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The Plays of Harold Pinter
From Absurdism to Political Drama?

Tectum

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© Tectum Verlag Marburg, 2009

ISBN 978-3-8288-5204-4

(Dieser Titel ist als gedrucktes Buch unter der
ISBN 978-3-8288-2038-8 im Tectum Verlag erschienen.)

Besuchen Sie uns im Internet
www.tectum-verlag.de

Bibliografische Informationen der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der
Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Angaben sind
im Internet über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

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1 Introduction

Harold Pinter was born on the 10th of October in 1930 in London as the son of a Jewish tailor. His family had been emigrated from Portugal over Hungary to England. In 1948 Pinter received a state scholarship to attend the most renowned theatre school in England, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. The first three of his twenty-nine plays *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party* were all written in 1957 and initially dismissed by audiences and critics, who could not make out the meaning of Pinter's plays. For instance, *The Manchester Guardian* in 1958 reviewed *The Birthday Party* as such:

What all this means, only Mr. Pinter knows, for as his characters speak in non-sequiturs, half-gibberish and lunatic ravings, they are unable to explain their actions, thoughts, or feelings. (qtd. in Silverstein 1993, 13)

Consequently, the play's production was stopped – and that only five days after it had been launched at the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith. Later, Martin Esslin identified Pinter's work as pieces of the Theatre of the Absurd and contributed to the subsequent appreciation of the playwright's work. Today Pinter is regarded as one of the most successful British playwrights and “one of the most widely performed and best-known dramatists in the contemporary world” (Raby 2001, 1). His status as a playwright even experienced a further boost, when in 2005 Pinter surprisingly was awarded with the Nobel Prize in Literature. Besides honouring Pinter's literary accomplishments throughout his career, the committee specifically addressed the political commitment of the author, “who in his plays uncovers the precipice under everyday prattle and forces entry into oppression's closed rooms.” (The Nobel Foundation)

However, Harold Pinter's political commitment has not always been as obvious as it appears to be today; having by now published a number of overtly political plays, using speeches and public appearances, such as the Nobel Lecture, for political attacks against the terrorism of the United States, and engaging himself in associations such as PEN (international association of writers promoting friendship, cooperation and freedom of speech) and human rights organisations. Especially in his early career Pinter rejected any kind of political interpretation of his plays and left no doubt of his scepticism towards politicians of any ideology and politics in general. Nevertheless, Pinter was always political, as already his conscien-

tious objection in the year 1948 hints at. The following selection of statements made by Pinter throughout his career stresses the playwright's ambiguous and often even contradictory attitude towards politics:

I don't care for didactic or moralistic theatre.

- Pinter 1961 (qtd. in Smith 2005, 52)

I don't care about political structures – they don't alarm me, but they cause a great deal of suffering to millions of people. I tell you what I really think about politicians. The other day I watched some politicians on television talking about Vietnam. I wanted very much to burst through the screen with a flame-thrower and burn their eyes out and their balls off and then inquire from them how they would assess this action from a political point of view.

- Pinter 1961 (qtd. in Smith 2005, 59)

I've always had a deeply embedded suspicion of political structures, of governments and the way people are used by them.

- Pinter 1980 (qtd. in Smith 2005, 70)

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

- Pinter 1981 (qtd. in Merritt 1989, 133)

My earlier plays are much more political than they seem on the face of it.

- Pinter 1988 (qtd. in Smith 2005, 85)

Political theatre now is even more important than it ever was [...] I believe that politics, our political consciousness and our political intelligence are not all over, because if they are, we are really doomed.

- Pinter 1996 (qtd. in Smith 2005, 92)

The content of these statements and the political attitude of his more recent plays suggest a change within the playwright's mindset, due to his "political awakening" (Grimes 2005, 18). Parallel to the rise of

the political stance within Pinter's work, one can seemingly witness a decline of the features which Esslin had defined as Absurdist¹. Plays like *Precisely* (1983), *One for the Road* (1984), *Mountain Language* (1988) or *The New World Order* (1991) appear to be less mysterious and enigmatic in order to address political facts and truths. While some critics have argued that Pinter sacrifices his literary craft by neglecting the metaphorical layer of his early plays (cf. Esslin 1993, 35), others point out the quality that, "refreshingly, he is an angry old man" (Grimes 2005, 36).

Pinter's work has therefore been described as a development from Absurdism to political drama. As the Theatre of the Absurd is mainly thought of as apolitical and incompatible with dramatizing political issues, the apparent decline of Absurdist features in Pinter's plays seems to go along with the simultaneous rise of the political substance. However, this paper is going to put forward the thesis that Pinter's plays have been political from the beginning and that Absurdist features are indeed applicable in order to address political issues.

The main focus of such an analysis must therefore be on the text itself. However, it is also necessary to define the constituent elements, namely Absurdism and political drama, and make them tangible, before engaging in a scrutiny of the text. The paper is therefore divided into three principal chapters. In the first chapter, we will take a look at the Theatre of the Absurd, its historical evolution, philosophical background and its basic characteristics. The second chapter examines the genre of political drama with regard to its historical manifestations, the significance of the term *politics* and the so-called failure of the political drama. The final chapter is then devoted to the actual analysis of Pinter's drama itself. The chosen plays can be seen as representative of Pinter's early work (*The Dumb Waiter* and *The Birthday Party*) and his later work (*One for the Road* and *Mountain Language*) and will be analyzed in terms of their political significance and the compatibility of Absurdist and political elements.

1 In this paper the terms *Absurd*, *Absurdist* and *Absurdism* are used with reference to the literary manifestation of the *Theatre of the Absurd*, hence they are spelled with a capitalized A. Whenever the term *absurd* is not capitalized, it is used according to its lexical function.

2 The Theatre of the Absurd

The term *Theatre of the Absurd* was introduced to the world of literary criticism by Martin Esslin in 1961 in his groundbreaking work which he consistently entitled *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Since then the term has become a collective name for a certain style of theatre that originated in the highly avant-garde theatre scene of Paris in the late 1940s and early 1950s and disobeyed the rules and conventions of the classical theatre and the so-called well-made play. Despite its revolutionary impact on the majority of audiences it cannot be understood as a completely new phenomenon, since it is closely related to former literary and dramatic modes, such as Dadaism, Existentialism and Surrealism, and makes use of well-known dramatic techniques. As we will see in the course of this chapter, it is the mixture of these techniques and an overtly pessimistic and negative attitude that made the Theatre of the Absurd such a novel experience (cf. Esslin 2001, 327).

Absurd originally refers to music and means “out of harmony” (Esslin 2001, 22). Today it describes something that is “not reasonable or sensible” (Crowther 1995, 5). The term *Theatre of the Absurd* is a problematic one as it is frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted as a kind of theatre that does not make any sense and is altogether absurd, and hence cannot be interpreted or understood in any logical way. This belief however is based on wrong assumptions. The phrase *Theatre of the Absurd* implies that a play, which falls under its category, addresses the absurdity of life and expresses this theme not only within its content but also with its very form (cf. Damian 1977, 23), which distinguishes it from other literary movements dealing with the absurdity of mankind, e.g. Existentialism (cf. Poppe 1979, 21). However illogical and senseless the events on stage may be, there is still meaning conveyed to the audience, which naturally is related to the absurdity of mankind and the necessity of dealing with it.

An exact date for the emergence of the Absurdist Theatre – as for all cultural phenomena – is hard to decide on. In the case of the Theatre of the Absurd its origin can be traced back to a relatively short time span starting with the beginning of the Second World War and ending in the mid 50s (cf. Damian 1977, 24). As the authors here in question do not form a unitary body, but claim to be individual and isolated, and elements and techniques of the Absurd are already to be found in earlier forms of literature (cf. Esslin 2001, 22),

a concrete and precise definition of timelines will always remain problematic. Nevertheless some authors have engaged in this project. Ruby Cohn, for example, traces back the beginning of Theatre of the Absurd to 1950, exactly mid-century (cf. Cohn 1990, 1). This was when two of Esslin's major Absurdist playwrights were performed in Paris, namely Arthur Adamov and Eugène Ionesco, and a third one, Samuel Beckett, had just finished writing the one play that would become the most discussed and successful piece of absurdist drama of the century, *Waiting for Godot*.

As J. L. Styan points out, the Absurdist authors chosen by Esslin² come from very different national, cultural and familiar backgrounds (cf. Styan 1981, 125). For this group of heterogeneous playwrights the city of Paris served as a kind of melting pot and consequently became inseparably associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. However, it would be wrong to assume that the Absurdist idea is a French creation or conception, since only one of the authors mentioned by Esslin is a Frenchman, namely Jean Genet. The other playwrights were of different nationalities³, but lived or at least worked in Paris, which therefore can be seen "as a powerhouse of the modern movement" and was "an international rather than a merely French centre" (Esslin 2001, 26). One should therefore rather refer to the Theatre of the Absurd as an international or European tradition than a French one.

Although the authors that Esslin treated as Absurdist do not form a unitary body and have not founded a literary school – at least not intentionally – they share a similar understanding of life and the purpose or purposelessness of mankind in general:

[...] the dramatists whose work is here discussed do not form part of any self-proclaimed or self-conscious school or movement. On the contrary, each of the writers in question is an individual who regards himself as a lone outsider, cut off and isolated in his private world. Each has his own personal approach to both subject-matter and form; his own roots, sources, and background. If they also, very clearly and in spite of themselves, have a good deal in common, it

2 In the first edition of *The Theatre of the Absurd* Esslin presented only four defining playwrights, namely Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, and Jean Genet. In subsequent editions he added Harold Pinter as a fifth playwright.

3 Samuel Beckett was Irish, Arthur Adamov Russian and of Armenian origin, Eugene Ionesco Rumanian, and Harold Pinter English.

is because their work most sensitively mirrors and reflects the preoccupations and anxieties, the emotions and thinking of many of their contemporaries in the Western world. (Esslin 2001, 22)

Much of this common understanding has its source in the recent historical developments. Still under the impression of the atrocities, gas chambers and bombs of two World Wars, facing a world whose former universal beliefs and truths have lost validity, and witnessing a rapid decline of religious faith (cf. Esslin 2001, 23), the authors here in question – as many of their contemporaries – started to feel the urgency to deal with the absurdity of human existence.

2.1 The Emergence of the Absurd

The emergence of the notion of the Absurd and therefore the Theatre of the Absurd must be seen in a broad social, political, scientific and religious context. It is a reaction of certain philosophers and playwrights to the absurd human condition, which in their eyes could not be accepted anymore and must be addressed and come to terms with. This “intolerable imprisonment”, as Richard Coe puts it (qtd. in Styan 1981, 125), is characterized by a loss of universal beliefs, a decline of religious faith and the inability of mankind to realize their own senselessness and purposelessness.

The two world wars – needless to say – had a crucial impact on the development of this feeling of senselessness and therefore on the Theatre of the Absurd, which can be seen “as a nihilistic reaction to the recent atrocities, the gas-chambers and the nuclear bombs of the war” (Styan 1981, 125). Conventions and values that allowed or even promoted a reign of fascism and violence could not be tolerated anymore and were therefore dismissed. The Absurdistists were convinced that “it is no longer possible to accept art forms still based on the continuation of standards and concepts that have lost their validity” (Esslin 2001, 399). This was the case for social as well as literary conventions, values and traditions:

Für viele Schriftsteller stellte sich nach der Erfahrung des Faschismus und nach dem 2. Weltkrieg die bürgerliche Kultur, deren Wertvorstellungen und Normen, welche Faschismus und Krieg nicht verhindert hatten, als unheilvoll dar, als unmenschlich und lebensfeindlich. Die Institutionen der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft und die Propagandisten