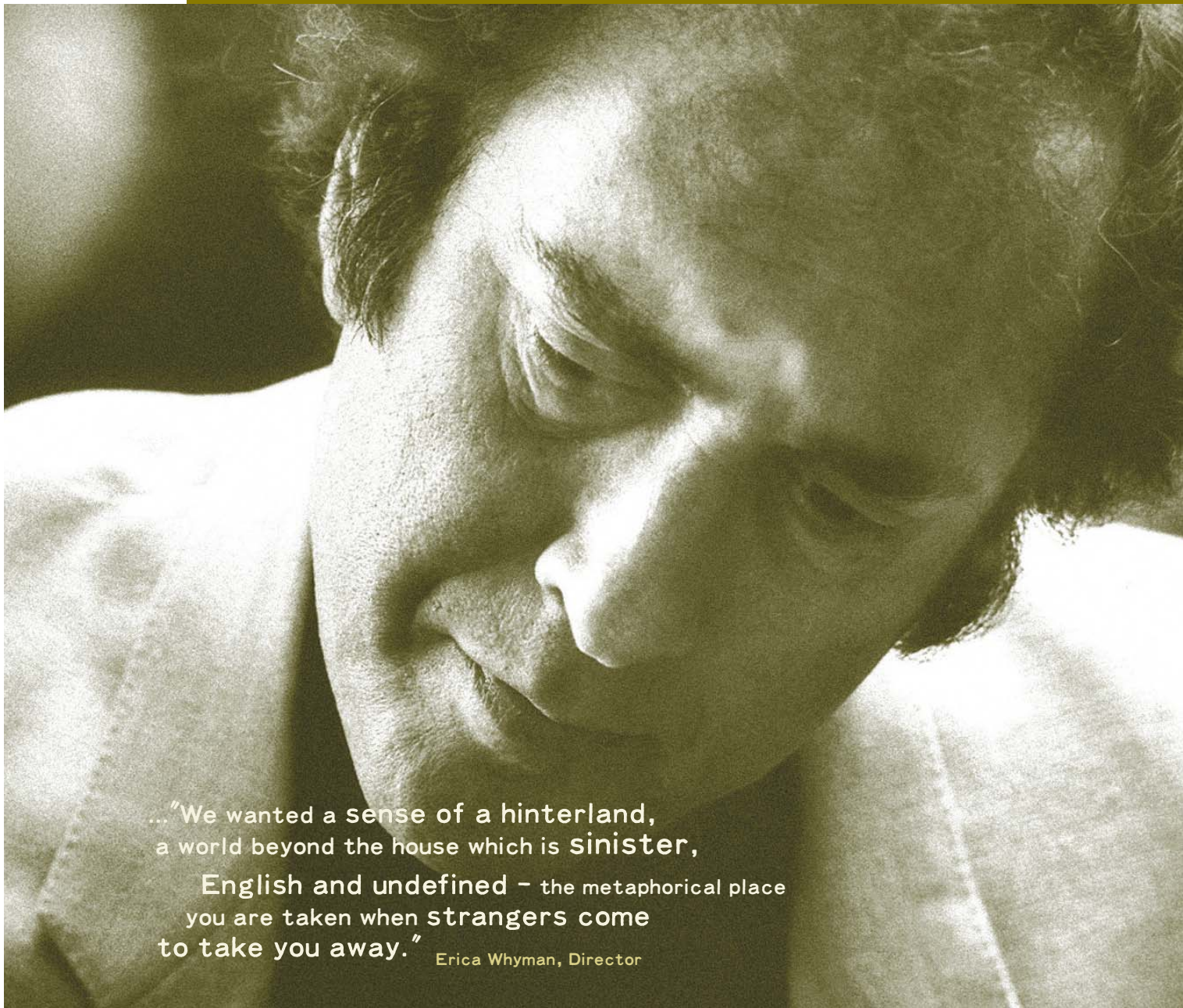


# The Birthday Party by Harold Pinter

Directed by Erica Whyman

Resource pack: David Wheeler



... "We wanted a sense of a hinterland, a world beyond the house which is sinister, English and undefined - the metaphorical place you are taken when strangers come to take you away." Erica Whyman, Director

6 February - 2 March 2002  
A Sheffield Theatres Production

**CRUCIBLE**

A resource pack for the Sheffield Theatres 2002 production of **The Birthday Party** by Harold Pinter, directed by Erica Whyman. The pack is designed for post-performance use (some pre-performance work can be found in this folder) and is aimed at students studying Drama, Theatre Studies or English Literature, as well as providing a general resource for audiences visiting the production.

Each of the four booklets contains rehearsal photographs and provides background and production-specific information, including **points for discussion** for general audience members and **Do it!** (activity section) for those studying the play. Each section has selected web links for further research and information.

**The play (outer folder) – background and socio-historic context**, including plot synopsis, the life and works of Harold Pinter, the first staging of the play in 1958, Pinter in context, how Pinter became a writer and the Crucible company with photographs and credits.

**Pinter's Hallmarks** – themes and techniques used by Pinter, including setting, character and language. Also includes books for further reading.

**Getting *The Birthday Party* up on its feet** – a guide to exploring a scene from the play, with Director's notes from Erica Whyman.

**Production** – Director, Erica Whyman's casting diary and design concept. Also Designer, Soutra Gilmour talks about the creative process of designing for *The Birthday Party*. With photographs of the model set design.

Please work with the pack as it best suits you; you are free to photocopy for use within your school/college/home.

We hope you find it to be an interesting and meaningful resource. It is part of the theatre's ongoing programme to make theatre accessible to all.

It would be very helpful if you could let us know what you and/or your students make of the pack. Please fill in the feedback sheet provided or send your comments to: Education Department, Sheffield Theatres, 55 Norfolk St, Sheffield S1 1DA or Email: [education@sheffieldtheatres.co.uk](mailto:education@sheffieldtheatres.co.uk)

Best wishes,  
**David Wheeler.**

Edited by: **Sophie Hunter** Rehearsal and model set photographs: **Gareth James for 7th Heaven**  
Model of set design: **Soutra Gilmour**

For their support I would like to thank Director **Erica Whyman**, Designer **Soutra Gilmour**, and **The Birthday Party** acting company, **Sheffield Theatres Education Department**, **Sheffield Theatres staff**, **Iris Associates** and **The Production Company**.

Text excerpts: **Faber and Faber edition, 1991.**

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Rehearsals

“Petey says one of the most important lines I have ever written. As Stanley is taken away, Petey says, ‘Stan, don’t let them tell you what to do.’ I’ve lived that line all my damn life. Never more than now.”

**Harold Pinter quoted by Mel Gussow,**  
New York Times, December 6, 1988.

**Goldberg:** We'll make a man of you.

**McCann:** And a woman.

**Goldberg:** You'll be orientated.

**McCann:** You'll be rich.

**Goldberg:** You'll be adjusted.

**McCann:** You'll be our pride and joy.

**Goldberg:** You'll be a mensch.

**McCann:** You'll be a success.

**Goldberg:** You'll be integrated.

(pp. 156-7)

## The plot

Stanley lodges in a seaside boarding house run by Meg and Petey Boles. One day his peaceful, if apathetic existence, is disturbed by the arrival of two mysterious strangers. It becomes clear that Goldberg and McCann are after him. They organise a birthday party for the terrified Stanley who insists it is not his birthday. After an evening of terror, the next day they take Stanley away, promising a future for him where they will provide 'proper care and treatment'.

## Pinter's childhood

As the son of Jewish parents Pinter was born and grew up in the east end of London in 1930-40s:

'I was very close to my parents, especially my mother,' says Pinter. 'My father was a pretty volatile, abrasive fellow, but warm-hearted too. He was a tailor and worked nearly 12 hours a day, so I couldn't blame him for being a bit short-tempered. I was part of a very big family. Although I was an only child, I had lots of cousins and aunts

and uncles. We were Jewish but I had a very odd relationship with being Jewish. I felt both Jewish and not Jewish, which in a way remains the case. After my bar mitzvah when I was 13, I hardly ever set foot in a synagogue again.'

Evacuation was a key formative experience. 'Separation made a great impact on me. I was evacuated three times. I came back right into the blitz, went away and came back to the V1s, then went away again and came back as the V2s were being dropped. The condition of being bombed has never left me.'

### Harold Pinter

The Guardian Profile: Stephen Moss.  
[www.observer.co.uk](http://www.observer.co.uk)

## Pinter: Becoming a playwright

Pinter began writing as a teenager for a number of small magazines. As a student he began his studies in acting at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) and the Central School of Speech and Drama and left to pursue an acting career with the stage name of David Baron. During this time he travelled around Ireland with a Shakespearean company and then spent a number of years working in local repertory theatres before focussing on writing plays.

During this period he was called up to do National Service, but he refused on grounds of being a pacifist and was fined £30 by the Courts.

In 1957 he had an idea for a play which he mentioned to a friend in the drama department at Bristol University. His friend was impressed and suggested they perform the play at the university, but the play needed to be ready within a week. Pinter insisted they forget the idea and then went on to write the script in just four days. This play was *The Room* and contained many of the elements that would later go on to characterise his work: an everyday situation gradually injected with menace and mystery, with little explanation or understanding of the motivation for such behaviour. In his next play *The Dumb Waiter* (1958), he added the further dimension of humour which subsequently developed into a Pinter hallmark: *the Comedy of Menace*.



Rehearsals

## Pinter: the person

As a young man Pinter was seen as a charismatic radical with a unique vision. Now, in his early seventies, he is still a leader and still defying definition.

**'Pinter remains to his credit, a permanent public nuisance, a questioner of accepted truths, both in life and art. In fact the two persistently inter-act.'**

**Michael Billington**, *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter*.

Pinter has always wanted to avoid scrutiny. His first poems were published under the name of Pinta. The term 'Pinteresque' has become part of everyday language, describing a particular voice and method that seems to be symbolic of something larger and more significant than the characters and actions of the plays they inhabit; possessing an ambiguity that make them both open to interpretation and impossible to pin down, denying us the comfort of knowing what they 'mean'.

Pinter is a recognised figure, but we know very little about him. In his later years he has become a political voice on Human Rights issues, notably critical of US foreign policy in Central America (early 70's), in his objection to Nato's presence in Kosovo (1999) and he has recently publicly questioned the War on Terrorism campaign (2001). He has also lent his full endorsement to the National Assembly Against Racism and its Speak Out Against Racism – Defend Asylum Seekers campaign.

## Pinter and post-war British theatre

Pinter belongs to long tradition of playwrights who have concentrated on the negative aspects of daily life and human ritual, expressed as oppressive, reactionary, alienating or false. These include Ibsen, Chekov, Synge, Beckett, Pinter and others.

The mid-fifties saw the emergence of this new voice in the theatre - generally a young voice, largely anti-establishment and prepared to shock. The English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre, London became the unofficial home for this new writing.

**'I have mixed feelings about words myself. Moving among them, sorting them out, watching them appear on the page, from this I derive a considerable pleasure. But at the same time, I have another strong feeling about words which amounts to nothing less than nausea.'**

**Harold Pinter**.

## At first it flopped!

***The Birthday Party*** flopped when it was first performed in 1958 at the Arts Theatre, Cambridge and subsequently at the Lyric Opera House, Hammersmith; withdrawn after just six nights of the run in response to bad Press. The critic Harold Hobson however, recognised the emergence of what he considered a highly skilful and significant new voice:

**'Mr. Pinter on the evidence of this work, possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London...'**

**Harold Hobson**, *Sunday Times* May 20, 1958.

The play today is considered a modern classic and Pinter has become one of the most influential and successful playwrights of our time. His contemporaries on his 70th birthday Oct 10, 2000 celebrated his achievements in a *Sunday Observer* article by Kate Kellaway:

**(Pinter is)... 'a poet of power'**

**David Hare**.

**'I think people will be going to Pinter plays in 100 year's time. He has such an individual voice; it may move in and out of focus but it won't disappear.'**

**Richard Eyre**.

**'Dramatic suspense is to do with the flow of information to the audience. Pinter achieves this in a way that is unique to himself.'**

**Tom Stoppard**.

**'There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it.'**

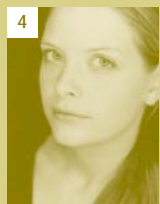
**Harold Pinter**.

# The Cast

## The Birthday Party

<b>Petey</b>	John Nettleton (1)
<b>Meg</b>	Anna Calder-Marshall (2)
<b>Stanley</b>	John Lloyd Fillingham (3)
<b>Lulu</b>	Andrea Lowe (4)
<b>Goldberg</b>	Robert East (5)
<b>McCann</b>	Robert Patterson (6)

<b>Director</b>	Erica Whyman
<b>Designer</b>	Soutra Gilmour
<b>Lighting Designer</b>	Bruno Poet
<b>Composer</b>	Michael Oliva
<b>Assistant Director</b>	Nikolai Foster
<b>Stage Manager</b>	Cath Booth
<b>Deputy Stage Manager</b>	Caroline Healey
<b>Assistant Stage Manager</b>	Emma Cameron
<b>Casting</b>	Anne McNulty & Sam Chandley



## Major works (a selection):

With some significant world and theatre dates too.

1956	<i>Bertolt Brecht's theatre company, The Berliner Ensemble visited Britain</i> <i>John Osborne, Look Back In Anger</i>
1957	The Room The Dumbwaiter
1958	The Birthday Party
1959	A Slight Ache
<b>1959–1975</b>	<b>War in Vietnam</b>
1960	<i>Samuel Beckett, Krapp's Last Tape</i> The Dwarfs The Caretaker
1961	The Collection
1965	The Homecoming
1967	Landscape
<b>1968</b>	<b>Abolition Of State Censorship in the theatre</b>
1970	Old Times
1974	No Man's Land
1978	Betrayal
1982	A Kind of Alaska
1988	Mountain Language
1991	The New World Order
1993	Moonlight
1996	Ashes to Ashes
<b>1999+</b>	<b>Kosovo Crisis</b>
2000	Celebration

*Pinter has also written the screenplays for several highly acclaimed cinema films, including:*

1963	The Servant
1964	The Pumpkin Eater
1966	Accident
1971	The Go-Between and
1981	The French Lieutenant's Woman

*Additionally, he has published*

1969	Mac - a Memoir
1971	Poems
1999	and a writing miscellany, Various Voices

*His array of awards includes a CBE in 1966 and the Laurence Olivier Award in 1996 for a lifetime's achievement in the theatre.*

### For a comprehensive list of his achievements visit:

[www.kirjasto.sci.fi/hpinter.htm](http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/hpinter.htm)  
[www.haroldpinter.org](http://www.haroldpinter.org)

### Web links Biography:

[www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc28.html](http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc28.html)

### Sunday Observer article:

[www.observer.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,372218,00.html](http://www.observer.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,372218,00.html)

## Read the following stage directions and opening lines from the play.

### Act One

The living room of a house in a seaside town. A door leading to the hall down left. Back door and small window up left. Kitchen hatch, centre back. Kitchen door up right. Table and chairs, centre.

Petey enters from the door on the left with a paper and sits at the table. He begins to read. Meg's voice comes through the kitchen hatch.

**Meg:** Is that you, Petey?

Pause

Petey, is that you?

Pause

Petey?

**Petey:** What?

**Meg:** Is that you?

**Petey:** Yes, it's me.

**Meg:** What?

## Do it!

1. Sketch the layout of the stage and furniture.
2. Describe the effect the stage setting will have on the audience.
3. What can you say about the relationship between Meg and Petey from the start of the play?
4. What images does *Comedy of Menace* suggest to you?
5. How do you expect this opening to develop? Continue the script in the same style. Act out your script.

## Points for discussion

1. Does the opening to the play suggest any particular style of acting or language?
2. It is often said that Pinter's style of language is more typical of the way we speak and interact; having read the opening to the play, do you feel this is true from your experiences?
3. Pinter's hallmark as a playwright has been described as *Comedy of Menace*. What expectation does this raise about the performance?
4. At the time when the play was written in 1958, theatres were designed and built with a *proscenium arch* (like the Sheffield Theatres' *Lyceum Theatre* – with audience on one side), but the *Crucible* has a *thrust stage*, where the actors play to the audience on three sides. In your view, how do you think the acting space, which is a single room throughout can be created on the *Crucible's* thrust stage?