

CAROL ROSEN

Plays of Impasse

*Contemporary Drama Set in
Confining Institutions*



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>>>>>>>>> PLAYS OF IMPASSE <<<<<<<<<<

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IN MEMORY OF
BARBARA ROSEN AND FRANCES ROSEN KING
WITH GRATITUDE FOR THEIR JOY OF LIFE

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1. Pinter's *The Hothouse*
2. Nichols's *The National Health*
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I know of one acid test in the theatre. It is literally an acid test. When a performance is over, what remains? Fun can be forgotten, but powerful emotion also disappears and good arguments lose their thread. When emotion and argument are harnessed to a wish from the audience to see more clearly into itself—then something in the mind burns. The event scorches on to the memory an outline, a taste, a trace, a smell—a picture. It is the play's central image that remains, its silhouette, and if the elements are rightly blended this silhouette will be its meaning, this shape will be the essence of what it has to say.

Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*

>>>>>>>>> ACKNOWLEDGMENTS <<<<<<<<<<<

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For whatever I know of other matters, I thank Jack Carden, my husband, my dearest friend, and my most astute critic. My deepest debt is to this terrific man who wanted a sensible life and chose to share one with me instead.

May 1982

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few years, should the renewed, determined effort to reach out, get in touch, *make* contact turn up almost exclusively in plays devoted to those whose brains and bodies are on the verge of flickering out? Why the intense focus on this single, very late moment in the time of our lives?" Kerr went on to suggest that these are plays "of last-minute awakening, last-ditch drives for a breakthrough."¹

About a year later, Roger Copeland wrote in the *Times* about the "utter indifference to public life" in recent plays obsessed with the self. Contrasting the "obsession with the private sanctum" in new American plays with what he called "the essentially public nature of the theater," Copeland discussed the solipsistic nature of *Wings*, for example, and he went on to consider how "a number of recent American plays have dealt, in one way or another, with the public trauma of Vietnam; but none has examined or even raised the issues of public policy related to our experience in Southeast Asia." Copeland cited in particular *Dispatches* and *G. R. Point*, and to a lesser degree, David Rabe's Vietnam trilogy, as plays set in the military that "manage effectively to evoke the hallucinatory quality of the war for those who fought it; and . . . dramatize the moral dilemma experienced by presumably civilized people who discover that they feel strangely 'alive' on the battlefield . . . but . . . focus on the way individual characters react to the war, rather than on the war itself (and as a result, Vietnam tends to become merely a metaphor for 'War' as opposed to a particular war fought for particular reasons)."²

Finally, Mel Gussow described the phenomenon of the incapacitated, wounded hero, and focusing on the many hospital beds cluttering the Broadway stage, he proposed that "the existence of these plays would seem to be no coincidence. There is a reason why playwrights and theatergoers are increasingly concerned with such problems." Gussow proceeded to ask some prominent social observers for their opinions about the now apparent proliferation of plays centered on brittle, broken people often institutionalized, always at the edge. Leslie Fiedler, author of *Freaks*,

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suggested that there is a growing interest in “beings who seem to be at the margin of everything called normal. They seem to be moving into the center of our imaginations. More and more stories deal with these people. It’s an overwhelming metaphor for what people think of their own condition, a reigning metaphor of our age.”

Professor of psychiatry Robert Jay Lifton said:

What we so broadly speak of as narcissism in our culture is often more basically the self-absorption people resort to because of their sense of being threatened or of falling apart. In these plays there is the metaphor of the single life. It is not so easy for a playwright to write about nuclear dangers and weapons without making it a propaganda tract. If you feel the danger of holocaust, you’re not just talking about death and dying, but about premature death. These plays would seem to reflect the use of what I call ‘death equivalents’ as creative metaphor. The plays seem to express death equivalents very strongly through the metaphor of a particular kind of illness. By no means are the plays despairing. One can use death imagery—in the direction of renewal.

And sociologist Amitai Etzioni pointed out a third angle; he saw this dramatic trend developing out of a “black period in society—a society depressed,” and he, too, described incapacitated characters as a metaphor for contemporary civilization. “The body society is impaired,” he said. “Nothing works anymore. Energy doesn’t work. The economy doesn’t work. We used to think we could fight inflation by tightening our belts. Now, no matter what you do, inflation gets worse. It is as if we are surrounded by a congenital disease. Society responds as if it were a dead body.”³

These comments apply not only to hospital-based contemporary plays, but equally well to the shape and movement of contemporary drama as a whole. Fiedler’s notion of such plays as a metaphor for abnormality in our age, Lifton’s vision of them as an apocalyptic metaphor for the

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threatened individual in post-World War II society, and Etzioni's concept of "the body society" as ill are all valuable commentaries on the cause of what must be reckoned with as the major mode of contemporary drama: a mode of serious plays relentlessly depicting characters at the edge of despair; characters lost in a situation of pain, anguish, and powerlessness; characters cornered, subjugated to the will of an overwhelming social setting.

This contemporary mode of drama is, as this book will show, by no means just this year's trend, and it is by no means simply a trend of exposing the pain, deformities, wounds, inertia, and drudgery of claustrophobic souls onstage. Rather, the success of such recent plays, which have won some commercial as well as artistic prestige—*Whose Life Is It Anyway?*, *The Elephant Man*, and *Wings* have all won major awards—indicates the commercial theater's and the public's recent, rather grudging acceptance of a mode of drama which, in fact, has been developing since the end of World War II. This new mode of drama reflects life in an age George Steiner has eerily called a "post-culture," shaken by the revelation that during World War II there was a "transference of Hell from below the earth to its surface."⁴

In an essay exploring how prison imagery is closely woven into the philosophical texture of Sartre's plays, "not as an illustration but as a metaphoric embodiment of a philosophical dilemma," Victor Brombert finds that Sartre's works "betray metaphorically an obsession with images of confinement, enclosure, and immurement. They communicate a sense of the walled-in quality of human consciousness and human existence. Bounded by external contingencies or by the imperatives of a dilemma, the Sartrean hero often appears inextricably jammed-in." Sartre himself writes, "Each situation is a trap, there are walls everywhere," in *Situations II*, cited by Brombert. Why does Sartre call for "a new dramaturgy of *situations*, which he conceives in fact as a theater of entrapment"?

Sartre asserts that the post-World War II generation has been "driven to create a literature of historicity." As Brom-

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bert sees it, "Sartre's generation had indeed learned that this was no longer a time to toy with aesthetic problems or to seek private salvation through art—that private salvation was no longer possible, that man was involved in a collective tragedy, and that the very meaning of traditional Humanism was being seriously challenged. The era of concentration camps (*l'ère concentrationnaire*, as it came to be called) reminded the writer that even imprisonment was no longer a private affair."

It should be argued that Sartre's concern with protagonists as "entrapped freedoms"—directly expressed in *No Exit*—is fundamental not only to the philosophical texture of post-World War II drama, but even more fundamental to the formal mode that has taken the contemporary stage. Nevertheless, one *could* argue that the action of plays of many periods is propelled by the yearning to escape. To extricate oneself, to liberate oneself, to get out—these are all serviceable "spines" for action in plays from Euripides' time to our own. But today's drama is harnessed to this spine in a way different from ever before. As Brombert suggests:

The theater, to be sure, lends itself to the prison image. The epic form—whether in the classical epic or in modern fiction—allows and even calls for movement in time and space. Tragedy, especially in the French tradition with its "unities," most often focuses on a crisis in which the protagonists have reached a seeming impasse. Racine's antechambers are not so different from Sartre's cell where characters are locked together in a death dance. And one could easily show that Greek tragedy is filled with images of restriction and confinement: the chains of Prometheus, the fatal webs and nets in *Agamemnon*, the meshes of fate and the trap of intellect in *Oedipus*. The modern stage, with its three walls—the fourth wall being the inexorable eye of the public—may be said to symbolize an issueless situation.

These are no doubt permanent features of the tragic

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theater. But in Sartre's plays, the prison motif is closely bound up with psychological obsessions as well as with philosophical themes.⁵

That final point is crucial to this study. For when Martin Esslin, in his excellent survey of drama since Beckett, dubs contemporary playwrights members of "the theater of the absurd," the emphasis is on the philosophical theme of existentialism; the focus is on the plight of characters condemned to Camus's desert of freedom, where man must first of all invent himself. The present study aims to go beyond the philosophical theme of enclosure by exploring the form and effect of contemporary plays. These plays objectify a psychological and social state of entrapment in a world that feels airless.

To understand more fully how special to our age is this sense of clausturation, this Sartrean dramaturgy of situations, it helps to compare the felt predicament of contemporary characters with the predicament faced by their immediate theatrical predecessors. For the world realized onstage in contemporary plays is highly distinct from the stage worlds of modern dramatists such as Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov. In plays by Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov, even if characters cannot escape from the emptiness they find at the heart of their lives—an emptiness which defies their longings for self-fulfillment and for the joy of life—such trapped characters can at least find symbolic referents for their condition in the world engulfing them. Even at a moment when action becomes impossible, Ibsen's Oswald can still cry out for the sun, Strindberg's dreamers can still express anguish through interior journeys and images of vampirism, and Chekhov's Nina can still identify her situation with that of a seagull.

But in the contemporary dramatic mode, in what I identify as plays of impasse, the world onstage has been emptied of consistent symbolic referents; symbols are autonomous; everyday activities and attempts to endure life in a parenthesis are vacated of traditional social or moral meaning.

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Contemporary plays of impasse tend to zero in on a claustrophobic, no-exit situation, and to explore with a camera's precision the nuances of everyday behavior by characters clinging to a hard life. They depict life with documentary exactness, and they turn that bitter life into a metaphor for the way things are. Plays of impasse tend to focus on the setting engulfing the individual, rather than on the individual himself, and they tend to find that setting reductive, at once diminishing and intensifying the experience of survival within bounds, against odds. The pain of this kind of survival, spatially fixed, demanding isolation and loss, is, for example, at the heart of Beckett's *Endgame*, an extreme instance of this mode of drama at the edge of existence—the tasks nearly finished, the bleak world on-stage nearly empty—when choice is limited to simple, small, yet risky moves. What remains is a burning ember of action, a pure image of life at the edge.

My concern, then, is the shape of plays of impasse: their form and their effect on a contemporary audience. This form is most pronounced in plays set in what sociologist Erving Goffman identified as "total institutions," by far the predominant contemporary stage setting. The correlation between the setting in a total institution, which becomes, in stage poetry, an overdetermined Structure, and the dynamic of impasse is the subject of this study.

TOTAL INSTITUTIONS

First, a definition. In his study of contemporary *Asylums*, Erving Goffman discovered that institutions established to pursue different goals share characteristics that govern interaction. First, Goffman groups total institutions according to their ostensible purpose in society:

First, there are institutions established to care for persons felt to be both incapable and harmless; these are the homes for the blind, the aged, the orphaned, and the indigent. Second, there are places established

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to care for persons felt to be both incapable of looking after themselves and a threat to the community, albeit an unintended one: TB sanatoria, mental hospitals, and leprosaria. A third type of total institution is organized to protect the community against what are felt to be intentional dangers to it, with the welfare of the persons thus sequestered not the immediate issue: jails, penitentiaries, P.O.W. camps, and concentration camps. Fourth, there are institutions purportedly established the better to pursue some worklike task and justifying themselves only on these instrumental grounds: army barracks, ships, boarding schools, work camps. . . . Finally, there are those establishments designed as retreats from the world even while often serving also as training stations for the religious; examples are abbeys, monasteries, convents, and other cloisters.

Once he points out these teleological distinctions, however, Goffman undermines their significance: he demonstrates that although total institutions differ in cause, their effect on inmates is essentially the same. All these subtly related establishments are finally “forcing houses for changing persons; each is a natural experiment on what can be done to the self.” The split between inmates and staff; the process of initiation, mortification, and subjugation of the self to the institution; the adherence to regimentation and routine; and the system of sanctions controlling inmate behavior—all these characteristics cluster together in a single configuration common to apparently unrelated institutional worlds. Hospitals and prison camps, for example, which are presumably worlds apart, are linked in Goffman’s overview as two total institutions, both of them concerned primarily with “the management of men.”⁶

Goffman defines the central feature common to all total institutions as a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating the sleep, work, and play spheres of human existence. He explains:

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First, all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority. Second, each phase of the member's daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together. Third, all phases of the day's activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials. Finally, the various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution.⁷

In the controlled environment of a total institution, then, inmates act out a script in which they are typecast. Yet even within the coercive conventions of model behavior, inmates may find space for existential improvisations: some may embrace their roles in the institutional system while others may establish an inner distance between self and role-playing. According to Goffman's model, inmates of total institutions follow the rules of a ritualistic game, planned and imposed on them by the hierarchy above.

This phenomenon of role-playing among inmates and staff in a total institution, further explored by Goffman in *Strategic Interaction* (1972), suggests the strong element of performance as a way of life in a total institution. Elsewhere, particularly in his seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), and in "Role Distance" (1961), *Interaction Ritual* (1967), and *Frame Analysis* (1974), works to which I will return throughout this study, Goffman has illuminated, with what commentators have dubbed Dickensian particularity, our behavior in social situations by means of a theatrical metaphor, the idiom of performance.

Various separate societies of role-players, then—whether aimed at cure, care, comfort, punishment, or protection—are linked in *Asylums* by their mutual modus operandi; their treatment of inmates, techniques, and effects are alike. Sim-

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ilarly, seemingly unrelated dramas—set in total institutions such as hospitals, insane asylums, prisons, or military training camps—may be linked by their treatment of ideas, their self-conscious theatricalism, and their effect as psychological and social metaphors.

STRUCTURES ONSTAGE AND THE NEW NATURALISM

Just as Goffman's concept of the total institution illuminates similarities overshadowed by obvious differences, so, too, the idea of contemporary plays of impasse links and clarifies seemingly dissimilar dramas which are actually all in the same mode. For the many contemporary plays which dwell both naturalistically and symbolically on our civilizations within civilizations, on the self governed by the Structure, are indeed all closely related in three ways: (1) the Structure depicted—an extremely naturalistic model of impingement; (2) the thematic metaphor—the world as it is, an overdetermined, ironically presented institution; and (3) the controlling image—impasse. Since the terms Structure and naturalism will be used throughout this book, I wish to present my definitions of them specifically at the outset.

Discussing The Living Theatre's production of *The Brig*, Judith Malina, the play's director, characterizes the set, the Structure depicted, as an overdetermined institution, a closed system:

The Brig is a structure. The precision of the description of this structure is the key to *The Brig*.

The Immovable Structure is the villain. Whether that structure calls itself a prison or a school or a factory or a family or a government or The World As It Is. That structure asks each man what he can do for it, not what it can do for him, and for those who do not do for it, there is the pain of death or imprisonment, or social degradation, or the loss of animal rights.

The men placed inside the structure are intended to become part of this structure, and the beauty and

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terror of *The Brig* is seeing how it succeeds and how it fails in incorporating those whom it has imprisoned into its own corporeal being. . . .

The Brig is a Constructivist play. The construction of the set dictates and directs the action by the power of its vectors and its centers of gravity. It was designed by the architects of ancient military prisons, Masonic craftsmen of dungeons and towers. From these fearsome structures the utility of minimal construction and maximum security is in direct descent.⁸

Here, the staged institution becomes a sort of cage. According to Goffman, the "total" nature of society's institutions is "symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests, or moors."⁹ Some plays, like the barbed-wire-enclosed *Brig*, now incorporate such concrete barriers into their designs, as if to keep the actors in and the audience out by means of a physical reminder of the limits of characters' mobility, the limits of play.

For the more documentary-like plays, then, the Structure may furnish its own boundary. The barbed wire between the audience and the action of *The Brig*, for example, objectively quarantines the Structure most emphatically. In other plays, such as Weiss's *Marat/Sade*, Storey's *Home*, or Kopit's *Wings*, the boundary is blurred. And elsewhere, as in Nichols's *The National Health* or Arden's *The Happy Haven*, the fourth wall is broken by means of direct address to the audience, treating us as visitors, observers at an institution. Some plays of impasse finally lurch beyond the frame of performance into an actual presentation, as in the pass-out parade at the end of Arnold Wesker's *Chips With Everything*. Always, the power of the setting—of the institutional Structure—to engulf *and* to exclude at will is central. People become stage properties, reacting to a situation, to an encompassing environment, instead of initiating action themselves. The pervasive set emerges as protagonist. So I am

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using Structure as a specific term, not as a synonym for form, edifice, space, or institution, but as Malina defines it, a massive, de-energizing social model.

Within the overwhelming Structure emerges the thematic metaphor of the world as it is, an extremely naturalistic model of impingement. The individual character is subjugated to his setting in these plays: no longer certain of his rights and choices, no longer secure in his judgments, no longer trusting his state, the contemporary player is wary of the setting which surrounds him. Structures such as hospitals, insane asylums, prisons, and barracks train inmates to survive in an imposing world like our own. But they also segregate their inmates in secret societies from which we are normally excluded. Again, *The Brig*, far from the best, but probably the clearest instance of the mode I am describing, illuminates the second characteristic of plays of impasse. The Structure of *The Brig*, its meticulously detailed, accurately rendered set, is meant to serve, writes Julian Beck, "in the scrutiny of actuality." Beck goes on:

"Poetry of the theatre," says Cocteau, not meaning meter; the phrase turned on the line, that kind of thing, but something else, which in the work of Brown . . . emerges as the distillation, extraction, representation of exact words and action of life as it is lived, honest, uncompromisingly honest, and by being life itself and not sham is some kind of poetry . . .

A resurgence of realism was needed: what had been passing for realism was not real.¹⁰

Throughout this study we will come across plays that go beyond Zola's principles of *Le Naturalism au théâtre* (1882) in their rigorous demand for clinical reconstructions, documentary accuracy, photographic images of social institutions transplanted to the stage. This is a self-conscious naturalism, reflecting on its purity of style, calling attention to its detailed setting, its sense of the minutiae of daily life, its episodic form.

Like George Segal's uncanny sculptures of public places—

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gas stations, subway cars, diners, butcher shops—inhabited by white plaster specters of humankind, these plays transcend the tradition of naturalism by making the convention of naturalism part of the subject of drama. Play after play presents naturalistically an irremediable state of being. In hospital-set plays, we see gleaming models of medical endgames; in asylum-set plays, we see elaborate measures taken to mask the divided self; in prison-set plays, we see the most direct and natural expression of lost freedom on a cul-de-sac stage; and in military-set plays, we see how machine-like man himself can become when he loses himself to the rigor and beauty of the Structure. And always, there is the sense of character as a ghost stalking these plays, like those pale plaster shadows haunting George Segal's petrified worlds.

In his essay "Notes on Naturalism: Truth is Stranger as Fiction," Stanley Kauffmann posits a "new naturalism," a term to which I will return in the discussion of David Storey's *Home*. Kauffmann recalls Jonathan Marks's apt analogy for the style of Storey's plays. This analogy suits not only Storey's plays, but many plays of impasse in general. "The Disney Studios have artists who do foregrounds—the story elements—and artists who do backgrounds. It is as if the foreground men had little to do in *The Contractor* and weren't used at all for *The Changing Room*," he writes. Now that "the Disney story men have gone home, naturalism becomes perforce as sheerly aesthetic a mode as any that would have pleased Pater or Wilde." Kauffmann now goes on to clarify the self-consciousness, the transparency, of the "new naturalism." He writes:

The pleasure in watching *The Changing Room* was a pleasure in abstraction, not in reproduction; in stylistic exercise, not in any of the historical "scientific" aims of naturalism. And thus that pleasure, rather than being dusty with century-old courage, became ultra-contemporary and free: The creation of a para-world that merely resembles, more than is usual in the theater,

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the world outside but whose purpose is to reward by *not* being the world outside, by being created by artists within its own perimeters. A valid comparison is with ballet. One might enjoy a ballet of a locker room, which could not possibly be “real,” as one watched the physical arcs and motifs meet the exigencies of pattern and musicality. The “reality” here is simply a different mode, and one enjoys watching the physical and verbal arcs and motifs meet the demands of theatrically projected verism.

The New Naturalism, new because of the changed context, has long been an accepted mode in the contemporary graphic arts—in the sculpture of Kienholz and Segal, for example. Their work has at least two effects: Their painstaking, minute reproduction of reality becomes, by their act of reproduction, an abstraction from reality; and the quality of their particular vision is an avenue to fresh speculation on that hardy perennial: What is Beauty?¹¹

Like the total institutions many of them depict onstage, plays in the new mode also seek to envelop and change an initiated audience. The controlling image is impasse. Some of our best plays—plays that stimulate, shock, strip our senses bare with the beauty and brutality of a Structure—focus most powerfully on the image of stasis, on the stripping away of meaning until only Artaud’s poetics of cruelty are left. The minimal spines of escape, the “at least” of social institutions from the point of view of characters—in a hospital, *at least* you can get out by dying; in an asylum, *at least* you can free your imagination; in a prison, *at least* you can exert power over others; in the military, *at least* you can conform to an ideal—are all shattered in plays of impasse. Playwrights sabotage these “at least” spines, leaving characters caught in an inescapable closed system. What remains, I have said, is a burning ember of action. This recurring image of impasse gives us, in plays like *Marat/Sade*, a visceral sense of what Artaud means when he writes

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that "everything that acts is a cruelty," and that the stage demands a "concrete physical language" to express thoughts "beyond the reach of the spoken language," to express "*metaphysics-in-action*."¹²

PINTER'S *The Hothouse*

The point of this approach to plays of impasse is to transcend the kind of categorization popular so far in the study of contemporary drama, the tendency to lump together plays because of their shared philosophical basis, instead of identifying and illuminating their formal similarities. Plays set in total institutions give us a solid, indicative base from which to generalize about the model of contemporary drama. For nowhere is this mode more vividly apparent than in plays set in total institutions. The final entrapment depicted in these settings—a development which conflicts with all our expectations and notions of what dramatic action is supposed to be like—is always at once startling and inevitable, a snapshot of the way things are, a searing image and a relic, a broken souvenir of the living and the dead. As Susan Sontag writes in her essays *On Photography*, photographic images "are indeed able to usurp reality because first of all a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask."¹³

The 1980 London theater season unveiled many new plays of impasse, haunting images with an eerie texture imprinted from reality. Notable among these plays were Ronald Harwood's *The Dresser*, set backstage at a provincial theater in the dressing room of a fading, flamboyant actor/manager, and Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, set in a *commedia dell'arte*, diabolical police station. Most notable, however, was the surfacing of one older play of impasse, Pinter's *The Hothouse*.

The Hothouse is of special interest here because it exposes the bare bones of Pinter's masterworks. It is a naked, rather

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obvious play of impasse in which the shape of Pinter's drama is directly expressed. In fact, after seeing this play, an uproariously funny send-up of an institution where methodical depersonalization and torture happen every day, we can understand why the playwright's first impulse was to stash this one away in a drawer. As Pinter has said,

Wrote the whole damn thing in three drafts. It was called *The Hothouse* and was about an institution in which patients were kept: all that was presented was the hierarchy, the people who ran the institution; one never knew what happened to the patients or what they were there for or who they were. It was heavily satirical and it was quite useless. I never began to like any of the characters, they really didn't live at all. So I discarded the play at once. The characters were so purely cardboard. I was intentionally—for the only time, I think—trying to make a point, an explicit point, that these were nasty people and I disapproved of them. And therefore they didn't begin to live.¹⁴

Although Pinter is being his own harshest critic here, he is quite right in saying he was trying “for the only time” in his career as a playwright “to make a point, an explicit point.” For *The Hothouse* is a sketchy, heavy-handed version of Pinter's more subtle, fleshed-out plays of closed circuits, empty phrases, institutional jargon, hopelessly gummed-up works, and seductions by a forceful idea of a woman. Here, in an insane asylum so bizarre that it might very well be where *The Cocktail Party*'s poor Celia was sent, Pinter plays with the idea of inmates massacring a complacent staff at Christmas time. Roote and Gibbs, administrators with a tension between them as thick as that between Lenny and Teddy in *The Homecoming*, talk about “taking the piss” out of each other,¹⁵ a pastime many of Pinter's characters happily engage in for hours on end. Language is used as a cutting weapon here (“I mean, not only are you a scientist, but you have literary ability, musical ability, knowledge of most schools of philosophy, philology, photography, an-

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thropology, cosmology, theology, phytology, phytonomy, phytotomy—” says Lush; “Oh, no, no, not phytotomy,” Roote answers [p. 88]). A volunteer employee, the eager Lamb, undergoes an interview and torture in a soundproof booth. His interrogation is a less resonant double of Stanley’s word-whipping in *The Birthday Party*. Here the interrogator is the luscious Miss Cutts:

CUTTS. Are you virgo intacta?

LAMB. Yes, I am, actually. I’ll make no secret of it.

CUTTS. Have you always been virgo intacta?

LAMB. Oh yes, always. Always.

CUTTS. From the word go?

LAMB. Go? Oh yes. From the word go.

GIBBS. What is the law of the Wolf Cub Pack? . . .

(pp. 73–74)

There is a parodic version of the kind of remembered love that vivifies the shadows of *No Man’s Land*, *Landscape*, and *Silence*:

Do you remember the first time we met? On the beach? In the night? All those people? And the bonfire? And the waves? And the spray? And the mist? And the moon? Everyone dancing, somersaulting, laughing? And you—standing silent, staring at a sandcastle in your sheer white trunks. The moon was behind you, in front of you, all over you, suffusing you, consuming you, you were transparent, translucent, a beacon. I was struck dumb, dumbstruck. . . . (p. 143)

And there is a mystery about who has died, and who has fathered a patient’s newborn babe, the kinds of questions Pinter’s characters never seem to know the answers to.

Most important, *The Hothouse* is quite clearly about the breakdown of a malevolent order, and the renewing of that order after the mess has been cleaned up. Like Arden’s *The Happy Haven*, *The Hothouse* is ostensibly about a sanatorium where a dead patient’s mother may be asked deadpan:

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Didn't you come down for Mother's Day, or Thanksgiving Day, or for the annual summer picnic for patients, staff, relatives and friends? Weren't you invited to the Halloween Feast, the May Dance, the October Revival, the Old Boys and Girls supper and social? Dancing on the lawn, cold buffets on the flat roof, midnight croquet, barbecued boar by the lake? None of this? . . . (p. 56)

But at bottom, the form of Pinter's less skeletal metaphysical farces and the redundant movements of his more searching plays of memory, desire, and conquest, going round and round without end, may be discerned in *The Hothouse*. Two moments stand out in particular: at one point, a woman languidly lies in an armchair, tossing a ping-pong ball in the air, while offstage a sigh, a keen, and then a laugh are heard; at another point, two men stand frozen with knives raised (pp. 117, 135). Such are the shapes of impasse that characterize Pinter's masterworks—silhouettes of inquietude and sexual energy contained—present even in this sketchy play, set by no less than Pinter in a zany, merciless total institution.

PLAYWRIGHTS' STYLISTIC APPROACHES TO IMPASSE

The dominant image of contemporary drama seems to me to be impasse, and the dominant way of expressing this core of meaning, at once naturalistically and symbolically, is the total institution. Plays set in hospitals, insane asylums, prisons, and the military turn up with an uncanny frequency. The plays I have chosen to explicate—to consider their effect on their audiences as they move from photographic immersions in an institution towards an image of a state of social and spiritual impasse—are the ones that strike me as the clearest examples of the contemporary mode.

Within the contemporary mode, three distinct stylistic emphases emerge:

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1. Plays that strive for objectivity, moving forward linearly, but subordinating plot to a depiction of a total institution with naturalistic, almost documentary accuracy as a kinetic *objet trouvé*;

2. Satiric, parodic treatments of total institutions, using these settings as entertaining and often grimly funny vehicles for social commentary and for a play of ideas; and

3. Imagistic, reductive, interior plays that suggest the total institution as they focus on the individual lost in a world he did not make and cannot control.

Each chapter in this study is devoted to plays set in a single total institution, examining three plays typical of the stylistic approaches to a Structure of impasse. In each chapter, then, one of the plays chosen is primarily photographic, exterior in its bias; the second play clearly expresses a satirical point of view, a commentary on the Structure as a metaphor for society gone haywire; and the third play is subdued, tending towards lyricism, indicating by means of props, sounds, and spaces an inner isolation, a personal stalemate within the larger, implied Structure.

In each chapter, the plays chosen in each of the three styles complement each other as powerful instances of the contemporary mode set in total institutions. Let me indicate how by enumerating styles here as above:

- Hospitals: 1. Peter Nichols's *The National Health (or Nurse Norton's Affair)*
2. John Arden's *The Happy Haven*
3. Arthur Kopit's *Wings*
- Insane Asylums: 1. Peter Weiss's *Marat / Sade*
2. Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Physicists*
3. David Storey's *Home*