methuen | drama

# PINTER AND STOPPARD

## A DIRECTOR'S VIEW

CAREY PERLOFF

# Pinter and Stoppard

# Pinter and Stoppard

## *A Director's View*

*Carey Perloff*

*methuen* | drama
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

METHUEN DRAMA
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, METHUEN DRAMA and the Methuen Drama logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2022



Cover design: Ben Anslow
Cover image © Tom Stoppard, Sydney, June 28th, 1994 (© Fairfax Media Archives / Getty Images); Harold Pinter (© Hulton-Deutsch Collection / Corbis / Getty Images); Carey Perloff at the ACT Gala opening of the new Strand Theater, San Francisco, April 2015 (Photography © Kevin Berne)



A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-3502-4338-5
PB: 978-1-3502-4339-2
ePDF: 978-1-3502-4340-8
eBook: 978-1-3502-4341-5

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters.

*This book is for my mother Marjorie Perloff, critic extraordinaire, who welcomed me into the world of literature, and for my mother-in-law Patricia Giles who welcomed me to all things English, with love and gratitude.*

# CONTENTS

# ILLUSTRATIONS

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book owes its existence to Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard, whose work has given me inspiration over three decades and whose collaboration was endlessly eye-opening. I would particularly like to thank Tom Stoppard for permission to quote freely from his notes and correspondence pertaining to my productions of his plays.

I owe an immeasurable debt to those who participated in my productions of Pinter and Stoppard's work, including actors Marco Barricelli, Rene Augesen, Steven Anthony Jones, Gregory Wallace, Anthony Fusco, Jack Willis, Manoel Felciano, Jason Butler Harner, Alison Jean White, Brenda Meaney, Dan Clegg, Andrew Polk, Adam O'Byrne, Pamela Reed, Graham Beckel, Jean Stapleton, Peter Riegert, David Strathairn, Firdous Bamji, Rosemarie Harris, Roberta Maxwell, Bill Moor, Scott Wentworth, Art Malik, and Judith Ivey, as well as designers Darron L. West, Alexander V. Nichols, Daniel Ostling, Andrew Boyce, Loy Arcenas, Robert Wierzel, James Ingalls, Douglas Schmidt, Candice Donnelly, Nina Ball, and so many more.

My work on Pinter's and Stoppard's plays was created in collaboration with creative teams at CSC, including Ellen Novack, Patty Taylor, and Lenora Champagne; at A.C.T. I was blessed with dramaturgs Paul Walsh and Michael Paller, Executive Director Heather Kitchen and Publications Manager Elizabeth Brodersen, all of whom helped frame the work by writing extensive dramaturgical packages, elegant program notes, and endless grant applications. In engaging actors-in-training in every aspect of the work, I am grateful to the wisdom and encouragement of Conservatory Director Melissa Smith and Young Conservatory Director Craig Slaight.

For detailed first-hand knowledge of the early period of Pinter's and Stoppard's work, I gleaned invaluable nuggets from my friend and colleague Giles Havergal. I have also benefitted over the years from the acute critical eye of Austin Quigley, the teaching of Martin Esslin, and the invaluable biographical works of Michael Billington on Pinter and of Hermione Lee on Stoppard. Having the opportunity to discuss this project with Hermione Lee in the wake of her masterful study was particularly valuable and enjoyable.

It was director Anne Bogart who generously connected me with her publisher, Bloomsbury Methuen, and urged them to take a look at this manuscript. Editor Anna Brewer, together with Sam Nicholls, combed through every word of the manuscript, gave invaluable advice, and helped make this a better book.

Enormous thanks to Kevin Kopjak for helping me to track down many long-lost photographs, and to Kevin Berne and Tom Chargin for so graciously giving me access to their remarkable archive of theater photos, from which I have drawn.

My agent Leah Hamos provided expert guidance on working with a publisher and encouraged me every step of the way, as did my colleague Brian Kulick who wrote three books to my one during the pandemic and constantly opened my eyes to new ways of thinking.

As always, my mother Marjorie Perloff has been my most rigorous and perceptive reader, giving me fertile ideas about structure, readership, context, and interpretation.

I wrote this book during the pandemic lockdown, which I shared day to day with my brilliant British husband Anthony Giles, who kept me laughing and happy throughout as we read aloud from Pinter's and Stoppard's work and reveled in their linguistic genius, and with my daughter Lexie whose intense work ethic from upstairs in her childhood bedroom inspired me to sit at my desk for longer hours than I would have otherwise, knowing we would meet for lunch, dinner and cocktails when the time came. My son Nick aka Wingtip and my sister Nancy Perloff gave me encouragement over the course of many walks.

More than anything, this book is for future theater artists and future audiences, in the hopes that the work of Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard will continue to resonate, move, awaken, and delight new generations, and to offer as much invigorating solace and sheer pleasure as it has given me.

# Introduction

# The Case for a Shared View of Pinter's and Stoppard's Work

On the morning of March 16, 2020, as the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were beginning to be felt across the world, we were ordered to "shelter in place" in San Francisco. An uncanny feeling of dread had already begun to spread throughout the city. Looking out my window, everything appeared "normal"—skies were blue, cyclists were hurtling through Golden Gate Park en route to the ocean, newspapers were being delivered. But the air was infected. Danger seemed to be lurking everywhere, even if we could not see it or put our finger on it. A kind of heightened silence, an inchoate dread, a palpable menace pervaded the collective psyche. I began thinking about Harold Pinter.

When Harold Hobson reviewed the first production of Pinter's *The Birthday Party* in 1956, he said, "Mr. Pinter's (threat) is of a subtler sort. It breathes in the air. It cannot be seen, but it enters the room every time the door is opened. There is something in your past—it doesn't matter what—which will catch up with you . . . There is terror everywhere."[1] On that first night of the virus lockdown, I pulled my *Collected Plays of Harold Pinter* off the shelf (as I have done during many moments of disruption or change in my life) and spent the evening rereading *The Homecoming* aloud with my husband. The queasy terror of the play's first lines (MAX: "What have you done with the scissors?") brilliantly launches this violent and erotic tale of a seemingly ordinary East End Jewish family after the war. Two grown boys live with their dad, whose brother drives upscale clients around London in his fancy car, and on the night the play occurs, the educated son who has gone off to America comes home for a visit with his wife Ruth. The anxiety of the visitors as they walk into that dark and fraught house is excruciating. What we witness in the course of the play is an entire kingdom collapsing. The World of Max, patriarchal, aggressive, weak, toxic, Jewish, and territorial, succumbs to the World of Ruth, seductive, secretive, sexual,

mysterious, and answering to no one but herself. And as that collapse gets under way, the slightest move incites terror.

Pinter knew about the effects of war. He grew up during the Blitz in London and encountered both extreme violence and pervasive anti-Semitism. He understood what it felt like to sit inside a perfectly ordinary room and jump with fear at a knock on the door. He also intuited that terror has an erotic component, and that indeed all human relations are on some level sexual. In Pinter's dramaturgy, power and dominance are the goals by which life is lived. You are either predator or prey. Action reveals character. Truth is fungible. Perhaps this is why Pinter's plays do not "date"—they are metaphoric enough to be eternal, and visceral or "local" enough to be immediate and recognizable. Besides, they are hilarious. For all of those reasons and more, his plays felt like perfect companions in a pandemic.

For me, encountering Pinter was the beginning of my life in the theater. As a Stanford undergraduate, I was introduced to his work by British journalist and critic Martin Esslin, whose *The Theatre of the Absurd* helped define a new kind of dramaturgy that began emerging after the Second World War. If in subsequent decades it became clear that Esslin's categories were somewhat artificial and that they strove to link work that had less in common than he suggested, *The Theatre of the Absurd* was an important introduction to a new kind of theatrical writing and a different way of thinking about the relationship of drama to audience. I had studied Beckett before reading Esslin, but it was Esslin who led me straight to Pinter. Over the course of my career as a director and artistic director, I had numerous occasions to collaborate with Pinter personally and to observe his work up close. The mysterious well of menace and sexuality that lay beneath the surface of his plays became a terrain I knew intimately and have never tired of exploring.

Pinter's impact upon my thinking as a theater director may be outsized in part because I met him when I was so young: I had become Artistic Director of the Classic Stage Company (CSC), an indigent downtown company in New York, in my mid-twenties, and when we produced the American premiere of *Mountain Language*, just after I had given birth to my first child, Pinter came to New York to be part of the rehearsal process. I can only imagine what he must have thought when he walked into the building on 13th Street and encountered a young woman who had a ten-day-old baby girl and was about to tackle the American premiere of his new play in the spotlight of New York theater with the playwright himself in attendance. But he never evinced a moment of doubt in front of me or the cast. Reams have been written about Pinter's temper and oppositional character, but this was not my experience of him. On the contrary, his love of the rehearsal process and his forensic exploration of every theatrical moment put him in a democratic position with anyone in the room willing to be as engaged as he was with the task at hand. I am fully prepared to acknowledge that my perception of Pinter stands in contrast to that of other artists, and certainly I had been warned about his temper, which apparently could erupt with

particular virulence when American politics came up. But neither in the rehearsal room nor in my many subsequent encounters with Pinter did the atmosphere ever feel embattled or threatening.

One singular incident may serve to illustrate our collaboration. In the chaos of organizing rehearsals, raising money, casting and designing the production, and experiencing motherhood for the first time, I had not yet had time to organize childcare when we began work at CSC in 1989. I therefore brought my daughter to the theater every day and tucked her into a dressing room backstage, where she slept in her carrycot as we worked (fortunately, she has always been a spectacular sleeper). Pinter never mentioned this fact, and I was not even sure he knew there was an infant back there until one day when we hit a snag in rehearsal for *Mountain Language*.

*Mountain Language* concerns a "mountain people" who have been forbidden by the government from speaking their own language in the capital of their own country; some of their men have been arrested and held in custody, and the women have come to the prison to try to contact them. Among these is an Elderly Woman who, in Scene 2, faces her son (a political prisoner) across a table and tries to convey to him, telepathically, that "the baby is waiting for you . . . They are all waiting for you." Peter Riegert played the Prisoner, forbidden by the State from seeing his own child. The desperate thoughts of mother and son were revealed to the audience in pre-recorded voice overs, as the two sat silently across from each other; any information the Prisoner could glean about his child had to come from his silent mother's eyes. This scene demanded enormously challenging emotional transparency from both actors. Riegert struggled with how to sustain the tension of the situation without "indicating" his grief. During early days of rehearsal, he constantly felt that he was miscast, being much more accustomed to playing characters with status and control, such as Goldberg in *The Birthday Party*. Try as we might, none of us felt that the despair of the scene was visceral enough.

Suddenly one day, Pinter, who had been watching rehearsals carefully and respectfully, stood up, walked backstage, picked up the carrycot containing my sleeping baby, and brought her onto the stage where we were working. Placing her on the table, he said to Riegert: "This is your child. You have been forbidden ever to see her. Through no fault of your own. Ever. You see? It's not at all abstract, it's very simple. You long for her, and you can't see her. That's what's going on here." The room went very quiet, and Riegert stared at the sleeping child in her carrycot. He nodded. He looked back up at Jean Stapleton, who was playing his heartbroken, frightened mother. We could almost hear their hearts beating. They started from the top and played the scene, fully and honestly. When it was finished, Pinter returned my infant to her dressing room. We never discussed what had happened, but from that point on, the scene was always visceral and real. My favorite opening night photograph from that production was Lauren Bacall cooing over baby Lexie, who remained blissfully unaware of the key role she had played in


**FIGURE 1** *Baby Lexie Perloff-Giles with Lauren Bacall, opening night of* The Birthday Party *at CSC. Photo by Ted Keenan, courtesy of CSC Repertory, 1989.*

excavating *Mountain Language*'s emotional charge. But the playwright always asked after her in the years to come.

Pinter's plays have loomed large in my life each time I found myself crossing a difficult juncture or tackling a new opportunity. My first production of *The Birthday Party* was connected with Lexie's birth, *Celebration* and *The Room* became entwined with the trauma of 9/11, *The Homecoming* was my battle cry to sustain a Core Company in spite of the 2008 Great Recession, and *The Birthday Party* (Take 2) marked my farewell to the leadership of a theater I had led and adored for twenty-five years. Thus, it was perhaps fitting that the catastrophe of Covid-19 triggered my desire to write this book and, ironically, engendered the solitude necessary to finish it.

I like to say that it was Harold Pinter who first got me into the theater and Tom Stoppard who kept me there. Of the many writers with whom I have collaborated over my directing career, Pinter and Stoppard are the lodestars, the constants, the two with whom I have shared the deepest aesthetic sympathy and enjoyed the most fruitful creative experiences. Why this is true I am not entirely sure, but every director has a muse or two that activates his or her imagination unlike any others. Our shared Jewish connection and intellectual interests were at least a part of the camaraderie we felt, as I shall discuss in Chapter 1. With Pinter, my collaboration began in New York in

1989. My decades-long collaboration with Stoppard was launched in 1993, during my first season as Artistic Director of A.C.T. (American Conservatory Theater), when I tried to secure the rights to *Arcadia*, which were being held by the Lincoln Center due to the concurrent New York production. Deeply frustrated, I wrote to the playwright to plead my case; the result was a long and wonderful epistolary conversation with Stoppard that yielded not only the rights to produce *Arcadia* in San Francisco but the beginnings of a fruitful collaboration and friendship that continues to this day.

Stoppard's work has informed my own directing and playwriting practice for three decades. Over the course of my tenure at A.C.T., I directed ten productions of Stoppard plays (*Arcadia* twice, *Night and Day*, *The Real Thing*, *Travesties*, *Rock 'n' Roll*, *Indian Ink* twice, *The Invention of Love*, and *The Hard Problem*) and collaborated with him personally on nearly all of them. As with the work of Pinter, I have come to find that Stoppard's plays have given structure to the architecture of my own life. *Arcadia* launched my 25-year tenure at A.C.T., *The Invention of Love* coincided with the dawning of a new century and a major fire in my house, *Rock 'n' Roll* gave us ballast in the midst of the financial meltdown of 2008, *Indian Ink* softened the loss of my father, and *The Hard Problem* helped celebrate the burgeoning musical career of my son Nick aka Wingtip, who sat in the back of the Geary Theater in 2017 and created a score for our production side by side with a writer he had known since birth.

I often wonder what was it about these two extremely different writers that has spoken to me so deeply over the course of my creative life. Aesthetically, Pinter and Stoppard are not obviously connected, although the two men were friendly for most of their careers and at one time played cricket together on a fairly regular basis. Early assessments of their work by theater critics often lumped them together: Kenneth Tynan, who "discovered" Stoppard after *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* premiered at the Edinburgh Festival, quickly asserted that "in terms of international prestige, the standard of British playwriting was held by Harold Pinter, Peter Shaffer and Stoppard,"[2] an opinion seconded by mainstream critics who seemed comfortable pairing Stoppard's and Pinter's plays as vital and important British "exports." On the surface, however, they sit on opposite sides of many polarities: Pinter was a dedicated Leftist politically (much more so in his later life) while Stoppard has been considered "conservative" for his resistance to making group statements or avowals; Pinter was lumped from the beginning with "Theater of the Absurd" writers that included Beckett and Ionesco, while Stoppard's work appeared in the West End early on and has always attracted a broad and occasionally commercial audience. One is a minimalist, the other is a maximalist. One is visceral, the other cerebral. One is visually pure, the other is visually outrageous. Pinter's plays are filled with silences, Stoppard's with a torrent of words. Pinter's characters are generally confined to a room, Stoppard's travel the globe, often in the course of a single scene.

Thus, it might appear that the differences between these two writers outweigh the similarities, when viewing them across the landscape of post-war English theater. Pinter is a playwright of intense observation, with an uncanny ability to mine the simplest of situations for the hidden current of menace, violence, and power play underneath. His is a drama of mystery, of subtext, of terror. He writes about what he knows: Jewish patriarchs in the east end of London (*The Homecoming*), sexual politics amongst literary Londoners (*Betrayal*), the terror of artistic independence and rebellion (*The Birthday Party*). His plays usually take place in a single space, in an atmosphere so denuded of superfluous detail that the slightest move is a radical act. He is uniquely able to take seemingly ordinary speech and lift it onto the plane of poetry without ever disconnecting it from the guts and heartbeat of his characters. Stoppard, by contrast, is a writer of ideas. Following his own internal dialectic, he sets off to create characters and situations that can best reveal his own debates in dramatically satisfying ways. "I'm a playwright interested in ideas and forced to invent characters to express those ideas," Stoppard told the critic Mel Gussow in 1979.[3]

Pinter and Stoppard themselves were deeply aware of the aesthetic differences in their work. Indeed, in a 1974 interview with Gussow, Stoppard said, "I don't mean this literally, but I have this feeling that I could've written most other people's plays and most other people could've written mine, because I know how it's done and they know how it's done. But with one or two people—I think Harold Pinter is an example—you don't know how it's done. And I couldn't do it."[4] In an earlier interview with Gussow in April 1972, Stoppard elaborated:

> I think Pinter did something equally important and significant. He changed the ground rules. One thing plays had in common: you were supposed to believe what people said up there. If somebody comes on and says, "Tea or coffee?" and the answer is "Tea," you are entitled to assume that somebody is offering a choice of two drinks and the second person has stated a preference. With a Pinter play, you can no longer make that assumption.[5]

Stoppard told a wonderful story to Shusha Guppy in *The Paris Review* about Pinter:

> The first time I met Harold Pinter was when I was a journalist in Bristol and he came down to see a student production of *The Birthday Party*. I realized he was sitting in the seat in front of me. I was tremendously intimidated and spent a good long time working out how to engage him in conversation. Finally, I tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Are you Harold Pinter or do you just look like him?" He said, "What?" So that was the end of that.[6]

Stoppard passionately defended Pinter's work and has made it clear that he never felt he came near to the elder writer in terms of contributions to the theater. He was dismayed when Christopher Hitchens wrote a dismissive column about Pinter on the occasion of Pinter's winning the Nobel Prize; Stoppard wrote Hitchens a four-page letter trying to explain what was unique and irreplaceable about Pinter:

> It was—at the time—counter-intuitive to see that a shortfall of information, rather than a surplus, is what can make the theatre hold up the mirror, and that the effect is dramatic—funny, disturbing, fascinating . . . and not because the writer is withholding information tactically, but because he doesn't know the answers. Not knowing the answers is the modus vivendi . . . It opened up a different street.[7]

I'm not sure this argument convinced Hitchens; nor, perhaps, did it quite address the core of Pinter's genius, which to my mind is the way in which he articulates unconscious appetites in highly specific idiomatic language that is simultaneously mythic and meticulous.

Hermione Lee's masterful 2020 biography of Stoppard makes much of the closeness between the two writers, although I rarely experienced that personally—certainly, they spoke highly of each other, but mostly stayed in their own lanes. However, Stoppard was devastated when Pinter died (on December 24, 2008), writing a beautiful condolence letter to Pinter's wife Antonia Fraser and then, a year later, a wonderful poem entitled "Another Time" about the intimidating process of dropping in on a Pinter rehearsal. The poem ends:

> was it? was it?
> was it what for fucksake
> oh open yes I see yes
> how very pinteresque
> but haroldly he broke for tea
> for he was always kind to me
> I wish I'd brought a cake.

If queried about Stoppard, Pinter may well have conveyed the same sense of both admiration and distance, from his own unique point of view. "I think I am in a trap, always. I sometimes wish desperately that I could write like someone else, *be* someone else. I often feel that about waking up with myself in the morning. You're trapped with yourself all your damn life . . . If I were someone else I would probably create a different air."[8] Pinter marveled at writers who invented new worlds or set their plays in exotic locations, as Stoppard did, but that was never where his own instincts lay. Each of them carved out a language that was utterly distinct and sui generis. Both have

had endless imitators, yet no real peers; in each case, a few lines of dialogue from the plays suffice to identify the author.

Why, then, couple these two writers in a single study? I would like to argue that when Pinter and Stoppard are considered together, facets of their work are revealed which have hitherto been less examined and which shed light on both. If the form of their work is different, their biographies and their passion for the actual making of theater become surprisingly complimentary when viewed through a shared lens. My understanding of the "rules of play" that pertain to each was abetted by having worked so extensively on the work of both; I carried my lessons from Pinter into my exploration of Stoppard's work and vice versa. In the same way, Pinter and Stoppard learned from and admired each other's work over the course of many decades. On the occasion of Stoppard's fiftieth birthday in 1987, Pinter wrote something about Stoppard that could equally have been said about himself,

> He is his own man. He's gone his own way from the word go. He follows his nose. It's a pretty sharp one. Nobody pushes him around. He writes what he likes—not what others might like him to write. But in doing so he has succeeded in writing serious plays which are also immensely popular. You can count on the fingers of one hand those who have brought that off. But, indisputably, he's one of them. He doesn't look fifty either.[9]

What I learned from Pinter during rehearsals in New York gave me a set of parameters that I have used when staging his work ever since. The same happened when I first got into the studio with Stoppard. Obviously, the presence of the writer is not a necessary nor, often, a possible condition in a working director's life. And it is not always a boon; there are writers who are so prescriptive that the creative life of the rehearsal room gets stifled by their involvement. Directing is an iterative process in which a script slowly reveals itself on stage through rigorous examination and the freedom to play and fail until solutions are reached which feel true to the spirit of the text. The direct involvement of Pinter and Stoppard during this process of discovery was invaluable to me. How does a director uncover the laws governing the unique and mysterious world of a given play? What is the roadmap that will help guide the journey into that unfamiliar landscape? And how do the specific and idiosyncratic laws of a given play inform how that play gets cast, designed, rehearsed, imagined on stage? These questions are particularly challenging when dealing with a dramaturgy that is not, strictly speaking, "realism." If one cannot rely on certain accepted truths or realistic markers to navigate a play, what path does one follow? Equally importantly, if one is part of the American theater tradition in which psychology, confession, and the tropes of naturalism are almost always the starting positions from which a play is explored, how does one approach the

unique worlds of Pinter and Stoppard? This is when it is a particular privilege to be in the rehearsal room with writers who are able to bring the "laws" of their plays into focus in ways that can then be remembered and activated in subsequent productions of that writer's work.

This is not to say that the playwright is always "right" or that there is a single correct way to stage a play. But an active spirit of collaboration on the part of the playwright helps ensure that all the artists involved are pursuing the same quarry. Pinter and Stoppard, from the advent of their very first plays, shared a delight in and forensic pursuit of the perfect *word*, the richest possible use of language. There is a distilled poetry in Pinter's work that is as vivid and meticulous as Shakespeare's blank verse. ("I suppose Shakespeare's dominated my life the way he's dominated many people's lives," Pinter told Gussow in 1988. "We don't recover from Shakespeare."[10]) Embedded in Pinter's language, if you know how to find them, are all the clues an actor needs to understand the "meaning" of the text. "The music and the rhythm will tell you what you mean," he explained. "You can work yourself into the ground, and you won't ever get anywhere unless you get the precise emphasis, and then the sense of the sentence will become clear."[11] The sound of a word or a phrase in Pinter is as crucial as its meaning; this may stem from his earliest schooldays in which he apparently conversed in an almost private language of invented words and puns with his friends, one of whom, Mick Goldstein, later explained,

> It is useless to try to recall the effect these phrases had on me now, since then, I was hearing them for the first time. I could appreciate Harold's use of the type of language that would result from the occasional distortion of using nouns, adjectives and verbs indiscriminately. It was possible to invent a completely private language. I am not saying that I immediately understood what it was that was being said, but there was a lack of concern if the meaning of a phrase eluded one's attempt to interpret it, provided that it had a life of its own.[12]

Similarly, there is a complex and highly crafted elegance to Stoppard's language that lifts ideas to the level of desire. In our collaborations, both writers gave explicit instructions in the rehearsal room about how their language was to be accessed and through what methods the force of their words could best be activated.

Furthermore, from their earliest days as young writers, both Pinter and Stoppard were inherently suspicious of *theory*. They were not aiming for abstract or existential truths but for theatrical events that would rivet an audience's attention. Pinter quipped in his speech "On Being Awarded the German Shakespeare Prize in Hamburg": "Someone asked me what my work was 'about'. I replied with no thought at all and merely to frustrate this line of enquiry, 'The weasel under the cocktail cabinet'. That was a great mistake. Over the years I have seen that remark quoted in a number of

learned columns . . . But for me the remark meant precisely nothing." (Actor Peter Riegert, who memorably played Goldberg for me in *The Birthday Party* at CSC, felt the "weasel" description really referred to the experience of seeing a play; he believed the "cocktail cabinet" represented the polite veneer of the theater, where a well-behaved audience came to watch a play, and the "weasels" were the actors who inevitably wreaked havoc on the proceedings.) Literal biographical interpretations annoyed Pinter as much as theoretical ones; Hermione Lee relates a story about a dinner table argument in the early 1970s in which Miriam Stoppard asked Pinter whether he believed a writer drew more upon his life or his imagination to inspire his work. "Pinter, outraged, at once lost his temper and berated her," relates Hermione Lee. "Miriam cried." Apparently, Pinter was defending his point of view that he never planned his characters' lives or knew how they were going to behave in any given moment, but simply followed his instincts. This was not Stoppard's experience of writing, and he allowed his wife to argue it out alone with his fellow playwright. Later Pinter sent Miriam flowers in apology.[13]

Stoppard is similarly resistant to academic or biographical analysis; the first time I ever queried Stoppard about a given moment in one of his plays (*Arcadia*), he replied bashfully that it was about sex. Stoppard's antipathy to personal disclosure mirrors Pinter's; "Biography is the mesh through which real life escapes," Eleanor Swan says tartly to her sister's biographer Eldon Pike in *Indian Ink*. Indeed, when Stoppard writes biographers into his plays (from Pike to Bernard Nightingale in *Arcadia*) they are notoriously unreliable. "Perhaps I'll get him a reporter doll for Christmas," says Ruth in *Night and Day*. "Wind it up and it gets it wrong." This is not to say that the lives, loves, and losses of both writers have not found their way into the fabric of the plays, on the contrary. The more deeply I got to know Pinter and Stoppard as human beings, the more their plays revealed themselves to me; those discoveries are, in part, the subject of this book. In both cases, I have found the psychological depth of their writing breathtaking. But the connections between fiction and life are mysterious and subterranean, and rarely present obvious equivalences. Now that Hermione Lee's biography has come out, perhaps scholars will start analyzing Stoppard's plays with a finer biographical comb.

From their first forays into theater, both Pinter and Stoppard have displayed wicked senses of humor that often mask dark and complex themes. (The critic Kenneth Tynan made a famous assessment that the playwrights of his time fell into two categories: "the hairy men—heated, embattled, socially-committed playwrights, like John Osborne, John Arden, and Arnold Wesker"; and the "smooth men—cool, apolitical stylists, like Harold Pinter, the late Joe Orton, Christopher Hampton, Alan Ayckbourn, Simon Gray and Tom Stoppard."[14]) Comedy can be chilling or it can be reassuring, but much of what makes both Pinter and Stoppard's work funny is *subterfuge*. These are not *confessional* playwrights. For me, this is one of the most salient aspects of their work.

In Stoppard's universe, *thought* is paramount. His characters are what they think. The erotic charge, which is considerable, is connected to the force of their ideas. You cannot separate Thomasina from her intellectual passions, no matter how much her desire for Septimus colors her words. *Arcadia* is a love story, but it is as much a love story about mathematics and fractals as it is about the momentary coming together of a nineteenth century girl and her tutor. Stoppard's reverence for a richly imagined linguistic life means that even his minor characters display a kind of verbal dexterity rarely seen in the actual world, but that is what makes his writing unique and compelling. He pays more attention to the necessary "gear change" (his term) engendered by the word "if" than most writers pay to entire sentences. As with Pinter's work, biography and confession, the tools of the trade in American drama, prove less useful in staging Stoppard's work than behavior, desire, and an almost athletic approach to language.

When you read about Pinter's youth, his gang of friends describe how they learned to "take the piss," using language to deflect, distract, and delight, but rarely to "reveal." The gap between what is said and what is meant in a Pinter play, or what lies buried beneath a Stoppardian joke, is thus terrain worthy of exploration. Stoppard shared Vaclav Havel's theory that humor is based in "incongruous juxtaposition" or an excess of literalism, which leads to delicious lines like Thomasina's "Septimus, what is carnal embrace?" to which he replies, "The process of throwing one's arms around a side of beef." Directing Pinter's and Stoppard's work inevitably involves figuring out how to activate complex language in a way that keeps the surface structure (or the joke) taut but allows the underlying emotional energy to move forward. I have spent many rehearsals trying to help psychologically trained American artists find their way into the mysteries of Pinter's or Stoppard's work without overburdening it with their own "feelings" or their desire for a more naked emotional expression and a more visible arc of experience.

I remember assuring Pinter's agent Judy Daish in 1988 that if she would grant me the rights to *The Birthday Party* at CSC, I would get the comedy right, as I was married to a Brit and would not burden the plays with too much earnest American psychology. That made her laugh, but still it took extensive persuasion by the poet and playwright Tony Harrison (whose *Phaedra Britannica* I had just directed) before she finally agreed. Like Pinter, Stoppard has been known to say that he believes most Americans are missing the "irony key" on their keyboard, and thus he is meticulous about helping actors access the humor in the language of his plays, down to the last syllable. I recall an incident in which the actress playing Ruth in *Night and Day*, which is set in a fictitious African country, was not getting her laugh in an early exchange, a laugh built on Guthrie's assumption that Ruth had not returned to her native London in years: "CARSON: Actually, Ruth was born in London. GUTHRIE: Really? Well, you wouldn't know it now. When were you last there? RUTH: Friday." Stoppard patiently explained to

Rene Augesen that she was dropping the second syllable of "Friday" and was thus eviscerating the desired comedic result.

Because the work of these two writers has always felt so congenial to me, it was only recently, in discussing Pinter and Stoppard with directors, actors, and designers less familiar with their plays, that I realized how oblique they could feel from the outside, at least in North America. Hence the impulse for this book. Each time I collaborated with Pinter and Stoppard, the landscape of the plays became both more familiar and more exhilarating to explore. Eventually, I stopped being anxious about "not knowing" underlying meanings in advance, and trusted that, over time, I would accrue enough tools to find my way through the mysteries of even their most difficult plays. I had also learned rehearsal techniques that I believed might be valuable to share. This is thus a study by a working theater artist, not an academic; it attempts to interpret and reveal the essence of the plays by exploring how they actually function on stage. It has been my experience that although Pinter's and Stoppard's plays are a staple of theaters around the world, the critical discourse around their work, based primarily on a reading of their texts, has not, with a few notable exceptions, proved useful for theater practitioners. Why has this been the case? Perhaps because drama is rarely part of the curriculum of English departments, at least not in America; drama is simply not considered a "serious enough" art form to merit the kind of analysis given to poetry and the novel. Robert Brustein articulated this unfortunate situation so clearly when he described his interview to join a literature seminar at Columbia taught by his mentor Lionel Trilling: "He (Trilling) was not happy about my theatrical interests. Drama for him was what Sir Philip Sidney called a poor stepsister of the arts, not a serious literary pursuit."[15] Conversely, when it comes to pre-professional drama departments, at least American ones, the work of dramatists like Pinter and Stoppard is rarely central to training that is either focused on Stanislavskian psychological techniques or on issues such as representation, identity, authenticity, and social justice. While I believe that both Pinter's and Stoppard's work requires actors of capacious psychological range and while their work expresses significant thinking about injustice, censorship, a free press and individual expression, it has become increasingly clear to me that, with some exceptions, young actors and directors are given few if any tools with which to approach what I consider to be some of the great theatrical writing of our era. I hope this book may help to change that situation. More than anything else, I have wanted to share these thoughts because my collaborations with Pinter and Stoppard have consistently pushed me to become a better, more imaginative, and more rigorous artist.

As I began, in preparation for writing this book, to look back over decades of collaboration and to contemplate what I had learned, I occasionally wondered why I had not felt terrified to be in the rehearsal room with those two writers. It was not as if I had either experience or theatrical training to boast of when I began working on their plays. But

neither seemed to care that I was young and inexperienced; both had started their careers in their twenties without having gone to graduate school or having had any connection to the professional theater, so my own unorthodox career trajectory—I have no formal theater training—must have felt familiar to them. They certainly had no bias against youth. "There was something else I found very gracious," Jean Stapleton (who played Meg in the CSC production of *The Birthday Party*) said of Pinter. "He did not encroach on Carey's turf. He did it so graciously. He respected her position as director."[16]

This graciousness toward his collaborators seems to have been part of Pinter's make-up from the beginning. The director Giles Havergal tells a wonderful story about Pinter coming to play Lenny in *The Homecoming* at the Watford Palace Theatre (where Havergal was Artistic Director in the 1960s). The director of the production was a very young and inexperienced man, Stephen Hollis, whose first professional outing this was. According to Havergal, Pinter treated Hollis with generosity and deference throughout the process. However difficult Pinter could sometimes be, he seemed to understand intuitively that a productive rehearsal room was one in which the actors respected the director, and he was going to set the tone.

As a female director, I realize this courtesy cannot be taken for granted. On many occasions in my theatrical career, I have known what it feels like to be rendered invisible by "great men." Nor do I mean to sound pollyannaish about the situation of being a woman director in rehearsal with two of the

**FIGURE 2** *Tom Stoppard and Carey Perloff in rehearsal at A.C.T. 2004. Photo courtesy of David Allen.*

most powerful men in British drama. It did make me laugh when I read Hermione Lee's account of Trevor Nunn taking Miriam Stoppard aside, shortly after she and Stoppard had got together, and saying to her, "You will look after him, won't you?"[17] The idea that anyone would say this to the male partner of a female artist, no matter how famous, is impossible to imagine. Regardless, because of our mutual intellectual interests, our mutual sense of humor, our shared aesthetic, and perhaps because of our mutual backgrounds, I was able to work with both writers as colleagues in an atmosphere of mutual respect. On every occasion, the experience was one of joy and discovery, never of intimidation or fear. We felt like congenial artists in pursuit of the same goals.

Given that my process for exploring the plays of Pinter and Stoppard is so connected to my knowledge of the two writers themselves, this book is in part a portrait of the artists as they revealed themselves to me in rehearsal. As such, it is by no means objective or complete; it was built up through pre-production correspondence, rehearsal experiences, notes from run-throughs and performances, and the many meals, drinks, phone calls, and panel discussions we engaged in together. My goal here is not so much to add to the broader biographical material available on Pinter and Stoppard or to comprehensively discuss all the plays, but to shine a light on specific working methods discovered in production, and to argue that the surest way to understand the plays is to figure out how to make them come alive onstage.

Central to the successful staging of a playwright's work is an intuitive understanding of that writer's individual *voice*. This is abetted not only by a comprehensive knowledge of the writer's whole oeuvre but a sense of the formative cultural factors that underlie the work. As I suggested earlier, my interpretation of, and personal connection to, Pinter's and Stoppard's aesthetic, humor, and creative impulse is connected to a biographical fact that is often overlooked, namely that both are Jewish. Thus, the first chapter of this book argues that their connection to Central European Jewish culture and their childhood wartime experiences helped shape their plays in crucial ways. Chapter 2 looks at the broader cultural landscape of post-war England and the environment that shaped Pinter's and Stoppard's arrival on the scene. While British readers may have a deeper knowledge of this period of cultural history than most Americans, I believe it is valuable for all those interested in the work to understand not just how radical Pinter's and Stoppard's plays felt when they first emerged, but how connected they were to a theatrical tradition that we may have forgotten today. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the "rules of play" (from casting to design to choreography to shaping of language) that I employ as a director when approaching Pinter's and Stoppard's work. The second half of the book (Chapters 4–7) focuses on individual plays (starting with Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and Stoppard's *Indian Ink*) as they revealed themselves to me through specific rehearsal experiences. The book does not cover Pinter's and