

Theater

"Pinter's 'Old Times' is about the pain of never fully knowing someone."

STAGE VIEW

BENEDICT NIGHTINGALE

Back to Pinterland, Where The Living Is Uneasy

If you're off to Mexico, Germany or Chad, and don't know the language, you're quite likely to get yourself a phrasebook. Perhaps something of the sort should be available at the box office for those buying tickets to that dark land of mists and mystification known to a generation of disoriented visitors simply as Harold Pinter. "Old Times," revived with a formidable cast at the Roundabout, is the latest reminder of this gap in the publishing market; but it has long been waiting to be filled.

A man starts talking in demented detail about bus routes: translated, this means "Get out of my house." Another rudely asks for olives: this, strangely, is his way of expressing sexual envy and anger. Yet another elaborately describes a confusing one-way street system: the message, this time rather easier to interpret, is "you're getting deeper than you know into a situation you can't handle." In Pinter an argument between two people about whether it's verbally accurate to say "light the kettle" may be the first sign that one is going to murder the other. In Pinter the riddle "Why did the chicken cross the road?" several times repeated, may succeed in reducing a nervous young man to a catatonic ruin. In Pinter the very word "wheelbarrow" . . . but no phrasebook could catch the subterranean horror coded into that harmless-sounding word.

These examples — culled, if you want map-references from encounters in "The Caretaker," "The Collector," "No Man's Land," "The Dumb Waiter" and "The Birthday Party" — suggest that Pinterland isn't a very friendly place. Indeed it isn't. The inhabitants neither surf nor ski: they huddle in rooms, usually in a state of suppressed panic, often expecting some intruder, some predator to steal their homes, their loved ones, their self-respect, their very identities. Many are, as the country's founding father himself once said, "at the extreme edge of their living, where they are pretty much alone." These same examples might also suggest that Pinter is profoundly alien territory, very different from the straight-thinking, straight-talking, straight-living land in which we all have our clear-eyed being. That seems a more dubious conclusion. Many of us would, I suspect, feel quite at home there, even without those helpful phrasebooks.

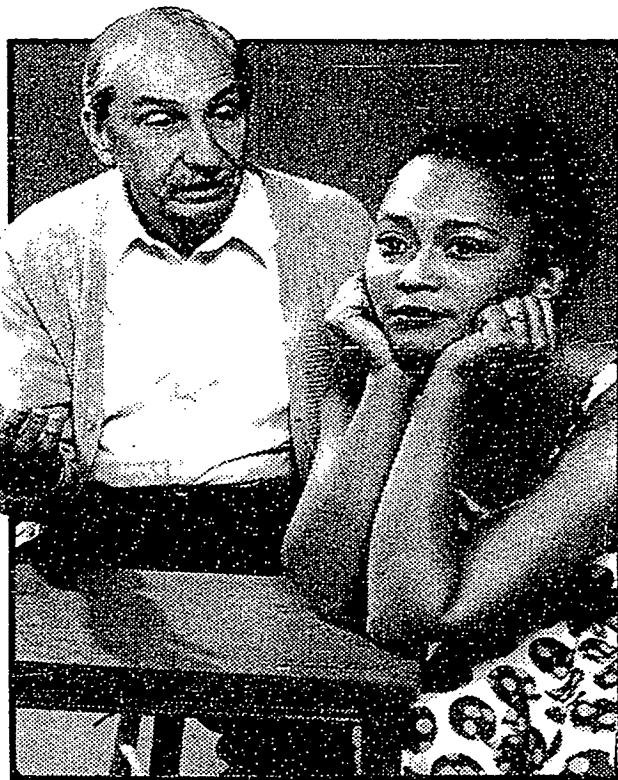
Let's consider, as a case-study, an example of Pinter in miniature, the play "Old Times" itself. It, too, occurs in an oddly isolated room, actually part of a converted farmhouse in deepest England, at the Roundabout a spare, white domestic cage poised in an infinite black-

ness. It, too, involves a predatory intruder, this time a woman coming from abroad to visit her old roommate, now living alone with her husband in this provincial wilderness. Their names are, respectively, Anna, Kate and Deeley. At the Roundabout they are an alternately bubbling and frosty Jane Alexander, a wonderfully languid and lissome Marsha Mason and Anthony Hopkins, at first relaxedly sprawling, then signalling his unease with the tap of the hand on the arm of a chair, finally and not without reason very upset indeed.

Back in 1971, when the play was first staged, Pinter seemed to have written himself into a dramatic cul de sac. His most recent offerings were "Landscape" and "Silence," which consisted of people sitting and talking about the past. Their subjects — the elusiveness of memory, the unreliability of perception, the complexity of consciousness — were clearly ones he needed to explore directly and in detail; but they hardly seemed very theatrical to the rest of us. "Old Times" was the way out, and a very clever one, because it combined Pinter's new interests with his old. It, too, was about that shadowy souvenir shop, the mind; but it brought menace, tension and conflict to the study of it. In "Old Times" the past is the battlefield on which a very Pinterish struggle is being fought to the emotional death. Memories are among the combatants' weapons.

Hostilities are soon declared. Anna burbles on and on about the culturally rich and fulfilling life she and Kate shared in London 20 years ago, then compliments Deeley first on his courage in living in "such a silence," then on his "wonderful casserole — I mean wife." You hardly need a phrasebook to translate that, and Deeley isn't the man passively to submit to the suggestion that marriage has reduced Kate from a lively girl into a kitchen object. Things rapidly escalate. Anna comes up with romantic memories of Kate, Deeley with more sensual ones. Anna sings "Oh but you're so lovely, with your smile so warm," Deeley counters with "I've got a woman crazy for me, she's funny that way." Deeley remembers meeting Kate at a showing of the movie, "Odd Man Out": Anna makes it apparent that her recollection of the same afternoon is very different. Anna talks of the interesting men she and Kate knew in London: Deeley recalls having once seen her, Anna, "squealing and hissing" at a party of men with bad breath and broken teeth. Suddenly, they are arguing about Kate's underwear, Deeley's habit of staring up skirts, and the way Kate dries herself after baths.

In a Romantic Vein



Sheila Dabney has the title role in Maria Irene Fornes's "Sarita," a musical drama about a woman torn between two loves. Rodolpho Diaz plays her father figure. Opening Monday at INTAR, 420 West 42d Street.



Norma Jean Giffin and Ray Iannicelli appear in "Flesh, Flash and Frank Harris," Paul Stephen Lim's chronicle of the life and loves of the turn-of-the-century writer. Monday at Shelter West, 189 Second Avenue.

This private war has reached a remarkably ugly stage, with each side now raring to inflict intimate atrocities on the other. What's actually been said is "you are a pretentious bitch," "you're a coarse fool," "you don't really know your own wife," "I know her in ways denied to you, pervert though you probably are," "I own her," "No, I own her." Yet the smiles, though increasingly tight, are still to be seen, and the language, though increasingly charged, is still polite. For just a moment Deeley speaks directly, wondering if he's alone in "finding this distasteful"; but, asked to explain himself, he instantly relapses into obliquity. He starts worrying about Anna's husband, alone in their villa in Sicily. Even now he cannot bring himself to say what he means: "Scram." Actually, Anna neither screams nor scores. So absorbing has the tussle between her and Deeley become that we, too, have been lured into sharing their basically crass assumption, which is that Kate is a sort of prize to be won. With a swift, surprising, yet marvellously logical shift of perspective, Pinter reminds us of what we should have realized before, that human prizes can only award themselves. Kate launches into a long, metaphorical speech whose precise meaning it would take more than a phrase-

book to unravel, but whose overall message is clearly and brutally a dual rejection. Neither Anna nor Deeley matter to her. Suddenly we see her for what she is, the sister of Ruth in "The Homecoming" and Emma in "Betrayal," one of a long line of Pinter women capable of tantalizing, deranging and even destroying others with the sexual force-field they effortlessly project. At the end Miss Mason can just sit there, the svelte spider at the center of her web, without even bothering to glance at the two stuck victims who so misguidedly tried to catch her. Kenneth Frankel's production at the Roundabout is less muted, less blurred at the edges than Peter Hall's original one. On the other hand, it is nowhere near as clear-cut as the "Old Times" Visconti staged in Italy, whose lesbian fondlings and gropings provoked the usually reticent Pinter to organize a protest of English-speaking critics. Mr. Hopkins manifestly chills and disgusts Miss Alexander, but she maintains a tense decorum, however sweaty and noisome he becomes. Miss Alexander maddens Mr. Hopkins, but he explodes only when the pressure becomes uncontainable, like a boil that has festered too long. And Miss Mason serenely keeps her coun-

Continued on Page 6

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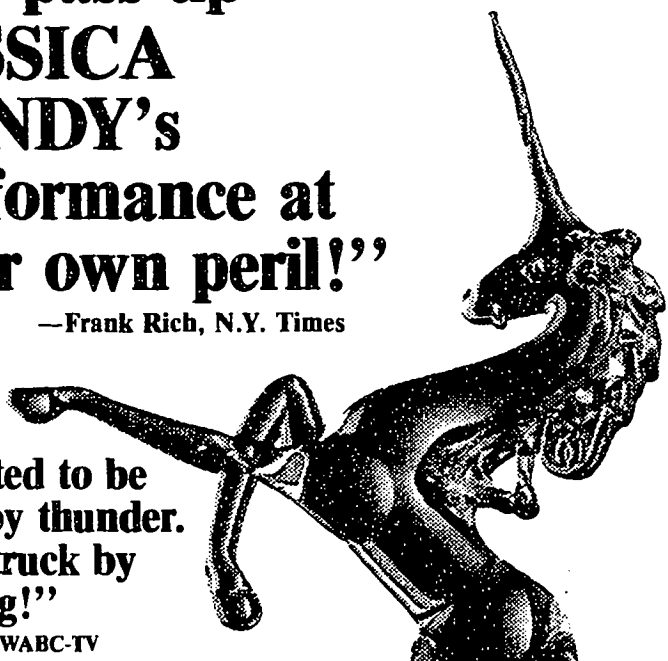
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