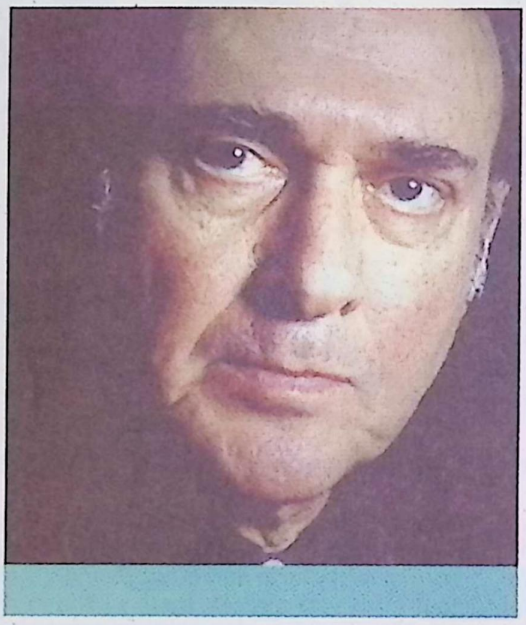
A man of singular appeal- Harold Pinter

Compiled by Sarah Z H



HAROLD Pinter was born in Hackney, a working-class neighborhood in London's East End, the son of a tailor. Both of his parents were Jewish, born in England. As a child Pinter got on well with his mother, but he didn't get on well with his father, who was a strong disciplinarian. On the outbreak of World War II Pinter was evacuated from the city to Cornwall; to be wrenched from his parents was a traumatic event for Pinter. He lived with 26 other boys in a castle on the coast. At the age of 14, he returned to London.

In 1950 Pinter started to publish poems in *Poetry* (London) under the name Harold Pinta. He worked as a bit-part actor on a BBC Radio program, *Focus on Football Pools*. He also studied for a short time at the Central School of Speech and Drama and toured Ireland from 1951 to 1952 with a Shakespearean troupe. In 1953 he appeared during Donald Wolfit's 1953 season at the King's Theatre in Hammersmith.

After four more years in provincial repertory theatre under the pseudonym David Baron, Pinter began to write for the stage. THE ROOM (1957), originally written for Bristol University's drama department, was finished in four days. A SLIGHT ACHE, Pinter's first radio piece, was broadcast on the BBC in 1959. His first full-length play, THE BIRTHDAY PARTY, was first performed by Bristol University's drama department in 1957 and produced in 1958 in the West End. The play, which closed with disastrous reviews after one week, dealt in a Kafkaesque manner with an apparently ordinary man who is threatened by strangers for an unknown reason. He tries to run away but is tracked down. Although most reviewers were hostile, Pinter produced in rapid succession the body of work, which made him the master of 'the comedy of menace.'

In 1960 Pinter wrote THE DUMB WAITER. With his second full-length play, THE CARETAKER (1960), Pinter made his breakthrough as a major modern talent, although in Düsseldorf the play was booed. *The Caretaker* was followed by A SLIGHT ACHE (1961), THE COLLECTION (1962), THE DWARFS (1963), THE LOVER (1963).

THE HOMECOMING (1965) is perhaps the most enigmatic of all Pinter's early works. It won a Tony Award, the Whitbread Anglo-American Theater Award, and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. In the story an estranged son, Teddy, brings his wife Ruth home to London to meet his family, his father Max, a nagging, aggressive ex-butcher, and other tough members of the all-male household. At the end Teddy returns alone to his university job in America. Ruth stays as a mother or whore to his family. Everyone needs her. - Similar motifs - the battle for domination in a sexual context - recur in *Landscape* and *Silence* (both 1969), and in *Old Times* (1971).

Several of Pinter's plays were originally written for British radio or TV. In the 1960s he also directed several of his dramas. After BETRAYAL (1978) Pinter wrote no new full-length plays until MOONLIGHT (1994). Short plays include A KIND OF ALASKA (1982), inspired by the case histories in Oliver Sack's *Awakenings* (1973).

From the 1970s Pinter has directed a number of stage plays and the American Film Theatre production of *Butler* (1974). In 1977 he published a screenplay based on Marcel Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Pinter has received many awards, including the Berlin Film Festival Silver Bear in 1963, BAFTA awards in 1965 and in 1971, the Hamburg Shakespeare Prize in 1970, the Cannes Film Festival Palme d'Or in 1971, and the Commonwealth Award in 1981. He was awarded a CBE in 1966, but he later turned down John Major's offer of a knighthood. In 1996 he was given the Laurence Olivier Award for a lifetime's achievement in the theatre. In 2002 he was made a Companion of Honour for services to literature.

Pinter's works include a number of screenplays, including *The Servant* (1963), *The Accident* (1967), *The Go-Between* (1971), *The Last Tycoon* (1974, dir. by Elia Kazan), *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981, novel by John Fowles), *Betrayal* (1982), *Turtle Diary* (1985), *Reunion* (1989), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1990), *The Comfort of Strangers* (1990), and *The Trial* by Franz Kafka (1990). In the 1990s Pinter became more active as a director than as a playwright. He oversaw David Mamet's *Oleanna* and several works by Simon Gray.