

Harold Pinter. By Graham Saunders. London and New York: Routledge, 2023. Pp. x + 161. £130/\$273 Hb; £35.99/\$75.99 Pb.

Reviewed by Min Zhang, Nanjing Forestry University, ZhangMin1109@outlook.com

Nobel laureate Harold Pinter, internationally renowned as one of the greatest post-war dramatists, kept on renewing innovatively his whole life. Considering that much attention has been paid to the exploration of Pinter's enormous body of work, it is not easy to make a balanced assessment. Against this backdrop, Graham Saunders, in his recent book *Harold Pinter*, sheds new light on previously established views and provides a reappraisal of the work of Pinter.

Noteworthy is the care with which Saunders deals with two key points. First, he recognizes that it is 'the slipperiness of the terrain' offered up by Pinter's work that 'has led to successive attempts at making the ascent with ropes constructed out of various critical strands' (p. 15). Therefore this book takes full advantage of plenty of archival sources and carefully engages with earlier discussions on Pinter's work. Second, given that Pinter's creation involves various fields, Saunders touches on different kinds of production, including plays, films and screenplays, which contributes to our understanding of this complex dramatist as a whole.

When it comes to the legacy and impact of Pinter, in Part I Saunders gives an overview of his life in historical context, his extensive experience as theatre practitioner and his critical reputation in different periods. Chapter 1 chronologically sorts out this dramatist's representative works, emphasizing his contribution to the renaissance of post-war British drama. The following chapter primarily charts the fluctuant reputation Pinter received and makes a brief evaluation of his styles, divided into three sections – 'The experimental turn', 'The kitchen sink absurdist' and 'Political Pinter', highlighting how these intriguing features are integral to his body of work.

With regard to the thematic analysis of Pinter's work, Saunders brings some new interpretations to light. For instance, through the examination of the qualities related to comedies of menace demonstrated in Pinter's early works, Saunders reconsiders some issues 'within the milieu of social realism' (p. 32). Afterwards, he pays much attention to the ambiguous representation of gender in Pinter's work, concluding that in the era of MeToo, 'Pinter's work has if anything become identified as part of a wider problem in theatre regarding the representation of gender' (p. 53). Turning to one of Pinter's memory plays, *Ashes to Ashes*, of particular interest is the interaction between Pinter and Sarah Kane in reference to the implicit description of the Holocaust.

Rather than look at Pinter's plays on the page, in Part II Saunders mainly concentrates on some notable productions of Pinter's three representative works, *The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*, which is of great significance to the study of his work from the perspective of performance. For example, with regard to *The Birthday Party*, chapter 6 focuses on the theatrical experimentation of various companies, such as the portrayal of Goldberg with stereotypical Jewish traits, the eradication of unduly long Pinter pauses, and the casting of Cecilia Noble, who played Lulu. Chapter 7 is mainly concerned with the changes associated with racial issues in different versions of *The Caretaker*, especially the all-Black cast performing in the National Theatre and the Bristol Old Vic. The last chapter centres on three productions of *The Homecoming*, particularly the Aldwych Theatre's 'absolute fidelity to Pinter's text' (p. 128), Comedy Theatre's Max played by Warren Mitchell as an East End Jewish patriarch, and the National Theatre's performance 'in a totally naturalistic way' (p. 136).

Over eight chapters, in two main parts, this brilliant book provides a thorough introduction to Pinter's life and career, a revelation of the themes of his work, and finally an application of various techniques in the staging of several representative works. In particular, Graham Saunders has offered a number of in-depth and comprehensive reappraisals of the critical reputation and legacy of this well-known dramatist since his death in 2008, which undoubtedly is an invaluable guide for scholars and students interested in Harold Pinter.