

REVIEWER RESPONSE TO PINTER'S *THE CARETAKER*

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Abstract

The Caretaker is one of Harold Pinter's early plays. It was an immediate success, and it drew the attention of many critics, who started judging this contemporary British playwright's works from a new perspective. Therefore, many scholars consider *The Caretaker* an important turning point in the reception of Pinter's works. The play has seen many stagings all over the world, two of them in Slovenia. This article sets out its most prominent productions, analyses and comments on their critical reviews, and compares these to the response to Pinter in Slovene cultural space.

International productions of *The Caretaker*

Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*¹ was first published in 1959 together with four other plays in the second volume of the author's collected works. It was premièred in April 1960 at the Arts Theatre in London and moved to the Duchess Theatre a month after the first production. This early play by Harold Pinter was enthusiastically accepted by the general public and the critics. It was his sixth theatre piece, presented only three years after his first two plays, *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*. The first reviews of the former were favourable, but, surprisingly, this was not the case with *The Birthday Party*, which is today one of his most frequently staged pieces; some even number it among the best achievements of contemporary British theatre. Its first production ran only a week, and it took most of the critics some time to realise that there was more to it than mere »verbal anarchy«, as Milton Shulman (1958) labelled what later became known as typical pinteresque dialogue. *The Cambridge Review* was satisfied with the quality of the production but critical of the text: »Despite the excitement the play generates in performance, the quality of *The Birthday Party* seems de-

¹ *The Caretaker* is a full-length, three-character, three-act play. The action is compressed into an attic room of an old house in the suburbs of London, owned by two brothers, Mick and Aston. The central character is Davies, an old tramp, whom Aston brings home after »finding« him on the street. Later the audience learns that Davies worked as a cleaner at a café where Aston supposedly saved him from a conflict, or maybe even a fight, with his employer. Aston first offers him shelter, then the job of caretaker. Davies is pleasantly surprised at the beginning but becomes ungrateful and selfish when he starts suspecting that Aston is not the actual owner of the apartment. He tries to manipulate the two brothers but eventually fails. As they both turn their backs on him, he realises that he has missed the chance of a lifetime.

batable« (Pinter 2004). Walter Kerr, a respected and influential reviewer in *The New York Times*, denoted *The Birthday Party* as »by and large a bore« (cf. Hollis-Merritt 1990, 231) and expressed doubts that the audience would be »turned on« (ibid.) by this play.

Despite the fact that the first performances of *The Birthday Party* failed to repeat the success of *The Room*, Pinter did not stop writing or staging. Soon the predictions of Harold Hobson, one of the few reviewers who spoke in favour of Pinter's plays from the very beginning, started to prove true:

Deliberately, I am willing to risk whatever reputation I have as a judge of plays by saying that *The Birthday Party* is not a Fourth, not even a Second, but a First; and that Mr. Pinter, on the evidence of his work, possesses the most original, disturbing, and arresting talent in theatrical London (Hobson 1958, 11).

In 1959, Germany saw the world premiere of *The Dumb Waiter*, and in the same year, *The Birthday Party* reappeared in England and abroad. Pinter's successful career was thereby firmly established with the result that *The Caretaker* came into existence in a favourable environment, friendly to its author and to his works.

As the course of events showed, *The Caretaker* was probably one of the most significant turning points in the critics' response to Pinter's writing. After the first production, Alan Pryce-Jones published an encouraging review in *The Observer*: »*The Caretaker* /.../ is quite superbly acted and produced. /.../ I trust anyone who responds to strict professionalism at the service of an excellent play will hurry to the Arts Theatre« (1960, 21). He also spoke in Pinter's defence regarding earlier less favourable reviews of his earlier plays:

Harold Pinter has been accused of a negative approach to the drama; he has been called obscure – not without reason – and tantalising (*vide* my colleague Maurice Richardson's remarks /.../). His latest play [i.e. *The Caretaker*, T.O.] is not obscure in the least; it is excitingly original, and manages not only to be exceptionally funny but also to touch the heart. /.../ I repeat, this play is an event (Pryce-Jones 1960, 21).

Positive judgements started to come from reviewers who had been less approving of Pinter at the beginning. Referring to *The Caretaker*, the *Daily Mail* judged this to be »a play and a production which no one who is concerned with the advance of the British drama can afford to miss« (cf. Jongh 2004). The following quite self-critical opinion by a well known reviewer, Kenneth Tynan, was published in *The Observer*:

With *The Caretaker* which was moved from the Arts Theatre to the Duchess Theatre, Harold Pinter has begun to fulfill the promise that I signally failed to see in *The Birthday Party* (Tynan 1960, 12).

Pinter's comments on the theatrical management of the time show that negative reviews of his early plays might have been, at least partly, the result of theatrical policies. Despite the fact that Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was staged in London in 1955 (the Paris premiere was in 1953), and that Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* started the

'angry young man' movement in 1957, the theatre space was still to a certain extent sceptical of the new trends. The reviewer in *The Manchester Guardian* even reproached Pinter for not being able to forget Beckett (cf. Hribar 1999, 202). However, Pinter does admit that a few years before the premiere of *The Caretaker*, the theatre situation began to change. According to a conversation with Richard Findlater, published in *The Twentieth Century* in February 1961, this change had a positive impact on the promotion and success of the play:

As far as the state of the theatre is concerned, /.../ I think things will go on more or less as they are for some considerable time. But it seems to me that there has been a certain development in one channel or another in the past three years. *The Caretaker* wouldn't have been put on, and certainly wouldn't have run, before 1957. The old categories of comedy and tragedy and farce are irrelevant, and the fact that managers seem to have realized that is one favourable change (Pinter 1961, xi).

Immediately, *The Caretaker* started to appear on stages all over Europe and the world. At the beginning of 1961, the play was staged in Paris and towards the end of the year in New York. Both productions were successful, so the transformation into film was the natural next step.

Pinter himself wrote the screenplay for the film, even though he was extremely sceptical about the project at first. Kevin Cavander's interview with Pinter and the director Clive Donner (Cavander 1963) about shooting the film and all the preparations shows that they implemented this plan in a rather unusual way: they raised all the required financial means by themselves – only through sponsors and patrons; moreover, all scenes were shot in the attic of an old house in Hackney, significantly without various modern facilities that a well equipped television studio offers; and finally, they produced the film without any guarantee that it would be distributed at all. Despite that, Pinter's opinion on the course of action and the circumstances of the shooting was positive:

I think it did an awful lot for the actors to go up real stairs, open real doors in a house which existed, with a dirty garden and a back wall. /.../ As a complete layman to the film medium I found that looking round that room where one had to crouch to see what was going on (the whole film was shot in a kneeling or crouching posture) – I found there was a smell to it (Cavander 1963, 22).

The production was a success. It was awarded a prestigious film award, the Silver Bear, at the Berlin Film Festival in 1963. Another film version of *The Caretaker* entitled *The Guest*, also directed by Clive Donner, was produced in 1964 in New York.

Many students of Pinter's work agree that the immediate success of *The Caretaker* was also due to the comical elements in the play, and even those reviewers who initially doubted or openly opposed this judgement, eventually changed or moderated their views. Nowadays, *The Caretaker* is considered to be one of Pinter's funniest plays; however, the author himself is cautious about any over-emphasis on its humour:

I did not intend it [*The Caretaker*, T.O.] to be merely a laughable farce. / .../ As far as I'm concerned, *The Caretaker* is funny, up to a point. Beyond that point it ceases to be funny, and it was because of that point that I wrote it (Pinter 1960, 21).

There are several different types and layers of humour in the play (cf. Onič 2003). Pinter himself appreciates intellectually demanding humour, probably because it is more undefined and relative than some other types of humour, for example, situational. Usually, there are various ways of interpreting it, and new interpretations emerge as the audience realises the true meaning of laughter-provoking words or actions. Referring to the laughter in the audience at *The Caretaker's* first run, Eslin (1991, 249) uses the term »the laughter of recognition«. Pinter indirectly expresses his agreement with this idea and confirms the relativity of his humour by showing that he is aware of the thin line between funny and tragic:

I am rarely consciously writing humour, but sometimes I find myself laughing at some particular point which has suddenly struck me as being funny ... more often than not the speech only seems to be funny – the man in question is actually fighting a battle for his life (cf. Quigley 1975, 52).

This characteristic is, according to Jure Gantar, a defining characteristic of absurdist plays, since – as he believes – »the theatre of the absurd confirms the fact that in the appropriate circumstances nothing is safe from laughter« (1993, 58; transl. T.O.)².

Over the course of forty years of constant production on stage, *The Caretaker* has appeared in many variants. Some of them followed the text quite literally, whereas others showed how specific and unconventional perception dimensions can be extracted from the text. Michael Billington (2001, 8) mentions a Romanian production in which the whole play is shown as a religious allegory; the first scene shows Aston as a Christ-like figure washing Davies's legs, accompanied by the sounds of Bach's *Mass in b-minor*. Furthermore, he recalls a production in Nottingham Playhouse in which the director, Steve Shill, pays much attention to the sound, light, and space effects, and less to the characters and relationships. Billington denotes it as a step away from Pinter, but he admits that the performance was unforgettable:

Raindrops keep falling on lead roofs for much of the evening. The famous room, far from being a cramped, dingy attic is surprisingly light and airy with three large windows /.../ By drenching the play in atmosphere, Shill also loses sight of the way language itself is an instrument of power. /.../ I shall remember this production, however, for its windblown white curtains rather than its human values (Billington 1993, 8).

The critics and the general audience have always been interested in what Pinter himself has to say about his writing. Roger Webster, along with many other literary reviewers and scholars of Pinter's works, suggests that the author of *The Caretaker*

² Original quotation: »/.../ absurdistične drame vedno znova izpričujejo, da v pravih okoliščinah nič ni varno pred smehom.«

has always been quite reluctant to give definite answers or comments about his plays but has preferred to stay in the background taking the role of an observer:

[S]ome contemporary writers such as Samuel Beckett or Harold Pinter have deliberately avoided making statements about their works when interviewed, as if they had no more right than anyone else to comment on them, seeming to deny any responsibility for them once they are in public circulation (Webster 1997, 21).

Many of Pinter's statements unambiguously confirm these remarks – as, for example, a statement taken from his speech in Hamburg in 1970, when he received the prize for *Landscape* and *Silence*: »I can sum up none of my plays. I can describe none of them, except to say: That is what happened. That is what they said. That is what they did« (Pinter 1971, 4).

Even now, after a few decades, Pinter has not changed this standpoint. In an interview with Mel Gussow that took place just before the *Harold Pinter Festival* in the summer of 2001 in New York, he confirmed his old belief: »I wouldn't even attempt to define it [the meaning of *Ashes to Ashes*] myself. If I could have defined it, I wouldn't have written it. This really applies to everything I write« (Gussow 2001, 8).

It is, however, possible to find Pinter quoting or commenting on his plays in the media as well as in the critical literature. According to Susan Hollis-Merritt, Pinter gives statements when the commercial aspect of his occupation requires it (1990:12). The common point of the majority of his statements is that Pinter usually does not attribute deep philosophical meaning to his plays but rather thinks about them as simple reflections of everyday life. The same goes for the ground of their existence. Here is, for example, what he once wrote in a letter to Peter Wood:

The germ of my plays? I'll be as accurate as I can about that. I went into a room and saw one person standing up and one person sitting down, and a few weeks later I wrote *The Room*. I went into another room and saw two people sitting down, and a few years later I wrote *The Birthday Party*. I looked through a door into a third room and saw two people standing up, and I wrote *The Caretaker* (Pinter 1981, 5-6).

This sentence, in which Pinter speaks about his inspiration for *The Caretaker*, refers to the time when he lived in a two-room apartment in London with his wife and son. The owner of the house had a mentally retarded brother, whom Pinter once saw through an open door; beside him was standing a tramp with a huge bag. »From that frozen moment came a dynamic play about power, territory, the tramp's manipulation of the two brothers and his eventual expulsion from this squalid Eden« (Billington 2001, 8).

***The Caretaker* on the Slovene stage**

The Caretaker appeared on our stages relatively late; the Slovene premiere took place on 5th June 1970, which is ten years after the world premiere in London. The

production was staged by Slovensko ljudsko gledališče in Celje, and the translation was provided by Janko Moder. This was not the first production of Pinter in our cultural space; three years earlier, Mala drama of Slovensko narodno gledališče staged *Homecoming*, but Pinter was still not well known at the time. For this reason, the theatre program of the Celje production (Ž/mavc/ 1970, n. pag.) contained a complete translation of Schechner's essay, published in 1966, which is an extensive analysis of this particular play as well as of Pinter's style in general; moreover, it provided numerous excerpts from his plays illustrating the points Schechner makes.

The Celje production was reviewed in the newspapers *Večer* (Smasek 1970) and *Delo* (Javornik 1970), the latter focusing more on the visiting performance in Mestno gledališče ljubljansko. Both reviews were quite extensive; they both give credit to the director, the actors, and the performance in general. What is more, they both contain a lot of information about the author, his style, his preferred themes, and – of course – about *The Caretaker*. Javornik does not doubt Pinter's mastery of dialogue and dramatic tension; however, the following quotation proves that he has not fully accepted all the dimensions of Pinter's style:

Šedlbauer [the director of production, T.O.] could, without causing any harm, have shortened that typical but tiring repetition of certain phrases, but, on the other hand, he has created a very lively and dynamic mise-en-scène production (Javornik 1970, 10; transl. T.O.)³.

After this production of *The Caretaker*, there was only one more in Slovene. That was the opening play of the 1990/91 season in Prešernovo gledališče in Kranj. The premiere was on 27th September 1990, which was more than twenty years after the first one. Again, Janko Moder provided the translation (1990a). The theatre program accompanying the performance (Bremec 1990) was thinner than the Celje one from 1970 but still bearing sufficient information about the play and the playwright. Vurnik, who wrote the review of the production, was quite severe towards the play in most of its aspects, but interestingly enough he found disturbing the very same elements as Javornik did twenty years before. Paradoxically, these are the elements of Pinter's style that his admirers and scholars of his opus most appreciate:

Possibly, some improvement could apply only to the rhythm of the performance. The dim introduction could be dropped, as well as the delays, because both imply some kind of mystery that doesn't exist at all (Vurnik 1990, 7; transl. T.O.)⁴.

At the time this review was written, Pinter's plays had been present in the Slovene cultural space for over two decades (and over three on the world scene). Considering this and the fact that in the late eighties sources on Pinter were abundant, it is surprising that Vurnik hazarded such a groundless and, in fact, mistaken opinion. He overlooked many important qualities of the text that were – despite the inconsistent trans-

³ Original quotation: »Šedlbauer bi sicer brez škode lahko nekoliko krajšal značilno, a utrujajoče ponavljanje posameznih fraz, vendar je izoblikoval izredno živo, dinamično, mizanscensko uprizoritev.«

⁴ Original quotation: »Nemara bi kazalo poskrbeti le za boljše izoblikovan ritem predstave, opustiti temačen uvod in zastoje, ker napovedujejo neko skrivnostnost, ki je pravzaprav nikjer ni.«

lation by Janko Moder – noticeable in the performances (cf. Pinter 1990b⁵). His superficial knowledge about the author, his works, and, most of all, the general reviewer's response to them is also reflected in the following statement:

If the play did not have so many witty and humorous elements in the dialogue, specially in the first part, which is entertaining for the audience, it would belong in a similar literary lumber room as it represents itself (Vurnik 1990, 7; transl. T.O.)⁶.

Pinter has remained current in Slovene theatres ever since the early performances⁷; the latest production of one of his plays before Slovene audiences was *The Birthday Party*, staged at Prešernovo gledališče Kranj in the 2002/03 season (cf. Veselko 2002). From her research into Pinter's translations into Slovene, Darja Hribar concludes that Pinter is »one of the most often translated contemporary British playwrights. Six out of fourteen translations /.../ were put on stage in Slovenia« (1999, 193). Pinter's plays are – as she later adds – very popular with theatre professionals, particularly directors and actors. For the actor Polde Bibič, for example, who played Davies in the 1990 production of *The Caretaker* in Kranj, »Pinter is, by all means, the author that one takes pleasure in« (Mencinger 1990, 17; transl. T.O.)⁸. Žarko Petan was the first director to produce Pinter on a Slovene stage⁹. He told Darja Hribar in an interview that »the way Pinter writes his stories is exceptional; the actors like to play him. He knows how to write for them« (Hribar 1999, 234; transl. T.O.)¹⁰. According to her analysis, the main reason for such popularity of Pinter is the fact that his texts allow scope for great creativity (Hribar 1999, 196), but since Pinter puts most of his dramatic power into language, this is only possible with a good translation. Some recent research papers on translation of Pinter's texts confirm that Slovene translation practice lacks consistency and translation strategy. Moreover, some translations that circulate among Slovene theatre groups are often not authentic but were severely adjusted for the specific purposes of certain productions, without any note informing the user of this fact, let alone any authorisation from the translator. Research activity on Pinter in Slovene cultural space and the development of Slovene translatology in general will, undoubtedly, contribute to a better quality of translated texts, and consequently to better performances and greater enjoyment of the Slovene theatre audience.

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⁵ This conclusion is based on a working video of one of the performances. A generalised statement is possible under the presumption that individual performances do not differ among themselves to such an extent as to refute the relevance of the above commentary.

⁶ Original quotation: »Če igra ne bi imela mnogih duhovitosti in humornih sestavin v dialogu zlasti v prvem delu, kar občinstvo zabava, bi sodila v podobno literarno ropotarnico, kakršno ponazarja sama.«

⁷ For a complete overview of Pinter's plays on Slovene stages and a list of un-staged Slovene translations of his texts, see Mirko 1999 and Hribar (1999, 231-233).

⁸ Original quotation: »Pinter je vsekakor avtor, s katerim ima človek veselje.«

⁹ *Vrnitev* (*The Homecoming*), Slovene National Theatre in Ljubljana, premiere: October 24th 1967.

¹⁰ Original quotation: »Pinter piše zgodbe izjemno; igralci ga radi igrajo. Zna pisati zanje.«

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