



A Playgoer's Guide

"There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false."

— Harold Pinter, 1958

What's the Party About?

Hemingway's short story "The Killers" gave Pinter models for the two hit men in *The Birthday Party*. Like many of his early works, the play abounds in ambiguity and mystery. Before rehearsals for the 1958 London premiere began, the director Peter Wood asked the twenty-seven-year-old playwright for clarification. "We agreed," Pinter responded, "the hierarchy, the Establishment, the arbiters, the socio-religious monster arrive to effect alteration and censure upon a member of the club who has discarded responsibility . . . towards himself and others." But the playwright refused to make any kind of moral judgments about his characters or to write an explanatory note that would specify the menace that pervades the play.

Who's Throwing the Party?



Harold Pinter was born in East London on October 10th 1930, and grew up in a working class environment. While attending Hackney Downs Grammar School, he became interested in acting, participated in school productions, and also began writing essays and poetry. During the late 1940's, Pinter spent a couple of terms at London's Royal Academy of Dramatic Art but withdrew to start a professional acting career. Pinter

first worked in radio in 1950 and then with a professional company and toured in 1951-2.

For several years he acted under the pseudonym of 'David Baron'; this happened after he wrote his first one act play, *The Room*. While he pursued his acting, the pace of Pinter's writing for the stage slowed down, but he continued to explore and develop his major dramatic concerns.

He once said that he was fascinated by "two people sitting in a room" and he expanded on the possibilities of that idea in his later plays, such as *Old Times* (1970) and *No Man's Land* (1974), where tension arises when a stranger comes into seemingly fixed and stable relationship.

Besides *The Birthday Party*, his first full length play, he has written 29 plays, 23 screenplays and directed 27 productions. Pinter never abandoned his interest in poetry; besides publishing several volumes of poetry, he has also edited anthologies of poetry, including *Ninety-Nine Poems in Translation* (1994).

Pinter has also won several awards: The Wilfred Owen Prize for a poem concerning the Iraqi conflict; The Shakespeare Prize; The European Prize for Literature; The Pirandello Prize; The David Cohen British Literature Prize; The Laurence Olivier Award and The Molière D'Honneur for lifetime achievement, and most recently The 2005 Nobel Prize for literature.

How the Party Started: Pinter's Influences

Like many of Pinter's plays, *The Birthday Party* was inspired by one incident. In 1954, he stayed at a filthy boarding house while on tour as an actor in the seaside town of Eastbourne. In those digs he met an overbearing landlady and her solitary lodger -- the prototypes for Meg and Stanley. "I said to the man one day, 'What are you doing here?'" remembers Pinter. "And he said, 'Oh well I used to be . . . I'm a pianist. I used to play in the concert-party here and I gave that up'. . . And when I asked why he stayed, he said, 'There's no where else to go.' That remark stayed with me and, three years later, the image was still there and . . . this idea came to me about two men coming down to get him."

Pinter grew up during one of the most devastating periods of history. Born in 1930, he was evacuated twice during the Second World War, though he was in London's East End for some of the most ruthless bombing campaigns of the Blitz. The memory of those pitch-black nights during the war would resurface years later in *The Birthday Party*, a play in which a game of blind man's buff turns into a disorienting, violent, sexually frenzied nightmare. Pinter is outspoken about the misuse of state power around the world, such as NATO's bombing of Siberia, the US foreign policy in Latin America and the Middle East, as well as the conflict in Iraq. At the end of *The Birthday Party* as Goldberg and McCann are dragging Stanley away, Petey tells him, "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!" In a 1988 interview with Mel Gussow, Pinter reflected, "All Petey says is one of the most important lines I've ever written . . . I've lived that line all my damn life."

A Good or Bad Party?

The uncertainty and doubt that Pinter sustains throughout *The Birthday Party* confused and angered many of London's critics in 1958. The critic Harold Hobson was one of the few who recognized and praised Pinter's use of ambiguity as a dramatic device. "The fact that no one can say precisely what it is about," Hobson wrote, "or give the address from which the intruding Goldberg and McCann come, or say precisely why it is that Stanley is so frightened by them is, of course, one of its greatest merits. It is exactly in this vagueness that its spine-chilling quality lies." A play of blindness and blackouts, *The Birthday Party* keeps its characters and

its audience in the dark. Did Stanley defect from an organization? Does he know Goldberg and McCann? Are these 'outsiders' figments of Stanley's imagination -- personifications, as some critics have suggested, of the Judeo-Christian tradition come to reintegrate a renegade into polite society? Where have they come from? Where are they going? There are many descriptions that attempt to describe the character and nature of the play, but who better to explain the play than the author himself. In a note from the author, Harold Pinter describes his work as follows; "In my play *The Birthday Party* I think I allow a whole range of options to operate in a dense forest of possibility before finally focusing on an act of subjugation." Whatever the ultimate purpose of theater -- yet another enigma to ponder -- it ought to leave spectators a bit confused, their preconceptions slightly altered and readjusted. Days after seeing *The Birthday Party*, you still may not know what hit you, much less what happened to poor Stan.

"I believe that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?" -- Harold Pinter, 2006

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