

# PROSCENIUM

George Woollands and Margaret Rendle founded Proscenium in 1924. The company's first production was the now little-known *The Tide* by Basil McDonald Hastings. Since then, the company has performed nearly 250 plays, using Harrow as a base since 1945. In this time Proscenium has built up a strong reputation for performing challenging plays (both classic and contemporary) to a high standard.

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**PROSCENIUM**

**The Birthday Party**

**By Harold Pinter**

**The Birthday Party**

**16<sup>h</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> January 2002  
Harrow Arts Centre, Hatch End**

## Cast

Petey . . . . .	Colin Hickman
Meg . . . . .	Anne Gerrard
Stanley . . . . .	Mark Sutherland
Lulu . . . . .	Olwyn Mears
Goldberg . . . . .	David Pearson
McCann . . . . .	Rob Ewen

## Production

Director . . . . .	Michael Gerrard
Assistant Director . . . . .	Linda Hampson
Stage Manager . . . . .	Crystal Anthony
Assisted By . . . . .	Amanda Jones
. . . . .	Paul Davis
. . . . .	Malcolm Jones

**“Not understanding Harold Pinter has become one of the great pleasures of contemporary literature”**

*cited by Austin Quigley -Columbia University NY.*

## Defining the Pinteresque

The adjective “Pinteresque” has found its way into the OED. Of course, we know what that word means when applied to a play. We expect pauses, silences (sometimes very long and very loud), we will not be surprised to find banality, understatement, fantasy, comedy, eroticism and above all we expect to feel disturbed by nameless menace, no matter how trite the dialogue.

Finally, we don't expect fully to comprehend.

There cannot be many dramatists or authors whose names have become part of our adjectival vocabulary in this way: Shakespeare, Kafka, Shaw, Dickens, Wilde. Distinguished company indeed.

## The Birthday Party

If Pinter had wanted to parody himself, he would surely have written “The Birthday Party”. The characters have no past other than the confused and often self-contradicting versions which some of them offer. At the end of the play they have no evident future; nothing is resolved and we are left to speculate and argue with each other about what it is, precisely, that we have just seen and heard.

## What the Critics Said

The Birthday Party was Pinter's first full length play. It closed after 8 performances in London in 1958, amid a welter of critical opprobrium and incomprehension.

M.W.W Manchester Guardian *“What all this means only Mr Pinter knows, for*

*his characters speak in non sequiturs, half-gibberish and lunatic ravings”.*

Pinter's own account of this disastrous debut makes amusing reading. He had decided to attend a Thursday matinee.

*“An usherette stopped me. “Where are you going?” she said. “To the dress circle” I said, “I’m the author”. Her eyes, as I recall, misted over. “Oh, you poor chap. Listen, the dress circle’s closed, but why don’t you go in and sit down darling, if you like, go on.” I went into the empty dress circle and looked down into the stalls. There were 6 people there.”*

One of those 6 present at that matinee was the Sunday Times critic, Harold Hobson, who never went to press nights. His subsequent review (reproduced opposite) said that Pinter *“on the evidence of this work, possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London”.*

Hobson's lone, prescient voice was not enough to save the play at the time, but its near classic status today vindicates his review.

## What Pinter said

Let the author have the last word:

An anxious young actor (Alan Ayckbourn) who was playing Stanley in a touring production of “The Birthday Party” asked Pinter to explain his character and motivation.

The reply was *“Mind your own fucking business. Concentrate on what’s there”.*

L.H.

Sources quoted from Michael Billington's biography of Harold Pinter.

## The Screw Turns Again

Harold Hobson

*(Edited version of the one positive notice for the premiere of The Birthday Party)*

I am willing to risk whatever reputation I have as a judge of plays by saying that Pinter, on the evidence of his work, possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London.

The influence of unfavourable notices on the box office is enormous: but in lasting effect it is nothing. “Look Back in Anger” and the work of Beckett both received poor notices the morning after production. But that has not prevented these two very different writers, Mr Beckett and Mr Osborne, from being regarded throughout the world as the most important dramatists who now use the English tongue. The early Shaw got bad notices; Ibsen got scandalously bad notices. Mr Pinter is not merely in good company, he is in the very best company.

There is only one quality that is essential to a play. A play must entertain; it must hold attention; it must give pleasure. Unless it does that, it is useless for stage purposes. No amount of intellect, of high moral intent, or of beautiful writing is of the slightest importance if a play is not in itself theatrically interesting.

Theatrically speaking, *The Birthday Party* is absorbing. It is witty. Its characters are fascinating. The plot, which consists, with all kinds of verbal arabesques and echoing explorations of memory and fancy, of the springing of a trap, is first rate. The whole play has the same atmosphere of delicious, impalpable and hair-raising terror which makes *The Turn of the Screw* one of the best stories in the world.

Mr Pinter has got hold of a primary fact of existence. We live on the verge of disaster. One sunny afternoon, whilst Peter May is making a century at Lord's against Middlesex, and the shadows are creeping along the grass, and the old men are dozing in the Long Room, a hydrogen bomb may explode. That is one sort of threat. But Mr Pinter's is of a subtler sort. It breathes in the air. It cannot be seen, but it enters the room every time the door is opened. There is something in your past - it does not matter what - which will catch up with

you. Though you go to the utter most parts of the earth and hide yourself in the most obscure lodgings in the least popular of towns, one day there is a possibility that two men will appear. They will be looking for you, and you cannot get away. And someone will be looking for them too. There is terror everywhere. Meanwhile, it is best to make jokes (Mr Pinter's jokes are very good) and to play blind man's bluff, and to bang on a toy drum, anything to forget the slow approach of doom. The Birthday Party is a Grand Guignol of the susceptibilities.

The fact that no one can say precisely what it is about, or give the address from which the intruding Goldberg and McCann come, or say precisely why it is that Stanley is so frightened of them is, of course, one of its greatest merits. It is exactly in this vagueness that its spine-chilling quality lies. If we knew just what Miles had done, The Turn of the Screw would fade away. As it is, Mr Pinter has learned the lesson of the Master. Henry James would recognise him as an equal.

## Harold Pinter: A Brief Biography

- 1930 Born in Hackney: son of a Jewish tailor.
- 1940 Evacuated to Cornwall during the 'Phoney War'.
- 1941 Returned to London during the worst of the blitz: evacuated to Reading.
- 1944-8 Hackney Grammar School, where he played a much praised Macbeth.
- 1948 Gained a place at RADA, but was unhappy with course and teaching and dropped out. Registered as a conscientious objector.
- 1951-2 Toured Ireland with Anew McMaster repertory company.
- 1953 Appeared in Donald Wolfit's season at the King's Theatre, Hammersmith.
- 1953-7 Acted for a number of provincial repertory theatres under the pseudonym David Baron.
- 1957 First play, *the Room*, premiered at Bristol University Drama Department.
- 1958 *The Birthday Party* staged at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith.
- 1959 *A Slight Ache* on radio. A number of sketches for revue *Pieces of Eight*.

- 1960 *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Room* at Hampstead and then the Royal Court. *The Birthday Party* televised. *The Caretaker* premiered at the Arts theatre.
- 1961 *The Collector* and *Night School* televised.
- 1963 Wrote film script for *The Servant*. *The Dwarfs* and *the Lover* staged at the New Arts Theatre and directed by Pinter.
- 1964 Wrote film script for *The Pumpkin Eater*. Directed revival of *The Birthday Party* at RSC.
- 1965 *The Homecoming* previewed by RSC at the Aldwych.
- 1966 Awarded CBE.
- 1969 *Landscape* and *Silence* staged by RSC at the Aldwych. Wrote film script for *The Go Between*.
- 1970 *Old Times* staged by RSC at the Aldwych.
- 1975 *No Man's Land* premiered by The National Theatre.
- 1978 *Betrayal* premiered by The National Theatre.
- 1981 Wrote film script for *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.
- 1984 *A Kind of Alaska* televised.
- 1987 *The Birthday Party* televised.
- 1988 *Mountain Language* premiered at The National Theatre.
- 1993 *Moonlight* premiered at the Almeida.
- 1994 *The Birthday Party* revived at The National Theatre.
- 1996 *Ashes to Ashes* staged at the Royal Court. Given the Laurence Olivier Award for lifetime's achievement in theatre.
- 2000 *Celebration* staged at the Almeida with a revival of *The Room*, both directed by Pinter.



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## 2001/2002 Season

### The Madness of George III by Alan Bennett

24th - 27th October 2001, 7.45 pm

Compass Theatre, Glebe Avenue, Ickenham

### The Birthday Party by Harold Pinter

16th - 19th January 2002, 7.45pm

Travellers Studio, Harrow Arts Centre, Hatch End

### Tales from Ovid by Ted Hughes

Adapted by Tim Supple & Simon Reade

13th - 16th March 2002, 7.45 pm

Travellers Studio, Harrow Arts Centre, Hatch End

### Bald Primma Donna by Eugene Ionesco & The Real Inspector Hound by Tom Stoppard

29th May - 1st June 2002, 7.45 pm

Travellers Studio, Harrow Arts Centre, Hatch End

### Proscenium Box Office : 020 8422 0400

Compass Theatre : £7.50, concessions £6.50

Travellers Studio : £6.50, concessions £5.50

(Concessions are only available on Wednesday)