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'The Artist is the Hero of the Story': Harold Pinter's *Moonlight* as a Case Study in Reception

The first major posthumous London revival of a play by Harold Pinter was *Moonlight* at the Donmar Warehouse in April 2011. There was a striking difference between the critical reception of this production and the way the play had been greeted on its 1993 premiere, when *Moonlight* – then framed as Pinter's return after fifteen fallow years and a number of increasingly controversial political interventions – prompted an extremely mixed response. In 2011, by contrast, the critical community was more or less united. This progression can be seen to illustrate more than just the benefits of hindsight, and in this article Harry Derbyshire considers responses to *Moonlight* in 1993 and 2011 as a means of illuminating the range of competing interests that underlie the journalistic and academic infrastructure within which the merits of cultural products are assessed. He also considers the emotional investment commentators often have in the triumphs and reversals of those they follow on the public and cultural stage. Harry Derbyshire's doctorate, on 'Harold Pinter: Production, Reception, Reputation 1984–1999', is from King's College London, and he currently lectures in Drama and English at the University of Greenwich. Publications include articles on Roy Williams, on human rights and verbatim theatre, and on the Reminiscence Theatre Archive of Pam Schweitzer, recently acquired by Greenwich.

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THE FIRST MAJOR posthumous London revival of a play by Harold Pinter was Bijan Sheibani's production of *Moonlight* at the Donmar Warehouse in April 2011. There was a striking difference between the critical reception of this revival and the way the play had been greeted upon its premiere in 1993, a difference which is indicative not only of the way in which artistic reputations are, in John Rodden's phrase, 'radically contingent',¹ but also of the sometimes overlooked (because usually concealed) overlap between an apparently objective professional judgement and a subjective intellectual or emotional response conditioned by a range of social, political, and cultural factors.

The reception of an artwork can be hard to quantify due to the difficulty of verifying reader or audience reaction; however, in theatre critics there exists a group whose responses to what they see are exhaustively recorded and therefore available for analysis. The responses of this group, moreover, to

some degree determine wider reception: 'Of all the forces that mediate between a playwright and the public', as Yael Zarhy-Levo has written, 'theatre reviewers may be of cardinal importance.'² In this article I want to analyze how *Moonlight* was received by reviewers, first upon its premiere in 1993, and then upon its revival in 2011, making brief reference also to scholarly responses to the play. I will argue that the debates and disputes that arose have significance far beyond the question of *Moonlight's* artistic worth, casting light upon the range of competing interests that underlie the journalistic and academic infrastructure within which the worth of cultural products is assessed, and to a certain extent upon the shared values and assumptions on which it is constructed.

Referring to the well-known story of how Pinter's first play went from receiving poor notices and being taken off within a week to acquiring the status of a classic, fellow playwright Tom Stoppard has remarked:

'One of the deeper satisfactions about the history of *The Birthday Party* is that the artist is the hero of the story. . . . Harold never shifted an inch . . . he just waited.'³

In Stoppard's reading, the moral of the tale appears to be that the principled artist may constitute a still point in the ever-shifting whirlpool of critical opinion, and that the art itself, if of sufficient stature, will be what remains when the views of critics are long forgotten. However, though the appeal of this notion to a writer such as Stoppard is clear, it does not do justice to the myriad social, political, and cultural influences which act upon the way an artwork is produced, experienced, evaluated, and passed down to posterity. To construe art as a fixed point in this way is to obscure the fascinating complexity of the process of production and reception – and, indeed, its open-ended nature.

The Complexity of Reception

As Susan Bennett has observed, 'the reception history of . . . *The Birthday Party* is exemplary' in highlighting the various factors in play when an innovative artwork is evaluated.⁴ The episode provides a clear illustration of Hans Robert Jauss's notion that reception of aesthetic works is determined by the receivers' 'horizon of expectations' – the expectations created by previous works providing the parameters within which the new work will be experienced – so that 'the smaller the distance' between 'the expectation horizon and the work . . . the closer that work gets to the level of culinary or entertainment art'.⁵

That Pinter in 1964, when the play was revived to critical acclaim, did not present the insurmountable challenge he had to reviewers in 1958 is evidence that expectation horizons had widened. Bennett also cites the episode as offering the perfect illustration of Stanley Fish's conception that (as Bennett puts it) 'texts are accorded value not by any intrinsic properties but by interpretive communities' – which is to say that the individuals who evaluate works belong to groups with shared expectations and inter-

pretive strategies, and it is these expectations and strategies rather than its inherent properties, which primarily determine an artwork's reception.⁶

The factors which influence the formation of such communities are indicated by Manfred Naumann, who highlights the way in which 'particular modes of thought and canons of evaluation are formed . . . according to the objective social functions transmitted to literature by the material and ideological relationships in a given social formation'.⁷ The model of reception put forward by these critics is complicated further when we take into account the active role in the mediating process that may be taken by the artist: for instance, as Zarhy-Levo has observed,

Pinter is a playwright who assume[d] an active role in determining his own dramatic image . . . and thereby negotiating the criteria by which he might appear to be judged.⁸

Stoppard's interpretation of the *Birthday Party* story, then, elides the complexities of the reception of an artwork; at the same time, however, it displays a storyteller's gift for constructing a clear narrative from an intricate sequence of events, and indicates the way in which we as observers often have an emotional investment in the triumphs and reversals of those we follow on the public and cultural stage. It may be that reviewers are especially susceptible to this: veteran reviewer Irving Wardle writes that 'Inside every critic there lurks both a sportsman and a bully; a rebel and an upholder of the status quo.' These personae, he continues, are especially apt to be unleashed at moments of potential drama:

When a great star comes out of retirement, or a newcomer shoots to the top, sportsmen and bullies combine in prostrating themselves before an institutional name, or cutting the upstart down to size, however little the artist may have merited either response.⁹

Such a moment of potential drama was provided by the Donmar revival of *Moonlight* in April 2011. In the two years that had elapsed since Pinter's death there had been no major London production of his work, a

relatively long period when set against the frequency of Pinter revivals in the previous decade. The dramatist's death had, it seems, prompted a respectful hiatus, which was now over. Might critics now indulge their rebellious side and make this the occasion for a radical reassessment of a previously revered author? This possibility, while perhaps remote, was not made more so by the fact that the play returning Pinter to the professional London stage should turn out to be a lesser known work from 1993, as opposed to an oft-proven classic such as *The Caretaker* or *The Homecoming*.

The potential drama occasioned by the 2011 revival of *Moonlight*, however, paled in comparison to the charged circumstances in which the play had premiered at the Almeida in 1993. Then there had been a heavy weight of expectation upon it, most obviously because at that point Pinter had not written a full-length play since *Betrayal* in 1978. The playwright was keen to point out that he had not been idle during that time, having written extensively for the screen and having authored a series of shorter works for the stage, but these short plays further complicated critical expectations since three of them (*One for the Road* in 1984, *Mountain Language* in 1988, and *Party Time* in 1991) had marked a new, political phase in Pinter's drama that proved increasingly unpopular with reviewers. Zarhy-Levo suggests that these works were greeted with hostility because, in their surprising lack of ambiguity, they resisted the receptive strategies which critics had honed over years of Pinter-watching, and comments that

The playwright's new plays, which were incompatible with the construct as devised . . . called into question the canonical position to which he had been assigned'.¹⁰

Moonlight, an eighty-minute drama that bore many of the hallmarks of Pinter's earlier work and had no apparent political agenda, might have been designed to supply what had apparently been lacking and renew the playwright's credentials.

Pinter, moreover, was in an advantageous position, insofar as the many critics who had

praised him in the past were likely to be predisposed to reassert their earlier acumen. For some, however, a renewal of the dramatist's standing would have seemed a less satisfying prospect: in addition to the longstanding distrust among British reviewers of anything relating to the *avant garde*, Pinter's political plays and activities had won him the enmity of a significant number of commentators. Charles Spencer, for instance, wrote in a review of *Party Time* that its author was 'in danger of becoming one of the great comic figures of British public life'.¹¹ That its author was now increasingly polarizing opinion did not bode well for the reception of *Moonlight* in 1993.

The Problem of the Comeback

Prior to the premiere of *Party Time* in 1991, Irving Wardle – then theatre critic of the *Independent on Sunday* – wrote an eloquent appreciation of Pinter, whom he portrayed as a playwright who had made consistent artistic advances in the earlier part of his career but who had had hit a dead-end after *Betrayal*, his subsequent lack of inspiration evident from the brevity of his political drama. Of the new play he wrote:

The only advance detail to slip out is that it runs for around eighty minutes. But that is enough to suggest that he has at last managed to touch the hidden spring that releases his powers of dramatic speech, and that when the house lights go down at the Almeida he will be seen once again to have moved on.¹²

This proved to be a false hope. *Party Time* was not as lengthy as rumour had suggested and few saw it as a major addition to the Pinter canon. It is interesting, however, to consider how Wardle presents the narrative of Pinter's career: by invoking past triumphs and recent decline, he depicts the playwright, as Stoppard was to do, as the story's hero. In this case, Pinter is presented as a vanquished hero, but Wardle offers, at the end, a glimmer of hope, the suggestion of an Arthurian renewal, tantalizing his readers with the prospect of a glorious return to form.

It will be seen, then, that the news, two years later, of a new Pinter play that did

indeed last eighty minutes and which was about a family rather than politics, held out for many the promise of such a return. But the stakes were high. If *Moonlight* was a success it seemed clear that Pinter's reputation would be substantially shored up; but a contemporaneous comparison makes clear that there were also risks – as witness John Osborne's emergence from semi-obscurity with *Déjàvu*, a sequel to *Look Back in Anger*, in 1992. The ignominious failure of that venture would prove, in the words of Luc Gillemann, the 'sad finale' of Osborne's career and the culmination of a 'long and dizzying fall . . . to virtual public neglect and ridicule'.¹³

Pinter's stock had not fallen nearly so far as Osborne's, and he would have had to exert considerable effort to write a play as objectionable as *Déjàvu*, but nonetheless the episode demonstrates how badly a comeback can backfire. How much this danger exercised Pinter is not recorded, though we know that after the first night he went to fetch the dailies with his habitual exclamation, 'Let's face the music', and that he was (in his wife Antonia Fraser's words) 'unequivocally delighted' by the positive notices.¹⁴

The Reception of *Moonlight* in 1993

Moonlight premiered at the intimate Almeida Theatre in September 1993 in a production directed by David Leveaux. It starred Ian Holm as Andy, a dying civil servant railing on his deathbed in the presence of Bel, his long-suffering wife, but in the absence of his three children. His two adult sons, Jake and Fred, refuse to see him, preferring instead to indulge in extended word games in Fred's bedroom, geographically distant but close in terms of proximity on stage. Andy's daughter Bridget also appears in the play, but she seems to be a ghost, frozen in time at the age of sixteen, and interacting with other characters only in the play's one 'flashback' scene, where she is shown arguing with her teenage brothers. Two minor characters, Maria and Ralph, also appear, though it is unclear whether they are literally present in the world of the play or are being conjured up in the imaginations of the characters.

Pinter revealed that the play was inspired by the experience of playing Hirst in a 1992 revival of his 1975 play *No Man's Land*. As might be expected, the resulting play includes moments of lyricism and mystery reminiscent of Pinter's 1970s work, but it combines these with earthy dialogue and humour that recall earlier plays like *The Homecoming*. As Pinter said, 'Though we know there's a lot of death about in *Moonlight*, salt, vinegar, and mustard exist in the play. In other words there are a few laughs.'¹⁵ The play can therefore be seen as a bringing together of different strands of the playwright's work, though at the same time some detected a new emotional openness in the play's dramatization of the pain of separation, and both the use of a flashback and the inclusion of a ghost were unprecedented in Pinter's previous work.¹⁶

Pinter's apparent return to his dramatic roots was acknowledged by most reviewers, but the critics were sharply divided as to the ultimate success of the enterprise.¹⁷ There were some who declared that this was just the triumph which Wardle had foretold: 'a genuine return to form', wrote Benedict Nightingale in *The Times*; 'Pinter at his best', wrote John Gross in the *Sunday Telegraph*; 'Pinter's most moving work', wrote Michael Billington in the *Guardian* – while most emphatically of all Jack Tinker of the *Daily Mail* proclaimed *Moonlight* 'a great play' possessed of 'a brilliance, a profundity, and a passion I had not thought to see again'.

Other reviewers, however, were distinctly unimpressed: *Moonlight* was 'a laboured imitation' (Nicholas de Jongh, *Evening Standard*), 'a collection of Pinterisms to order' (Martin Hoyle, *Mail on Sunday*), 'not funny' (Malcolm Rutherford, *Financial Times*). Charles Spencer of the *Telegraph* concluded that 'Pinter seems to be dressed only in the tattered remains of his once-formidable talent'.

Just as many of the positive reviews contrasted the success of *Moonlight* with the lean years that had preceded it, so the negative ones juxtaposed its failure with the glory of Pinter's early successes, both groups setting their verdicts within the frame of the playwright's overall career to construct the play

as the latest chapter in a heroic narrative of triumph or defeat. An overall survey of reviews of *Moonlight* at the Almeida shows nine positive, five negative and five mixed, giving the play a slender margin of approval – and, following the Almeida performances, the play transferred to the Comedy Theatre in the West End where, coincidentally, Osborne's final play had met its fate a year earlier.¹⁸

Upon this transfer, in November 1993, the play received a further batch of notices, and this time the balance was much more clearly in its favour, with seven of the eight reviews being positive.¹⁹ Partly this consolidation of support for the play can be ascribed to three favourable reviewers taking the opportunity to restate and expand upon their earlier praise, but more generally it seems that critical opinion was now coalescing around the tentatively positive consensus established in the first reviews. Those who saw *Moonlight* as a reassertion of Pinter's status, proving him still capable of the quality of writing on which his reputation was based, outnumbered those who saw the play as a calculated but unsuccessful attempt by an ageing playwright to repeat the feats of his youth. This tendency was further in evidence in 1994 when *Moonlight* was staged as part of a Pinter Festival held at the Gate Theatre, Dublin, providing the occasion for John Peter of the *Sunday Times* to withdraw his earlier qualification that the play was a 'minor' work and to compare Pinter's mastery of stagecraft to Titian's way with paint.²⁰

Views of the Reviews

As the dust settled, it seemed increasingly understood that Pinter had emerged from the fray with the result that he needed; in his annual bulletin from London to readers of *The Pinter Review*, published in Florida, Ronald Knowles felt justified in writing that, while 'responses to *Moonlight* ranged from one extreme to the other . . . the majority . . . collectively recognized . . . a significant development of substance and achievement';²¹ and elsewhere Knowles wrote that 'generally the play was very well received'.²²

More disingenuously, perhaps, in his 1996 authorized biography of Pinter, Michael Billington wrote of the critical response to *Moonlight* that, unlike earlier plays, it had not been 'greeted with puzzled incomprehension' – despite several of the reviewers expressing exactly this – before quoting from three of the play's most favourable reviews as if they were representative of critical opinion as a whole.²³ Similarly, Yael Zarhy-Levo briefly considers *Moonlight*'s reception in her book *The Making of Theatrical Reputations* and reports that 'almost all the reviews were favourable'.²⁴

A very different assessment is given by D. Keith Peacock in his 1997 book *Harold Pinter and the New British Theatre*, in which the reviewers' responses to *Moonlight* are characterized as 'bewildered and hostile', a rendering of the consensus that accords with his own view of the play as 'tiresomely self-referential' and 'verg[ing] on self-parody'.²⁵ Peacock's summary is not only the exception that proves the rule, but a clear indication of the way in which the apparently factual question of how well a play was reviewed will receive different answers depending upon who is being asked, and what vested interests might be in play.

The press reception of the premiere production of *Moonlight*, and the way in which it was subsequently represented, illustrate some of the mechanisms that help to perpetuate (may indeed render self-perpetuating) a reputation such as Pinter's. Not only can a given writer's eminence inspire much loyalty and goodwill, but it is also in the interest of critics to maintain the standing of those they have previously championed, since failing to do so might call into question the reliability of earlier judgements; similarly, where critics are themselves uncertain, it is understandable if they begin to cluster around whatever nascent consensus appears to be forming.

All this notwithstanding, there may be some critics – 'rebels' in Wardle's terms – who attempt to topple the icon; however, they are unlikely to be found among the ranks of specialists in the author in question and, because it is generally to such specialists

that the task of retrospectively assessing critical reaction falls, any dissent such critics register is liable to be downplayed in, if not altogether omitted from, such surveys. Crucially, the new work is not responded to in isolation, its reception instead constituting the latest chapter of an ongoing narrative, and Pinter, the hero of that narrative in this case, survived the potential crisis of 1993 to fight another day.

From 1993 to 2011

Several reviewers of *Moonlight* had, with greater or lesser degrees of sarcasm, alluded to the painstaking attention the play would receive within the academy – ‘one day, probably very soon, scholars will sort it out’, as Mark Amory wrote in the *Independent on Sunday*. There was, of course, some truth in this: in contrast to the overnight deluge of opinion constituted by newspaper reviews, academics are able to formulate their response to a new work over an extended period of time, and Pinter remains of great interest to the scholarly community. As long ago as 1969, Herman T. Schroll identified a marked difference between the way Pinter’s work was received by reviewers and by academics, detecting in scholarly writing on Pinter ‘the implicit assumption that the playwright was a worthy literary subject’, while reviewers continued periodically to suggest that Pinter’s work was – among other things – limited, repetitive, mannered and lacking in compassion.²⁶

Though aware that posterity would ultimately adjudicate, Schroll highlights the fact that, in the first decade of the playwright’s career:

The serious issues raised by reviewers . . . were in radical opposition to the subtle readings offered by those commentators who viewed Pinter as a prominent literary figure.²⁷

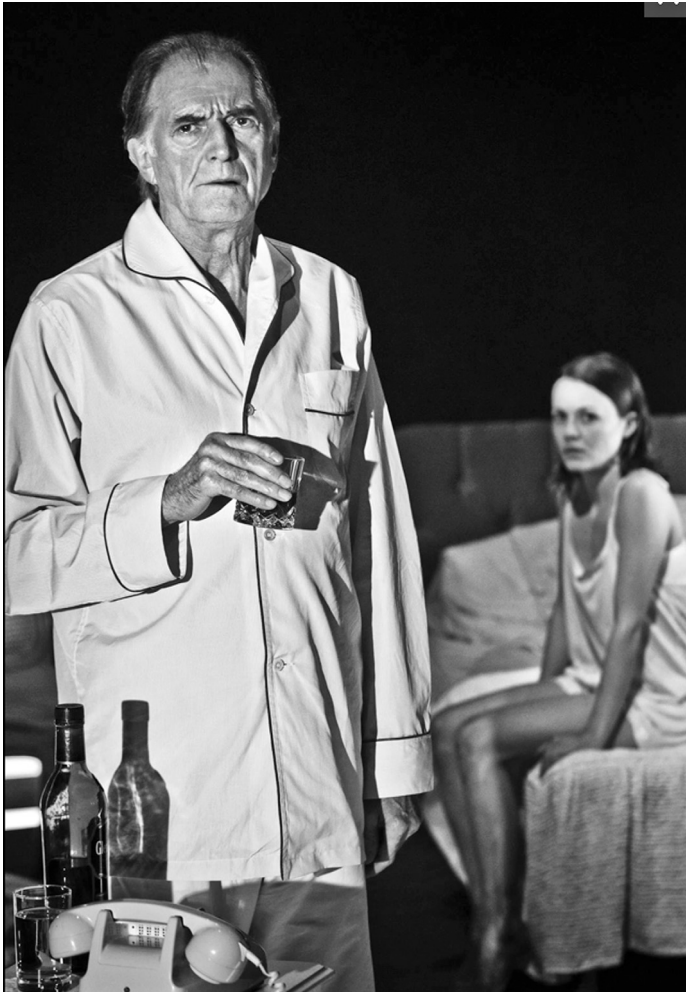
This seems very much to have been the case with respect to *Moonlight*. The charges of self-parody made by reviewers critical of the play have not tended to be considered in scholarly responses to it, with occasional

exceptions. Instead, academics have mostly taken the worth of the play as read, their high valuation of it implicit in the detailed and sophisticated analysis to which they then subject it.²⁸ It might be noted, however, that Pinter’s 1996 play *Ashes to Ashes* seems to have attracted considerably greater attention from academics, which certainly reflects the engagement of that play with the Holocaust and aspects of trauma theory, but may also suggest an implicit and collective value judgement.

The years that separated the premiere of *Moonlight* and its first London revival saw a number of relevant developments take place. The most obvious and significant of these was the playwright’s death in December, 2007 following years of increasing ill health which had understandably softened critical attitudes to this once indomitable and sometimes belligerent figure. Of great significance, too, was the award to Pinter of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2005, which occasioned widespread acknowledgement of his achievements and the expression of a certain degree of nationalistic pride in a writer who, it was now unequivocally clear, had attained great international esteem.

Also of significance, I would argue, was the changing political climate in the early years of the new century. Although Pinter continued to make outspoken interventions and to be strongly criticized in some quarters for his political speeches and writings (notably his slim volume of poetry *War*), it is also fair to say that his consistent criticisms of neo-imperial US foreign policy began to seem considerably less out of step with public opinion in the years following the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. Lastly, *Moonlight* no longer occupied the exposed position of being Pinter’s latest play: he had followed it with two shorter pieces – *Ashes to Ashes* and *Celebration* (2000) – which, although neither is generally classed as a work to rival *The Birthday Party* or *The Caretaker*, were agreed to have been original additions to Pinter’s canon and successes in their own terms.

As we have seen, then, the reception of *Moonlight* following its premiere saw an initially tentative thumbs-up from the London



David Bradley as Andy and Lisa Diveney as his wraith-like daughter Bridget in the Donmar Warehouse production of *Moonlight*.

critics solidify, at least in subsequent accounts, into a positive consensus approving the play. Productions then followed around the world – as they arguably would have done whatever the play's critical fortunes in London – and academics incorporated the new addition into their readings of Pinter's work as a whole. To the careful observer, however, there were indications that the play's status was not as secure as some accounts would suggest: the run of *Moonlight* at the Comedy Theatre lost money, for example – not especially surprising given the difficulty of making a success of serious drama in the commercial sector, but hardly indicative of cast-iron success.²⁹ As mentioned, the play was relatively neglected by scholars – and, most tellingly, was not revived on the London stage for eighteen years.

The Reception of *Moonlight* in 2011

Two reviewers found the revival of *Moonlight* in 2011 puzzling, but for very different reasons.³⁰ Michael Billington, on the one hand, considered it 'strange that one of Harold Pinter's most accessible plays had to wait eighteen years for a major London revival'; Euan Ferguson, conversely, thought it to be 'a minor mystery why the sure-footed Donmar has revived Harold Pinter's 1993 play at this time, unless as a sly hubristic reminder that giants too can, as their feet grow bigger, stumble'. Another critic, Lloyd Evans, thought ahead to the likelihood of further revivals and concluded that 'this is the last glimmer of *Moonlight* London will see in a while'.

The decision to produce the play arose from discussions between Michael Grandage, then Artistic Director of the intimate Donmar Warehouse, and director Bijan Sheibani, who had begun his professional directing career with a well-received double bill of Pinter plays in 2003. The cast was led by veteran Pinter actor David Bradley, a gruff and cadaverous presence in the role of Andy, and Deborah Findlay, who brought tartness and poise to the part of Andy's wife Bel; Daniel Mays, acclaimed for his portrayal of working-class characters such as Danny in Simon Stephens's *Motortown*, took the part of Jake. The action played out on a largely empty stage, Sheibani focusing primarily on a faithful rendering of the text, though the opening moments in which the cast lined up in front of the audience before taking their positions struck a bold note of self-conscious artificiality.

The production was widely reviewed, and there are some echoes of the stronger reactions elicited in 1993. 'Great God, this is an awful play!' writes Libby Purves in *The Times*, paraphrasing Captain Scott's assessment of the Antarctic in an attempt to convey what she saw as *Moonlight's* emotional sterility, while Charles Spencer of the *Daily Telegraph* repeats the charge of self-parody, describing the playwright as 'desperately replaying old themes and riffs to diminishing returns'. Others, including the dependable Billington, lavish praise on the play, and it is described as 'quietly devastating' (Nathan, *Jewish Chronicle*) and 'impossible not to admire' (Caplan, *Time Out*).

The majority, however, are more temperate: in contrast to the reviews of 1993 a clear consensus arises in 2011, the gist of which is that, as Kate Bassett writes in the *Independent on Sunday*, 'this isn't Pinter's best play'. There are four unequivocally positive assessments of the play and six unequivocally damning ones; the other nine offer a mixed response, acknowledging strengths but concluding, mostly more in sorrow than anger, that *Moonlight* is not a completely successful work.³¹

For many reviewers, the play's emotional impact in performance constituted the acid

test of the show. Billington found it a 'heart-breaking' work (*Guardian*) and Georgina Brown 'a play that blazes' (*Mail on Sunday*), but more commonly there was a sense of emotional disengagement: *Moonlight* 'didn't move us as it should' (Henry Hitchings, *Evening Standard*); 'the play is hard to connect with . . . fitfully illuminating but remain[ing] chilly' (Siobhan Murphy, *Metro*); it 'remains strangely unmoving' (Sarah Hemming, *Financial Times*); and the audience's 'sympathy and patience dr[ie]d up' (Maxie Szalwinska, *Sunday Times*).

A number of critics recorded that for them the performance – although brief – did not fly by. This tallies with my own experience: the drama seemed lacking in the substance and depth present in much of Pinter's work; it was not that the play's themes necessarily lacked emotional resonance, just that the dialogue did not seem well enough executed. I would agree that *Moonlight* is not one of Pinter's best plays; it would take the stimulation afforded by Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and the experience of immersion in Gitta Sereny's biography of Albert Speer to elicit from Pinter *Ashes to Ashes*, arguably his last great work.

The most obvious conclusion to draw from the 2011 revival and its reception is that this kind of verdict is much easier to reach eighteen years after a play's premiere and two years after its author's death. With Pinter's status assured by ongoing regard for his *oeuvre* as a whole, and enshrined in the award of the Nobel Prize, his reputation no longer hangs in the balance; consequently the sense of jeopardy and uncertainty detectable in the 1993 responses is simply not present in 2011, allowing a greater degree of objectivity.

There are, however, some interesting retrospective comments about the play's fraught reception eighteen years earlier. They come from a range of angles but most correspond, in terms of fact if not in terms of attitude, to the summaries given by Michael Billington and Ronald Knowles, both quoted above. Henry Hitchings writes that *Moonlight* was 'acclaimed as a haunting and passionate demonstration of Pinter's art'; Libby Purves

writes in *The Times* that 'it was greeted at the time with routine obeisances to a formerly mould-breaking writer working towards a lifetime Olivier and Nobel'; and Euan Ferguson tells *Observer* readers that 'it was reviewed at the time with hagiographic plaudits'.

Only Charles Spencer of the *Daily Telegraph* gives a sense of the earlier critical disunity when he writes that the play was initially greeted 'by some' as a return to form. Lloyd Evans in the *Spectator* allows himself a lengthy disquisition on the thesis that Pinter, like Samuel Beckett, owes his eminence to the praise of academics, gained on the basis that 'simplicity and definition are less amenable to academic discussion than allusiveness and obscurity', which means that scholars 'can harvest a richer crop of tracts and monographs from an abstruse dramatist than from a plain-speaking one'. As we have seen, there may indeed be some truth in this, though few are likely to be convinced by Evans's accompanying assertion that academia in the twentieth century became 'more powerful and prosperous than the art it elucidated', so that 'it's all about economics'. Perhaps more credible is Tim Walker's belief that Pinter is so frequently revived because 'actors still seem to have a soft spot for the old boy' – as, we have seen, do directors.

Implicit in descriptions of *Moonlight* as 'one of Pinter's lesser works' (as Szalwinska puts it) is a confidence in the ongoing validity of his best plays. This confidence is not evident in all reviews, however, and Tim Walker opens his *Sunday Telegraph* notice by wondering 'whether [Pinter's] work [will] outlive him for very long'. Walker's reasons for pondering this may not be entirely sound – he suggests that Pinter's plays largely lack 'strong stories, strong characters and strong dialogue' – but the fact of his publicly throwing the playwright's longevity into question is interesting in itself, especially considering Pinter's relationship with the right-wing press.

Moreover, in his contention that Pinter's work is 'depressing', Walker echoes a comment made by Charles Spencer:

In one respect at least the play does work powerfully. I have rarely left a theatre feeling as desolate as I did after sitting through *Moonlight*. . . . I would advise anyone in the grip of depression to give the play a very wide berth indeed. The sheer misery of the piece strikes me as both malign and potentially infectious.³²

Here we might pause and consider the extent to which the success of an artwork relies upon the compatibility of the outlook presented with the disposition of the viewer. Responses of this kind are more than usually subjective; we might contrast the views of Spencer and Walker with that of Georgina Brown, for whom the play was 'brilliantly bleak', or indeed with that of academic Varun Begley, for whom it is actually 'somewhat sentimental'.³³

It is not necessary to conclude, however, that such responses are an entirely individual matter: we might recall that when Pinter first rose to acclaim his work was often associated with the Theatre of the Absurd, a movement described by Martin Esslin, the man who defined it, as 'the reflection of what seems to be the attitude most genuinely representative of our time' – a 'sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition'.³⁴

Pinter's drama arises from his sensibility, formed in the aftermath of the Second World War and influenced by Existentialism and the work of Beckett. An important factor in the ongoing longevity of his plays will be the degree to which audiences can relate to that sensibility even as the historical moment which produced it passes out of living memory.

Forward into Posterity

It has become a political commonplace that towards the middle of a president or prime minister's final term he or she will start to focus more and more on the question of legacy, thinking not of day-to-day fluctuations in popularity but of the likely judgement of history. It might be suggested that this sometimes applies to artists, too: it was with the premiere of *Moonlight*, Zarhy-Levo suggests, that Pinter 'seemed to redefine his

position in the mediating endeavour, becoming an active participant in the process'.³⁵ From this point on, she argues, Pinter played a conscious and highly significant role in positively influencing the way in which both his individual plays and his overall reputation were perceived. This he achieved by encouraging – through interviews, publications, broadcasts, speeches, and some carefully calculated programming of his own work in festivals and double bills – a view of his work that saw his latterly expressed political concerns as integral to, rather than detracting from, his artistic achievements, a mode of persuasion which reached its apotheosis in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech 'Art, Truth, and Politics'.³⁶

If we accept that, from the early to mid-1990s, Pinter began actively working to secure his ongoing standing, an argument might be mounted that *Moonlight* was a part of this same project and that, although it may not now be considered a major work, for a time the drama played a crucial role in shoring up his then declining status. Writing in 2010, Boyd Tonkin describes Pinter's reputation between the 1970s and the award of the Nobel as marked by a 'gentle downward curve and then sharp upward spike', a trajectory that approximately matches the way Zarhy-Levo plots the graph.³⁷

One might object that Pinter was always a canny operator who throughout his career made well-judged moves to maximize his standing; but the idea that, faced with perceptibly declining critical fortunes, he might have stepped his efforts up a gear is nonetheless persuasive. How his reputation will fare in his absence remains open to question, and the early signs are mixed.

The reception of *Moonlight*, both in the reviews of 1993 and 2011 and in ongoing scholarly commentary on the play, demonstrates the continuing currency of Wardle's comments about reviewers who are by turns bullying and rebellious and, in addition, Schroll's observations about the difference between academic and journalistic criticism. More broadly, however, it is possible to take from this business a strong sense of the way

in which cultural commentators of various kinds invest, in one way or another, in the figures they follow, debate and assess.

Partly through his own efforts and with considerable assistance from his supporters, Pinter survived the crisis of 1993, and enjoyed a renewed eminence in his remaining years which received its ultimate expression in the award of the Nobel Prize; however admiration for his achievements is not comprehensive or universal, and even in the aftermath of his recent death there are those who are keen to bring him down to size. For those who debate his worth, Pinter is more than the author of a series of plays: he stands for something. This might be literary pretension, political naivety, or godless despair; or might equally be artistic fearlessness, uncompromising truth-telling, or even the remembered excitement of a youth in which his work made its first impact.

How we respond to the latest production of one or another of his plays will be heavily affected by the stance we take in relation to Pinter as a figure, and whether his reputation endures or declines in the years following his death will depend on how effectively those who wish to sustain his eminence – whether they be critics, directors, actors, or theatre-goers – can maintain their ascendancy over those who believe it to be unearned. This situation, moreover, is by no means unique to Pinter, and the same kinds of conflict can be witnessed in relation to the reputation of any public figure or group; in the medium term a reputation can be supported or undermined by individuals, but in the long term its fortune is determined by the overall response of a society to the values that the person or people at its centre are deemed to embody, something that will itself change over time.

The process of mediation and reception continues in perpetuity, and the number of determinants in play mean that its course cannot easily be predicted; what is certain is that the stories we formulate about the progress of our cultural heroes – and villains – will continue to say as much about ourselves as they do about their ostensible subjects.

Notes and References

1. John Rodden, *The Politics of Literary Reputation: the Making and Claiming of 'St George' Orwell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. x.
2. Yael Zarhy-Levo, *The Making of Theatrical Reputations: Studies from the Modern London Theatre*, Studies in Theatre History and Culture (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2008), p. 161.
3. Quoted in Ronald Knowles, 'From London: Harold Pinter 1994–95 and 1995–96', in *The Pinter Review: Annual Essays 1995 and 1996* (Tampa: University of Tampa Press, 1996), p. 154.
4. Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: a Theory of Production and Reception* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 43.
5. Hans Robert Jauss, quoted in Patrice Pavis, *Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiology of Theatre* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), p. 74–5.
6. Bennett, p. 44.
7. Manfred Naumann, 'Literary Production and Reception', in *New Literary History*, VIII, No. 1 (Autumn 1976), p. 119.
8. Zarhy-Levo, p. 164.
9. Irving Wardle, *Theatre Criticism*, Theatre Concepts (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 48.
10. Zarhy-Levo, *The Making of Theatrical Reputations*, p. 191.
11. Quoted in Zarhy-Levo, p. 194. For more on Pinter's fraught relationship with the British press in this period, see Harry Derbyshire, 'Pinter as Celebrity', in Peter Raby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 266–82.
12. Irving Wardle, 'The Master and the Muse', *Independent on Sunday*, 20 October 1991, 'Sunday Review', p. 18–19.
13. Luc Gilleman, *John Osborne: Vituperative Artist* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 216–18.
14. Antonia Fraser, *Must You Go?: My Life with Harold Pinter* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2010), p. 211.
15. Quoted in Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Pinter* (London: Nick Hern, 1994), p. 124.
16. Pinter had ordered scenes non-chronologically before, but never included one scene set in the past in an otherwise straightforward chronological play structure; the character of Jimmy in *Party Time* may also be a ghost but, if so, he does not watch over the living in the conventionally spectral way that Bridget does.
17. The nineteen reviews of the run at the Almeida referred to here are collected in *Theatre Record*, XIII, No. 18 (27 Aug.–9 Sept. 1993), p. 981–7.
18. The Comedy Theatre would scarcely be an appropriate memorial for Osborne, but it became one for Pinter when it was renamed in his honour in 2011.
19. The eight reviews of the Comedy run referred to here are collected in *Theatre Record*, XIII, No. 22 (22 Oct.–4 Nov. 1993), p. 1259–61, and No. 23 (5–18 Nov. 1993), p. 1347.
20. Quoted in Ronald Knowles, 'From London: Harold Pinter 1994–95 and 1995–96', p. 153.
21. *Ibid.* p. 120.
22. Ronald Knowles, *Understanding Harold Pinter* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), p. 201.
23. Michael Billington, *Harold Pinter*, 2nd edn (London: Faber, 2007), p. 346–7.
24. Zarhy-Levo, p. 196. Zarhy-Levo appears to classify the play's many mixed reviews as positive; doing so supports her argument that critics are more welcoming of Pinter when his work is amenable to their longstanding receptive strategies.
25. D. Keith Peacock, *Harold Pinter and the New British Theatre*, Contributions in Drama and Theatre Studies, No. 77 (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 154–7.
26. Herman T. Schroll, *Harold Pinter: a Study of his Reputation 1959–1969* (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1971), p. 33–4.
27. Schroll, p. 89.
28. See, for instance, Francis Gillen, "'Whatever Light is Left in the Dark?': Harold Pinter's *Moonlight*", in Francis Gillen and Stephen H. Gale, ed., *The Pinter Review 1992–3* (Tampa: University of Tampa, 1993), p. 31–7; Penelope Prentice, *The Pinter Ethic: the Erotic Aesthetic* (New York: Garland, 1994); Katherine H. Burkman, 'Echo(es) in *Moonlight*', in *The Pinter Review: Annual Essays 1994* (Tampa: University of Tampa, 1994), p. 54–60; Ruby Cohn, *Anglo-American Interplay in Recent Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Raymond Armstrong, *Kafka and Pinter. Shadow-Boxing: the Struggle between Father and Son* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999); Martin Esslin, 'Harold Pinter: from *Moonlight* to *Celebration*', in *The Pinter Review: Collected Essays 1999 and 2000* (Tampa: University of Tampa Press, 2000), p. 23–30; Linda Renton, *Pinter and the Object of Desire: an Approach through the Screenplays* (Oxford: Legenda, 2002); and Varun Begley, *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).
29. See Michael Coveney, 'One for the Money ... Two for the Show', *Observer*, 16 June 1996, 'Review', p. 11.
30. The nineteen reviews of the Donmar revival referred to here are collected in *Theatre Record*, XXI, No. 8 (9–22 April 2011), p. 394–8.
31. The positive assessments are Billington's in the *Guardian*, Georgina Brown's in the *Mail on Sunday*, Nina Caplan's in *Time Out*, and John Nathan's in the *Jewish Chronicle*; the negative reviews are by Lloyd Evans in the *Spectator*, Libby Purves in *The Times*, Charles Spencer in the *Daily Telegraph*, Tim Walker in the *Sunday Telegraph*, Mark Shenton in the *Sunday Express*, and Quentin Letts in the *Daily Mail*.
32. What Spencer does not reveal in his *Moonlight* review but has disclosed elsewhere <www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/9675660/The-Effect-National-Theatre-review.html> is that he himself suffers from clinical depression, information which makes his comments on Pinter's play more understandable while at the same time highlighting their very particular subjectivity.
33. Varun Begley, *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 32.
34. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd edn (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 22–4.
35. Zarhy-Levo, p. 200.
36. Included as an appendix to Billington, p. 431–42.
37. Boyd Tonkin, 'The Long Goodbye: What Do Antonia Fraser's Diaries of Life with Harold Pinter Add to the Marital Memoir?', *Independent*, 15 January 2010, available at <www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/the-long-goodbye-what-do-antonia-frasers-diaries-of-life-with-harold-pinter-add-to-the-marital-memoir-1867914.html>.