how concerns of the state often disregard the dignifying rights of the individual.
2. Protesting against the hypocrisy and complacency of those who wield power against the weak.
3. Concerned dramatically to demonstrate how language is very often abused to overpower and demoralize the underdog.

- How do these concerns emerge through **The Birthday Party**?
- How could these concerns be brought out through all the elements of performance? e.g acting; costume; set & lighting design; sound etc.





Harold Pinter is not only a playwright. He is a master of adaptation for film, an actor and a director as well as a writer of prose and a poet.

- Read Pinter's poem **A View of the Party** opposite.
- What new insights into the play does this provide?

### A View of the Party

i  
The thought that Goldberg was  
A man she might have known  
Never crossed Meg's words  
That morning in the room.

The thought that Goldberg was  
A man another knew  
Never crossed her eyes  
When, glad, she welcomed him.

The thought that Goldberg was  
A man to dread and know  
Jarred Stanley in the blood  
When, still, he heard his name.

While Petey knew, not then,  
But later, when the light  
Full up upon their scene,  
He looked into the room.

And by morning Petey saw  
The light begin to dim  
(That daylight full of sun)  
Though nothing could be done.



ii  
Nat Goldberg, who arrived  
With a smile on every face,  
Accompanied by McCann,  
Set a change upon the place.

The thought that Goldberg was  
Sat in the centre of the room,  
A man of weight and time,  
To supervise the game.

The thought that was McCann  
Walked in upon this feast,  
A man of skin and bone,  
With a green stain on his chest.

Allied in their theme,  
They imposed upon the room  
A dislocation and doom,  
Though Meg saw nothing done.

The party they began,  
To hail the birthday in,  
Was generous and affable,  
Though Stanley sat alone.

The toasts were said and sung,  
All spoke of other years,  
Lulu, on Goldberg's breast,  
Looked up into his eyes.

And Stanley sat – alone,  
A man he might have known,  
Triumphant on his hearth,  
Which never was his own.

For Stanley had no home.  
Only where Goldberg was,  
And his bloodhound McCann,  
Did Stanley remember his name.

They played at blind man's buff,  
Blindfold the game was run,  
McCann tracked Stanley down,  
The darkness down and gone

Found the game lost and won,  
Meg, all memory gone,  
Lulu's lovenight spent,  
Petey impotent;

A man they never knew  
In the centre of the room,  
And Stanley's final eyes  
Broken by McCann.

**1958**



As is clear from Pinter's guidance on the play, he encourages your interpretation. It is important that you draw your own conclusions. When watching TAG's performance, you will also need to consider the interpretation of the director, Guy Hollands. Has he left the interpretation open for you or is he "making a statement" about Pinter's play?

The following questionnaire is a well-known template for interpreting a performance. Ask yourself these questions after you have seen TAG's production of *The Birthday Party*.

- What conclusions do you draw from the production?
- How do these conclusions differ from your interpretation of the text?

### Pavis Questionnaire Analysing a Production

#### GENERAL DISCUSSION OF THE PERFORMANCE

1. What were the dominant elements of stagecraft which held the production together, giving it a unified identity?
2. How was the geography of the stage (proscenium, thrust, or arena) used to create an environment which complemented the style and content of the production?
3. To what extent was the linear development of the production coherent or confused?

#### SCENOGRAPHY

1. What were the dominant spatial forms used on stage (e.g. urban, landscape, architectural, internal, external)?
2. What was the physical relationship between the audience space and the performance space?
3. Was colour used to offer a level of understanding separate and complementary

to other elements?

4. Organisation of the space:
  - How were on and off stage denoted?
  - How was a fiction of space off and beyond the area of action denoted?
  - What was shown and what was implied?

#### LIGHTING

1. How was the lighting system used to support the production (e.g. environment, atmosphere, temperature)?

#### STAGE PROPERTIES

1. What type?
2. What function?
3. What relationship to other design elements?
4. How were they used by the actors?

#### COSTUMES

1. What was the role of costume in the production?
2. How did this affect the actors?

#### THE ACTORS' PERFORMANCES

1. Did you notice any conflict between conventional and individual styles?
2. Was there anything special about the relationship between individuals and the group?
3. How did the text affect the performer's use of his/her body?
4. Were there any significant gestures used?
5. Were the cast seeking a particular vocal quality?
6. How successfully was the dialogue executed?
7. To what ends did the performers use the dialogue?
8. How was movement used by the performers and to what effect?



### THE FUNCTION OF MUSIC AND SOUND

1. Describe the 'soundscape'.
2. How was the sound generated (live, recorded, vocal, orchestra etc.)?
3. How was sound/music used and was it successful?

### PACE OF PERFORMANCE

1. What was the overall pace?
2. Did all the elements of the performance support this?
3. What were the deliberate diversions from the dominant pace?

### INTERPRETATION OF THE STORY-LINE IN PERFORMANCE

1. Summarise the story.
2. What was/were the thematic point/s of the story?
3. What is left ambiguous and what is explained?
4. Explain the structure of the plot.
5. To what genre does the dramatic text belong?

### TEXT IN PERFORMANCE

1. What were the conspicuous elements of translation from the page into performance?
2. Where did you see an emphasis on the relationship between text and image?
3. Was the form suitable to the content?

### AUDIENCE

1. Where did the performance take place?
2. What expectations did you have for the performance?
3. How did the audience react?
4. How much responsibility did the audience have for giving meaning to the performance?

### "DEATH" OF THE AUTHOR?

1. What was the historical background of the text?
2. To what extent does knowledge about the writer affect your view of the text?
3. How do you think this knowledge affected the performance?

### DOMINANT SIGNIFIERS

1. What are the dominant images that represent the special quality of the performance?
2. What does not make sense in your interpretation of the production?
3. What were the dominant themes and how were they represented in the form of the piece?
4. What made sense intellectually?
5. What made emotional sense?
6. What cannot be reduced to signs and meaning? And why?
7. List the signifiers and the signified.
8. Describe the relationship between the form and the content.
9. Identify the relationship between reality and illusion in the context of the performance.

Adapted from a system created by Patrice Pavis 'Theatre Analysis: Some Questions and a Questionnaire', New Theatre Quarterly, 1(2)



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## Extract A (Act 2)

**GOLDBERG.** Mr. Webber, sit down.

**STANLEY.** It's no good starting any kind of trouble.

**GOLDBERG.** Sit down.

**STANLEY.** Why should I?

**GOLDBERG.** If you want to know the truth, Webber, you're beginning to get on my breasts.

**STANLEY.** Really? Well that's –

**GOLDBERG.** Sit down.

**STANLEY.** No.

**GOLDBERG** sighs, and sits at the table right.

**GOLDBERG.** McCann.

**MCCANN.** Nat?

**GOLDBERG.** Ask him to sit down.

**MCCANN.** Yes, Nat. (**MCCANN** moves to **STANLEY**.) Do you mind sitting down?

**STANLEY.** Yes. I do mind.

**MCCANN.** Yes now, but – it'd be better if you did.

**STANLEY.** Why don't you sit down?

**MCCANN.** No, not me – you.

**STANLEY.** No thanks.

Pause.

**MCCANN.** Nat.

**GOLDBERG.** What?

**MCCANN.** He won't sit down.

**GOLDBERG.** Well, ask him.

**MCCANN.** I've asked him.

**GOLDBERG.** Ask him again.

**MCCANN** (to **STANLEY**). Sit down.

**STANLEY.** Why?

**MCCANN.** You'd be more comfortable.

**STANLEY.** So would you.

Pause.

**MCCANN.** All right. If you will I will.

**STANLEY.** You first.

**MCCANN** slowly sits at the table, left.

**MCCANN.** Well?

**STANLEY.** Right. Now you've both had a rest you can get out!

**MCCANN** (rising). That's a dirty trick! I'll kick the shite out of him!

**GOLDBERG** (rising). No! I have stood up.

**MCCANN.** Sit down again!

**GOLDBERG.** Once I'm up I'm up.

**STANLEY.** Same here.

**MCCANN** (moving to **STANLEY**). You've made Mr Goldberg stand up.

**STANLEY** (his voice rising). It'll do him good!

**MCCANN.** Get in that seat.

**GOLDBERG.** McCann.

**MCCANN.** Get down in that seat!

**GOLDBERG** (crossing to him). Webber. (Quietly.) SIT DOWN.

(Silence. **STANLEY** begins to whistle "The Mountains of Mourne". He strolls casually to the chair at the table. They watch him. He stops whistling. Silence. He sits.)



**Extract B (Act 3)**

**PETEY** appears at the kitchen hatch, unnoticed.

**GOLDBERG.** When will he be ready?

**MCCANN** (sullenly). You can go up yourself next time.

**GOLDBERG.** What's the matter with you?

**MCCANN** (quietly). I gave him . . .

**GOLDBERG.** What?

**MCCANN.** I gave him his glasses.

**GOLDBERG.** Wasn't he glad to get them back?

**MCCANN.** The frames are bust.

**GOLDBERG.** How did that happen?

**MCCANN.** He tried to fit the eyeholes into his eyes. I left him doing it.

**PETEY.** (at the kitchen door). There's some Sellotape somewhere. We can stick them together.

**GOLDBERG** and **MCCANN** turn to see him.

**Pause.**

**GOLDBERG.** Sellotape? No, no, that's all right, Mr. Boles. It'll keep him quiet for the time being, keep his mind off other things.

**PETEY.** (moving downstage). What about a doctor?

**GOLDBERG.** It's all taken care of.

**MCCANN** moves over right to the shoe-box, and takes out a brush and brushes his shoes.

**PETEY.** (moves to the table). I think he needs one.

**GOLDBERG.** I agree with you. It's all taken care of. We'll give him a bit of time to settle down, and then I'll take him to Monty.

**PETEY.** You're going to take him to a doctor?

**GOLDBERG** (staring at him). Sure. Monty.

**Pause.** **MCCANN** brushes his shoes.

So, Mrs. Boles has gone out to get us something nice for lunch?

**PETEY.** That's right.

**GOLDBERG.** Unfortunately we might be gone by then.

**PETEY.** Will you?

**GOLDBERG.** By then we may be gone.

**Pause.**

**PETEY.** Well, I think I'll see how my peas are getting on, in the meantime.

**GOLDBERG.** The meantime?

**PETEY.** While we're waiting.

**GOLDBERG.** Waiting for what? (**PETEY** walks towards the back door.) Aren't you going back to the beach?

**PETEY.** No, not yet. Give me a call when he comes down, will you, Mr Goldberg?

**GOLDBERG** (earnestly). You'll have a crowded beach today . . . on a day like this. They'll be lying on their backs, swimming out to sea. My life. What about the deck-chairs? Are the deck-chairs ready?

**PETEY.** I put them all out this morning.

**GOLDBERG.** But what about the tickets? Who's going to take the tickets?

**PETEY.** That's all right. That'll be all right, Mr Goldberg. Don't you worry about that. I'll be back.

He exits. **GOLDBERG** rises, goes to the window and looks after him.