

S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

1:2 2015

Short Forms

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ISSN 2421-4353

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies
<http://www.skenejournal.it>
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Harold Pinter's Early Revue Sketches

Abstract

Considering Pinter's early revue sketches as integral elements of his early writing project, this article puts them in partial dialogue with the longer dramatic works from his pen in the same period. The value and impact of his sketches is placed in the context of the playwright's emerging career as a writer, and the contribution to his reputation they effected offers a suitable counterpoint to the mainstream view of his work as difficult or obscure. His choice of comedic theme and form in the sketches cannot simply be explained as his employing short-form to experiment with material he might expand or develop in his longer dramatic works, but the brevity of expression is clearly structured and exploited to offer a focussed delivery toward a revelation or punch-line, to such a degree that the journey to the punch-line often has greater dramatic importance than that final release. The use of phatic speech, audience confusion or mis-direction, allows Pinter to foreground character and index character motivation to forge humour from unexpected verbal developments. Vignettes that consider social power relationships are clearly important in these sketches and, while there is little that is overtly political, class structures and the relationship between power (including gendered power) and morality are explored across the portfolio of early sketches.

Harold Pinter was the master of short-form drama. Of the eighteen stage plays he wrote, only eight were full length (*The Birthday Party*, *The Caretaker*, *The Hothouse*, *The Homecoming*, *Old Times*, *No Man's Land*, *Betrayal* and *Moonlight*). The rest are one-act plays that mostly will last for less than an hour in performance, certainly less than ninety minutes (*The Dumb Waiter*, *Landscape*, *Silence*, *Monologue*, *A Kind of Alaska*, *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language*, *Party Time*, *Ashes to Ashes* and *Celebration*). Those that were written for radio or television clock in around the hour mark or less too (*A Slight Ache*, *A Night Out*, *Night School*, *The Dwarfs*, *The Collection*, *The Lover*, *Tea Party*, *The Basement* and *Family Voices*). If we add the substantial list of the sketches he published throughout his career then it becomes clear that the majority of Pinter's output involved dramatic expression concentrated

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into a condensed period of time.¹ It is to this latter collection of sketches, and the early revue sketches specifically, that I will be drawn in this essay. In doing so, I want to consider how they pack their dramatic punch, and what genetic traits they share with their more well-known kin.

In part, the writer's investment in short-form drama might be explained by Pinter's working methods, and in part by that intense period in the late 1950s and early 1960s in which he was writing for radio and television, and therefore to a given, fixed time-frame. These two factors pull against one another. In 1962, he argued that his characters should be allowed "to carry their own can, by giving them a legitimate elbowroom" (Pinter 1991a: xii). "Each time I write it is like opening the door to some unknown house", he later explained, "I don't know who is in the house. I don't know who is going to come through the door. I don't know what is going to happen" (qtd in Batty 2001: 123). Throughout his career, he repeatedly and consistently clarified his working method in these ways, as being subject to the demands and vicissitudes of inspiration, dependent upon characters making themselves known to him and determining their own stories. Clearly, there is a structuring process taking place in the writer's studio, applied to the free-form arrangements that arrive at the tip of the writer's pen from such a mode of working as the material revolves around a kernel of thought, argument, or problem to solve. It is not a methodology that might usually make for long-form drama, which might require a more consciously and systematically controlled, organised and sustained creative process. To some degree, this method might be problematised by the structural demands of writing for the media of television and radio, which imposed a strict discipline upon the writer. This clearly represents a challenge to a declared method of working which espoused absolute flexibility, not restraint of any sort. Nonetheless, the need to expand a dramatic narrative to fit but not exceed a specific timeframe for radio or television is clear enough as an explanation of the disciplined nature of Pinter's early short-form writing. The demands of writing sketches for revue shows magnifies that imposition of form over content, as the need to move from establishing a dramatic issue, to developing it, to resolving it, is contracted into just a few minutes. In this regard, Pinter's portfolio of sketches from his early career might clearly have had some influence on the evolving methodology of the young writer in terms of the impact of achieving a narrative or thematic result in a condensed format.

The early revue sketches mostly predate Pinter's writing for radio and television, and represent, then, a stringent application of format. With

¹ Admittedly, this calculation takes no account of Pinter's extensive writing for the cinema.

these, we have a rich collection of brief dramas that we might consider from a number of angles. Most pertinently within this study, is the interest they hold as examples of Pinter's ability to express, entertain or amuse in very condensed packages, and his ability to wield language in a way that draws attention to its purpose and its construction. These sketches, then, might in turn be considered as part of a process of a developing writer, and we can consider how the sketches inform the full-length dramas he wrote for the stage. Rather than viewing them as footnotes to his dramatic works, though, we should be encouraged to think of them as integral elements of his writing project, finding their way after all into his collected dramatic writings on an equal footing with their more well-known, lengthier counterparts. There is very little waste in Pinter's writing career, and a survey of the materials that he gave to the British Library manuscripts archive indicates that very little was left unpublished in his bottom drawer. The published sketches are not, as it were, the cream of an otherwise unpublished collection, they represent everything he wrote in that format.

Looking at the context of Pinter's early revue sketches, we can note that Pinter's career as a dramatist was far from established. His first play, *The Room*, had been written in 1957 to be performed by a student group led by Pinter's old Hackney friend Henry Woolf. His second script, *The Birthday Party*, written later in 1957, was his first to receive a professional production, in 1958. However, this was to remain on stage for only a week, with audiences quickly waning in the shadow of some pretty damning reviews. *The Dumb Waiter* was written at the same time, but was not to receive a British premiere until 1960, when *The Room* also was first put to professional production. He wrote *Something in Common* for radio early in 1958, but it was rejected by the BBC. He adapted and extended it to become *A Slight Ache* which he presented again to the BBC in September 1958, who accepted it for later broadcast. In the winter of that year, he began to write *The Hothouse* for radio, but it was not well received by the BBC commissioning department, and he himself then shelved the work once it was completed, believing it to be too explicit in its political satire (it was first only published and performed as a stage play much later, in 1980). It was at this point in late 1958 and early 1959 – with one failed professional production and two radio plays submitted to the BBC – that Pinter wrote his first review sketches. Disley Jones, who had worked with Pinter on the failed production of *The Birthday Party* at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, approached the author to contribute to a revue show he was planning at the theatre for summer 1959. A further commission arrived for the Apollo Theatre, and Pinter contributed material to these two revue shows in short succession; *One to Another* at the Lyric that opened on 15 July and *Pieces of Eight* at the Apollo on 23 September. At the time, then, these represented the most certain sources of income from writing

that presented themselves, complemented by the scheduling of the radio broadcast of *A Slight Ache* on 19 July 1959, a few days after the opening of the *One to Another* revue. To ease matters, in September 1958, Pinter had received some financial support from Roger L. Stevens, an American producer and philanthropist, indicating that in discerning circles the measure of his talent was beginning to be appreciated. The award made it possible for Pinter, newly-married and with a baby son, to dedicate time to his writing ambitions beyond the certainty of the modest income from the sketches and radio play. In early 1959 he wrote *The Caretaker*, and its success a year later would seal his fame and recognition. With the affirmative public and critical response to that career-defining play still waiting in the wings, Pinter at this stage had a very small public portfolio, some critical respect, and a lot to prove.

Pinter's contribution to the two 1959 revue shows was a small handful of sketches: "The Black and White", "Trouble in the Works", "Last to Go", "Request Stop", "Special Offer" and "Getting Acquainted" (the manuscript to which is now lost). To these we might add for consideration other sketches penned at that time: "That's Your Trouble", "That's All", "Interview", "Umbrellas" and "Applicant", the latter being a scene recovered from the then shelved *The Hothouse* script. Some of the others were dramatic re-writes of short prose pieces that Pinter had written in the early fifties ("The Black and the White", for example, was originally a prose piece written in 1954-55). The text of "Umbrellas" was re-discovered, over fifty years after it had disappeared and the sketch had been part of a revue entitled *You, Me and the Gatepost* at the Nottingham Playhouse on 27 June 1960.

The *One to Another* revue also featured sketches by N. F. Simpson, Bamber Gascoigne and John Mortimer and starred Patricia Bredin, Ray Barrett, Sheila Hancock, Barbara Evans, Tony Tanner, Roddy Maude Roxby, Joe Melia, Beryl Reid and Patrick Wymark. It ran for seventy-four performances. Peter Cook contributed the majority of sketches to *Pieces of Eight* at the Apollo, and the actors for that production included Kenneth Williams and Fenella Fielding, supported by Peter Reeves, Josephine Blake and Myra de Groot. It ran for over 400 performances and its popular success contributed to the nascent reputations of both Pinter and Cook, though only the latter sought to capitalise upon it as a vehicle for developing a career in comedy. This sort of work, though, and this cohort of actors, very much served to position Pinter alongside Cook as a new sort of comedy writer, part of a new generation that re-wrote the rules of revue wit in ways that adumbrated the challenging social satire of 1960s television shows such as *That was the Week that Was* (1962-63). Beryl Reid and Sheila Hancock were young comic actresses for stage, screen and radio with emerging reputations. Kenneth Williams was perhaps the biggest name in the casts of

the two revues, whose work on radio in *Hancock's Half Hour* (1954-59) had made him something of a household name, which he was about to consolidate with numerous appearances in the *Carry On* franchise of films (1958-92). The context in which Pinter began to develop a reputation, then, was more as part of an alternative new wave of comic material than in the world of the angry young men and women that was dominating the young, new theatre scene at the time.

Pinter's brand of comedy, as represented by these early sketches, was far from as overt as that constructed by Peter Cook or John Mortimer for the same revues. His humour very often sat in the foregrounding of specific verbal characteristics that his characters manifested, and what they revealed of their characters' social or emotional positions. By way of example, one of the characteristics of Pinter's writing that is evident in the sketches is the use of phatic speech, which, as Michael Billington puts it, involves "using language not so much to communicate as to maintain the tenuous thread of human contact" (2007: 108). "Last to Go" is the prime example of this, and has been the subject of a notable article by David Lodge that examines the phatic speech, though he draws some conclusions about metaphorical structures that might not hold up to the scrutiny of live performance experience (Lodge 2001). The sketch centres around a dialogue between a coffee stall barman and his customer, a newspaper seller, who engages him in conversation. The sketch involves the newspaper seller making small-talk and the barman politely confirming each packet of trivial information in turn by way of repetition, or sustaining the conversation by asking obvious closed questions:

MAN ... All I had left tonight was the 'Evening News'. *Pause*
 BAR. Then that went, did it?
 MAN Yes. *Pause*. Like a shot. *Pause*.
 BAR. You didn't have any left, eh?
 MAN No. Not after I sold that one.

(Pinter 1991b: 234)

The humour in the scene might be generated from two angles, and would depend upon delivery to be created and sustained. Firstly, there might be a tension – with slow delivery and working of the pauses throughout the sketch – that would operate by making an audience anticipate whether or not the two men could sustain their empty dialogue. This humour relies to a certain degree on a slight superiority of audience to character; we are amused by the lack of articulacy, perhaps, and by the ability to sustain vacant dialogue without communication. Secondly, humour might arise from the expectation that some form of genuine communication is going to take place as a result of this exchange; that in some way the phatic expressions are being sustained in order to create a context within which a

meaningful message might be shared. Humour builds up in the tension of anticipation of that, and is released as laughter in the failure of its appearance once titillatingly forwarded. Towards the end of the sketch, this sense that the two men may have something productive or meaningful to say arises when they begin a chain of exchanges about a George, seemingly a mutual acquaintance. The narrative, so to speak, begins to develop when we hear why the man was passing the coffee stall earlier that day, a piece of information with which he opened the dialogue: he was intent on finding George. This collapses in a deliberately flaccid revelation that George was not to be found. With an exchange about whether or not George had arthritis, we suspect they are not talking about the same man. The sketch then folds back on itself with repetition of details of which paper was sold last, before the final (potentially poignant) line: “I think he must have left the area” (Pinter 1991b: 236).

In its context within the *Pieces of Eight* revue, “Last to Go” stands out as quite subtle, signalling its comedy a lot less than the sketches that surrounded it. Peter Cook’s “Not an Asp” is a useful point of comparison. In both sketches, a possibly lonely individual seeks to make contact with another, but fails to do so. In Cook’s sketch, the oddball individual has a box in which he claims he has a viper, and pursues a near monologue of what is and is not in the box and inflicts this bizarre tirade on his unwitting neighbour on the park bench. Well suited to Kenneth William’s precise and emphatic delivery, the comedy is found predominantly in the strange behaviour of this character. What is distinct in Pinter’s work, and less easy to ‘perform’ in terms of straight comedy, is that he wields the space between people, the breach in communication, as an experience that is both pathetic and comic. As audience, we wait for him to fill the gaps that he creates, only for them to collapse.

We see this too in “The Black and White”, the title of which refers to the name of a chain of milk bars that once were found all around London. Milk bars were alternative to pubs, where one would buy a milk-based drink from a counter. Simple meals were available too, most commonly soup. One of the first Black and White bars, so named after their choice of décor, stood at 68 Fleet Street. As a teenager and young man, Pinter would frequent this establishment with his friends on late nights out in London. Its location was convenient for them as Fleet Street would be where they would alight from buses from West London via Marble Arch and catch buses home to Hackney. The conversation between two old women around buses in the sketch, then, is likely to have stemmed from Pinter’s own experience and detailed knowledge of the timetables and trajectories of the various London night buses, and indeed accurately reflects the bus routes of the early 1950s from and around Fleet Street.

As with “Last to Go”, the sketch sustains itself through phatic dia-

logue, and in this case the impulse even displaces or over-rides attempts at real conversation, suggesting a rigidly embedded conversational routine between old friends:

SEC. You see that one come up and speak to me at the counter? ...

FIRST You got the bread then?

(Pinter 1991b: 228)

As with the elusive George in “Last to Go”, this sketch has in its background the potential of human contact beyond the speakers. While we might detect an impulse toward and need for such contact in ‘Last to Go’, the introverted routine that we detect between these ladies extends itself to a suspicion of others. We learn that the second woman was approached by a stranger who asked her the time, and that he received verbal abuse and a threat of the police being called for his innocent request. There is sad observational humour in these exchanges, where two ladies so clearly enjoying the benefit of one another’s company set themselves through their behaviour in opposition to the potential of social interaction. The stage location of the all-night café suggests an existence beyond the regular social world of work and domestic rhythms, and the talk towards the end of the sketch of how the two of them are heading off soon in different directions, one to “the Garden” (probably Covent Garden) and the other to Waterloo Bridge, foregrounds their separate lives. The expression of a desire to stay put (“I wouldn’t mind staying”) nonetheless seems to indicate a need to sustain the conversation and the company (Pinter 1991b: 230). There is a subtle friction between the two in these closing exchanges, in terms of the contrasting use of “up” or “down” to indicate a location away from the bar:

SEC. I’m going. I’m going up to the Garden.

FIRST I’m not going down there. Pause. I’m going up to Waterloo Bridge.

(Pinter 1991b: 230)

Though we might not read this as deliberate contradiction, it does indicate a separation, a movement in different directions which, on the back of an expression of the desire to stay put, suggests something of the loneliness of these characters and their existence outside of social norms or social exchanges.

“That’s All” approaches this theme differently, with two women (Mrs A and Mrs B) discussing their shopping habits in relation to those of another, who we learn has moved away but returns on Thursdays to use the butcher’s shop she is used to, pointing to the entrenched routines that dictate the lives of these characters. Mrs A asserts that the third woman

used to come round to her house for a cup of tea on Wednesdays, but comes less often now. Mrs B seems to suggest that the other women does not come around at all, but Mrs A insists that is not the case. As with “Last to Go” and “The Black and White”. The comedy is gentle, mostly derived from the mundane detail, repetition and casual responses of Mrs B (who mostly just says “Yes”, “No” or “I know”), but the brief sketch is another study of the reassuring grip that routine and habit has on human acquaintance, and the sadness of the risk that beneath habit there is no connection between people.

Phatic speech had of course been mobilised by Pinter in the plays he wrote before these sketches, notably in the comparable dialogues between Rose and Meg and their husbands in the opening scenes of *The Room* and *The Birthday Party* as a means to express the character of those domestic environments, before their dramas were generated by intrusion from beyond the walls of the home. In *The Dumb Waiter*, it served to indicate that the two protagonists are waiting, biding their time until instructions arrive to necessitate more meaningful exchanges. What these sketches perform, though, is an intuited need for company and connection between their characters that goes further than the suggestion of contented simplicity or inadequate communication between partners in those early plays. This adumbrates the ambition of *The Caretaker* and the television plays of the early 1960s to examine not only the means by which that company is solicited – the offer to take care of one another – but the human failures and weaknesses that betray those impulses of coming together.

We might also consider dialogue such as that presented in “That’s All” and “The Black and White” as ‘schizogenic’ in the terms presented by Luc Gilleman, who considers seemingly bizarre speech patterns in Pinter’s work as effective as a consequence of “its appearance of simplicity and its actual relational complexity, structurally present in the form of contradiction and disqualification” (Gilleman 2008: 81). The comedy and the tensions such dialogue produce are sources in the appetite we carry for making sense of what appears nonsensical. “Trouble in the Works” provides an early example of Pinter experimenting with a schizogenic exchange to hilarious ends, but with a potentially sinister undertone that he exploits elsewhere. In stark contrast with “Last to Go”, “That’s All” and “The Black and White”, ‘Trouble in the Works’ operates in a more well-trodden comedy sketch format of a bizarre verbal exchange that moves towards a punch-line. Another dialogue, this time the sketch is positioned from the off in terms of a simple power relationship, between a factory owner, Fibbs, and a foreman or even perhaps a trade union representative, Wills. Industrial relations seem harmonious; the staff has excellent facilities and the nature of the dialogue suggests a positive working relationship between the two men. Wills is nonetheless present in his boss’s office to

inform Fibbs of some worker discontent, and the comedy is generated by the building tension towards learning what possible detail the work force are so unhappy about, and audience are in the same position of ignorance as the boss in this regard. Along the way, there is deliberate base humour served in the innuendo-riven names of the various tools and fixtures that the men are complaining about making: “brass pet cock”, “hemi unable spherical rod end”, “high speed taper shank spiral flute reamers”, “nipped connector” and “nipped adaptor” to list but a few (Pinter 1991b: 226-7). The fun is in both the innuendo and the hilarity that is released from vocabulary of a highly specific technical sort being tripped off the tongue in quick succession. Part of the humour here also, of course, is the fact of watching two men having a conversation that quite obviously makes straightforward sense to them, and in which they get increasingly emotionally invested, when its constituent parts are a series of repeated semi-nonsensical industrial jargon. In this way, Pinter’s innovation is that the journey to the punchline is more important than the punchline itself, which simply offers a packet of satisfaction in signalling the curtain is to fall.

Wills finally reveals what it is the workers want to make instead of all those machine parts. Interestingly, and as if to substantiate the notion that the punch-line is not the key to the comedy here, there have been three versions of the punch-line over the life of the text in print. One anecdote has it that Pinter’s original punchline (the men want to make “trouble”) was censored for being too political in its original context (and by that we might read it might have been taken as dismissive of or ridiculing workers’ rights and demands). It was replaced by “brandy balls”, which remained as the given text when published by Methuen (it reverted to “trouble” in later publication by Faber). “Brandy balls”, of course, maintains the frisson of innuendo of “nipped connector” and “nipped adaptor”, but perhaps in a diminished, unsatisfying way. Another alternative punch-line was “love”, which was used in a cartoon version of the sketch made and broadcast in Canada in 1968 under the title of *Pinter People*. The idea of making “love” was, of course, very much in synch with the late 1960s alternative society zeitgeist, whilst satisfactorily playing on the variable function of the verb ‘to make’.

The potential of specialised jargon as the basis of humour was first explored by Pinter in a short prose piece “Latest Reports from the Stock Exchange” (1953) in which the opaque paraphernalia of newspaper stock exchange reports formed a structural basis for a series of comments about crises in the political arena. In dramatic form, the wielding of specialised jargon was exploited as part of a process of rendering people vulnerable and is first wielded with some effect in the interrogation of Stanley by Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party*, though a far more exquisitely

written example is the bamboozling verbal assault that Mick makes on Davies in *The Caretaker* when pretending to have understood the vagrant has some expertise in interior decoration as a means of exposing the old man's conniving behaviour. Though "Trouble in the Works" has none of the nuance of Mick's assault, it is premised in the same experience of the ownership of knowledge that mastering of jargon manifests, and this makes it an early example in Pinter of how power is wielded through abstract language. This is more fully capitalised upon in *The Caretaker* and beyond. Elin Diamond draws a connection between use of vocabulary such as "hemi unibal spherical rod end" with Mick's use of "penchant" in *The Caretaker* and Ben's use of "ballcock" in *The Dumb Waiter*, to argue just this point: that "such words function as a primitive force, silencing or intimidating the listener" (Diamond 1985: 211). Whereas our laughter in those plays is directed at the vulnerable character in each exchange, the joke in "Trouble in the Works", however, is clearly on the audience, whose established position of ignorance is cause for their own hilarity.

'Umbrellas' offers something of a brief examination of power in a comic vignette, though its ambitions are quite monochrome. Less than a couple of minutes in length, "Umbrellas" is a dialogue between two men sunbathing in deck chairs on the terrace of a hotel. In just shorts and sunglasses, they carry no signifiers of wealth or status in the form of clothing, though the location and the characteristics of their exchange (they refer to one another as "old boy") might suggest they are both men of means, of what in the 1950s might have been considered upper class. The comic premise of the play is two semi-naked men in the hot sun extolling the virtue of umbrellas for the entirety of the brief dialogue. The punch-line ("You find them handy, eh? [...] When it's raining particularly") is a small dose of humour, and operates on two levels (Pinter 2011: 518). Firstly, it foregrounds the current uselessness of the umbrella that is to hand, and, by doing so, it deflates and foregrounds the preceding dialogue as being more precisely about currency, ownership, the emblems of acquisition that the umbrella has temporarily replaced in this self-congratulatory exchange. The dialogue here, then, is not just filling time or the gap between men, it is affirming a world-view through a bizarre symbol for the purpose, one that at the time in the late 1950s might ordinarily have been used metaphorically to describe the value of the recently established welfare state structure to protect all equally.

'Umbrellas' is reminiscent of "That's Your Trouble", in which two men, also called A and B, (and one of whom also carries an umbrella) discuss another man (offstage) who is carrying a sandwich board. The entire sketch, barely a couple of minutes in length, involves discussing what ailment the man might be afflicted with by carrying the board for too long. They dispute whether he'll get a headache, based on differing views of

where in the body the strain of carrying the board will take its toll. Again, the social commentary is subtle, enveloped within a seemingly meaningless exchange in which two men claim ownership of greater knowledge about the human body. These two men of leisure (one lying on the grass in the park with a book in his hands the other making cricket strokes with his umbrella) objectify a working man, employed in the least remunerative and most exploitative activity, as a walking advertising board. The vague punch-line (“You don’t know what your trouble is, my friend. That’s your trouble.”) reflects back on the speaker who has just anatomised the off-stage person (Pinter 1991c: 222). The sketch seems to activate that sense of judgement on the distance between people sustained by class and the kind of leisure/labour separation explicit in the deck chaired attitude of the men in “Umbrellas”, augmented here in ‘That’s Your Trouble’ by the petty claim to superior knowledge that the two gentlemen briefly feud over.

Pinter had employed a petty argument over who knows best as a means of distraction from greater truths in *The Dumb Waiter*, notably in the scene in which Ben and Gus argue over the appropriate nature of the colloquialism “light the kettle” as against the accuracy of “light the gas” (Pinter 1991a: 126). As with ‘That’s Your Trouble’, the comedy generated by the squabble between the men in their claims to superior knowledge foregrounds their blind spot, their seemingly oblivious attitude to significance of the structures that contain them as workers, neatly captured in a process that sums up British stoicism, routine and the will to procrastination: making a cup of tea. Embedded as a note in *The Dumb Waiter*, the fact that a spat over knowledge becomes the very premise and engine of the sketch ‘That’s Your Trouble’ makes the labour/leisure and class structures that remain unchallenged all the more noticeable, and we might therefore consider it the most overtly political of these early sketches, in its attachment if a flippant attitude to the ills of exploitative labour, and implication of its audience in that attitude through the attractive humour it generates.

“Interview” offers no overt sense of social commentary in the way that “That’s Your Trouble”, “Umbrellas” or even “Trouble in the Works” hint at, though the outburst of a punch-line that it delivers is both absurd (in the sense that it is simply bizarre) and explicitly political. Mr Jakes in being interviewed by an unnamed gentleman, who enquires about the health of the pornographic book market. With a few hilarious comment about how Christmas represents something of a downturn in trade (“you don’t get all that many people sending pornographic books for Xmas presents”) (Pinter 1991c: 229), the interview takes an odd turn when Jakes responds defensively to being asked what sort of people frequent his shop. There follows a seemingly paranoid rant about the “security police” keeping dossiers, which develops into the revelation that Jakes too keeps dossiers on

his clientele with the ambition eventually to expose them. “They’re all the same, every single one of them. COMMUNISTS” comes the punch-line, causing no doubt an immediate confusion, and concomitant hilarity, in any audience (Pinter 1991c: 230). The implication is that, in order to pursue a moral crusade, the bookseller must engage in selling unseemly wares that will attract those he wishes to purge from society.

The fervour with which Jakes presents his paranoid view and means of identifying undermines any real political charge the sketch offers, however overtly political it positions itself, and this would seem to serve simply to puncture posturing that has no substantial basis. Without real target, and offering humour through its bizarre revelation, the sketch is weak and more akin to work in progress than a finished work, but its spark and charge has a root in the same structure that Goldberg and McCann present in *The Birthday Party*, and which causes the dilemma that Ben and Gus face in *The Dumb Waiter*, which is the machinations of ideological structures to impose conformity, obedience and punish transgression. These take form much more explicitly in Pinter’s later drama where the impulse by the powerful elite toward “keeping the world clean for democracy” results in the fragmentation of family and state control of the individual (Pinter, 2011: 277) and Basil Chiasson speculates neatly that Pinter from early on in his writing career offers a “response to ... the ways of speaking which correlate to the rationality instrumental to the neoliberal project” (2014: 251).

While the interview format is used in “Interview” as a straightforward platform for the release of this paranoid divisiveness, it serves a far more intrusive and violent function in “Applicant”, the sketch extracted from the originally abandoned radio play *The Hothouse*. Lamb, a young man who is clearly eager to please is interviewed by Miss Piffs, whom Pinter describes as “the essence of efficiency” (Pinter 1991c: 225). The sketch opens with pleasantries exchange between the two, and we assume quickly that Lamb is being interviewed for a scientific post (he confirms he is a physicist). Piffs informs Lamb that he will first undergo a psychological test to determine his suitability, and connects electrodes to his hands and fits earphones over his ears. Lamb is evidently alarmed by this, but maintains a polite tolerance for the unexpected procedure. Once the equipment is in place, Lamb is encouraged to relax before Piffs presses a button which causes Lamb to convulse and fall from his chair. Piffs then begins a long trade of questions, without pausing for answers. Starting with plain enquiries about his emotional health, she swiftly moves onto innuendo (“Do you often do things you regret in the morning?”) and implies ambiguity as to Lamb’s sexual persuasion (“Are you often puzzled by women? ... Men”) before asking outright about his libido and whether he is a virgin (Pinter 1991c: 226-7). Pressing another button, she turns on a

pulsating red light and synchronously asks rhythmic questions about how aspects of femininity might alarm Lamb (“Do women frighten you? ... Their clothes? Their shoes? Their voices? Their laughter?”) (Pinter 1991c: 228). Toward the end of this passage, the words are replaced by drum beats, the strike of a cymbal, a trombone chord and a bass note, punctuated each time with just the word “their”, as though to attribute these abstract musical sounds to women too. This is a remarkable appropriation of the tendency to use such noises as indicators of casual sexual titillation in screen and radio comedy of the time,² employing them instead as indicators of female sexual agency and power rather than of willingly accessible sexuality. The scene is a more potent take on the notion expressed in ‘Interview’ that the morally correct and strong can weed out and subject those assumed to be morally inferior and weak.

We also see a challenge to gender orthodoxy in “Special Offer”, a short monologue in which a female employee of the BBC tells a tale of having been approached with an offer of “men for sale”, clearly a form of sexual exploitation in which the men are presented as “tried and tested” commodities at “very reasonable rates” with a money-back guarantee (Pinter 1991b: 237). The inversion of exploitation quite simply renders not only the reality of prostitution overt, but the broader objectification of women as pleasing objects within a male-dominated gender discourse is foregrounded. This reversal of the contemporary representation of women in comedy in “Special Offer” and “Applicant”, albeit crude, is an initial example of Pinter’s later more sophisticated examination of the complex relationships negotiated between men and women in domestic and working relationships. This became something of a major characteristic with his work for television in the early 1960s – with plays such as *A Night Out*, *Night School* and *The Lover* – and came to fruition on the stage with *Tea Party* and *The Homecoming*. In all of these, the threat of female sexuality, of women retaining ownership of their sexuality despite the manoeuvres of the men to define them and contain them in the domestic sphere, is a key creative occupation for Pinter, resolved finally in the character of Ruth in *The Homecoming*, who most overtly takes on the masculine discourses of gender control and sexual privilege, and, mastering them herself, turns them on the men.

“Request Stop” plays with gender stereotypes differently, and activates a more common comedy trope; that of the lonely, asocial old woman who talks excessively. Standing in a queue at a bus stop, the Woman speaks down to a small man in a raincoat next to her, the attire being the signifier of the

² Perhaps the most memorable contemporaneous example of this is the sound effect that accompanied the sudden loss of the bra by Barbara Windsor’s character during a morning exercise scene in *Carry on Camping* (1969), part of a film franchise that was tirelessly replete with such base humour sound effects.

‘dirty old man’ in stock mid-century British comedy.³ She presents herself as a victim of the man, who is given no lines in response by the author, causing us at first to assume his guilt. “I beg your pardon, what did you say”, she says as the sketch begins and continues in that tone of aggrieved upset, claiming that all she had done is ask the man if she could get a bus to Shepherd’s Bush from that stop, accusing him of making insinuations (Pinter 1991b: 231). As she attempts to get another lady involved as a witness, the second lady makes an exit, before the others in the queue thrust their arms out to catch the bus that has now arrived. Following their mime of departure, another man comes to join her, now alone at the bus stop. Acting in a coy manner, the woman delivers the sketch’s punch-line, and asks him if he knows whether she can catch a bus to Marble Arch from that stop. The humour, of course, is ignited here by the realisation that, now asking after a completely different destination, she has been up to mischief, and had managed perhaps to fool the audience into believing that she had been harassed by the first man on the scene. She simultaneously rises in our estimation as the agent of comic unrule, and falls as a clear public nuisance, about to falsely accuse another man as a means of self gratification.

Pinter’s early revue sketches, though they might have come into being as a response to a career-sustaining offer of paid work at a time of uncertainty, were demonstrably integrated into his developing project as a writer, both in terms of the mastery of formal structures, and in terms of the engagement with themes that had been and would be explored in his work for stage, radio and screen. As comedy vehicles, they did not always operate in the commonplace ways of providing humour through, for example, unresolved friction between characters, the undermining of social status for the satisfaction of an observing low-status audience, or the puncturing of hubristic pride. Instead, Pinter took the opportunity to examine the opportunities of a condensed short-form drama, and exploited the usual engagements with audience that they might usually secure. Insight into character emotional need through what is not spoken, the implied critique of social structures by presenting humour from characters’ being oblivious to those very structures, and the unsettling of gender discourses, are all key components of his early work that are explored in and through the sketches. Later in his career, we might perceive that new trajectories were often set in motion first through experimentation with sketch drama. ‘Night’, presented in revue in 1969, participates in a lengthy exploration of the ambiguity of past experience having some sway on present arrangements and relationships that dominated much of

³ The raincoat was notably employed as a signifier in this way repeatedly in *The Benny Hill Show* on TV (1955-91).

the next decade of Pinter's output. In 1983, the sketch 'Precisely' initiated a period of more overtly political writing that concluded with the sketches 'God's District' (1997) and 'Press Conference' (2002). Considered from this perspective, Pinter's sketches offer keen insight into his working methods, his thematic concerns and the trajectory of his creative currents at any point in the chronology of his extensive output.

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