



No Man's Land

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Do Hirst and Spooner really know each other, or are they performing an elaborate charade? The ambiguity - and the comedy - intensify with the arrival of Briggs and Foster. All four inhabit a no-man's-land between time present and time remembered, between reality and imagination.

No Man's Land Details

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Manny says

[A claustrophobically enclosed room. HIRST, SPOONER, FOSTER, BRIGGS]

HIRST: Well?

SPOONER: Oh, quite, quite, don't mind if I do.

[He ambles towards the open bottle of scotch on the buffet, but finds FOSTER in his way]

FOSTER: That's not what the boss means.

[BRIGGS nods, but HIRST shakes his head disapprovingly]

HIRST: I'm sorry Spooner. No way to treat a friend. We would never have tolerated this behaviour at Oxford, would we old chap? *[He has taken the bottle himself and poured out a couple of glasses]* There you go. Now get on with it.

SPOONER: Get on with it?

HIRST: Interpret the play! Show us your learning, your breadth of culture, your eloquence, your insight and understanding! Dazzle us with your verbal pyrotechnics and metaphysical conjuring tricks! *[He pauses to swallow a good half of his drink]* Or not.

BRIGGS: As the case may be. Depending on your mood.

FOSTER: And your capabilities.

HIRST: Exactly.

SPOONER: Well... er... *[he takes a sip from his glass]* evidently, er, evidently one is reminded of Sartre. Huis clos. L'enfer, c'est les autres. Hell... *[he takes another sip]* is other people.

BRIGGS: But that depends, don't it?

FOSTER: On whether other people are hell.

[He and BRIGGS move menacingly towards SPOONER, but HIRST stays them with a wave of his hand]

HIRST: Gentleman, please. I am sure our guest's reflections were generic and philosophical rather than coarsely personal. Continue.

SPOONER: And, er, needless to say one is impressed by Pinter's skill as a writer. One might say overwhelmed even. Watching him standing nonchalantly in front of the wicket, thwacking every ball towards the boundary, you're happy if you even manage to field a couple of them.

HIRST: Well done sir, well done!

SPOONER: In fact, the whole play is about language.

FOSTER: *[sarcastically]* Oh yeah, right. Missed that.

SPOONER: *[starting to hit his stride]* But of course it is! From a deconstructionist viewpoint, from the angle of *archi-écriture*, we can see how more often than not the characters do not use language, but are used by it. Submerged in a dense web of habit and allusion, their lines make local sense but are globally meaningless. In this way, Pinter suggests--

FOSTER: I don't like "submerged in a web". It's a, wotsit--

HIRST: Mixed metaphor.

BRIGGS: That's it. The cricket's fine, yer know, thematic like. But this--

HIRST: A good point, Foster, but we must let our guest conclude.

SPOONER: Thank you. *[He gulps down the rest of his drink and dashes on]* And finally, from the standpoint of feminism and post-colonialism, doesn't the play at every moment underline the centrality of the relationship between violence and language? In the exchanges, suffused with unstated but tangible menace and carried out in a Saussurian no man's land where all normative links between signifier and signified have been cut, we see how the parameters of communication, the semantic framework itself, are determined by hegemonic rather than linguistic structures.

[A long pause]

HIRST: And?

SPOONER: And... and nothing. That's it. I'm finished.

HIRST: *[to BRIGGS and FOSTER]* So what did you make of that, boys?

BRIGGS: Bollocks.

FOSTER: Complete fucking bollocks.

HIRST: I'm afraid I must agree with you. I have never heard such cunt-faced lunacy in my life.

[He gets slowly to his feet. As HIRST, FOSTER and BRIGGS advance on SPOONER, the lights abruptly go out, leaving the stage in pitch blackness]

CURTAIN

Marie Engfors says

Two men drink and talk bs. Two more men enter. Nothing happens, except they drink more. I don't get it. Sorry, Mr. Pinter, you're not my cup of tea.

Angela says

I'm going to the theatre to see the marvellous Sir Ian McKellen and Sir Patrick Stewart perform this play, and thought I should actually read it before I see it so I have an idea what it's about.

This is a very funny play - excellent word-play and comedic stance, which I find very typical of Pinter generally. It's also very poignant about depression and hints to past horrors that all characters have witnessed or partook in.

An excellent play and I can't wait to see it performed, even if I can't figure out which character Stewart and McKellen will be portraying.

Bookdragon Sean says

Talk about dream casting:

I saw a live screening of this last night at the theatre I work at. Yes, I work at a theatre. I get paid to watch shows. I'm supposed to be keeping an eye on the audience to make sure they behave themselves. They almost always do, so I can sit back and enjoy the performance. It's not a very hard job.

I read this play a number of years ago now, and all it did was bewilder me. I had no idea what was going on. Well, I had some ideas, but it's one of those plays where there is no definitive interpretation: its left open for the audience to try and decipher what is going on. Watching a performance of it did help things. I can make a few guesses as to what I think this play is about, but that could be just this particular version's interpretation of certain events. They could have leaned on certain aspects and presented them slightly differently.

So here's what we know: two old men return from a pub. They've just met each other for the first time. They have a few drinks and spend some time getting to know each other. They have a similar past, they're both poets and both of their wives have left them at some point in their lives. Hirst (Sir Patrick Stewart's character) has an emotional breakdown as Spooner breaks through the surface of his cold shell. They still act like they don't know each other. They go to bed, Spooner is locked on the stage (front room) for the night and darkness ensures.

The next day Hirst greets Spooner like he is an old friend; he recollects this man from his past and begins to reveal secret affairs he was involved in under his friend's nose. So why the sudden shift? There are a few ways to take this. Either the characters were pretending- playing a little dance with one and another- or Hirst is mentally ill. There are suggests of early on-set dementia in his dialogue. The set used in this version reminded me of a prison or a closed-in mind where the walls are slowly coming in. The characters are trapped here for their own reasons.

“You are in no man's land. Which never moves, which never changes, which never grows older, but remains forever, icy and silent.”

Hirst has some incredible lines; lines that make you question the reality of this play. At one point I considered that the entire thing may be a fabrication of his consciousness. None of these people are here, only he sits in this room working out his daemons. The characters are people from his past, people he once met, people he could have once been and people he wants to reconcile with. It's hard to decipher. But I think this reading does have some faults and merits. Then there are the war associations, the nuclear disarmament badge that Spooner wears and the frequent reference to what the characters were doing during the war. How does this tie in with the title? The true remarkability of this play is that is there so much more to it than it initially appears. I want to watch it again, and read it again to see if I can read between the lines and figure it all out. I don't think I'll be able to though!

TK421 says

3.5, really. I should think this was a solid 4 stars if I understood it more. As is, I loved the word play and trickery and the way the characters sympathized yet antagonized each other in a playful but malicious manner. Ultimately, it reminded me of when my siblings and I meet for the holidays. While we all "know" each other because of the common denominator of all coming from the same womb, none of us truly know who each other are. Perhaps that is the point of this play. What is it exactly that we know of another person?

RECOMMENDED

Dioni (Bookie Mee) says

Reading this for the play starring Sir Ian McKellen and Sir Patrick Stewart in London. I don't think much of the script itself, but perhaps the performance will change that. I imagine Ian McKellen as Spooner, the homeless, and Patrick Stewart as Hirst, the wealthy one.

Lucile Barker says

45. No Man's Land by Harold Pinter

I was terribly disappointed in this after the great screenplay he did for the French Lieutenant's Woman. This four male character play is not very engaging unless you are fond of trying to carry on a conversation in a dementia ward. Maybe it had something going for it when it was released in 1974 or maybe I expect too much (e.g., plot, action, interesting characters), none of which were evident in the script. Two old geezers, who may or may not know each, drink through a night, and reconnect in the morning, talking about their earlier lives and not very interesting regrets. They are accompanied by their servants, who might as well be keepers. There was a recent revival of the play in Britain, starring Ian MacKellan and Patrick Stewart, but I don't think that even they could rescue the torpid script. It is said that this play explores the limbo between life and death and reading it was purgatory. This one should be no reader's land.

Alex says

There's a poignant core to this play that has to do with how a variety of factors such as the loss of love, the waning of talent, the decline of reason, the sponging of unethical folks (Foster and Briggs), conspire to age us into an irrelevant limbo.

I just saw the recent Patrick Stewart/Ian McKellan broadcast of the play, and as enjoyable as it was to watch those two actors, I think the production revealed the challenging nature of the work as a performance piece. Unless a few choice moments are given emotional emphasis at the end of the play, the whole thing feels like a flat intellectual exercise. I think the opportunity for a powerful ending is there, but this might be the truth of most of Pinter's work: that it plays best on the page, where one's imagination is free to provide the narrative and the emotional climax.

Sandra says

Read this now in anticipation of the McKellan/Stewart production which we have just got tickets for. Found it very funny at the beginning; it gets wonderfully strange - just as things start to fall into place there is a shift. Off to read more Pinter!

Emma G says

I gave this five stars because I'm such a fan of the way Pinter writes - even if I haven't really got a clue what he's going on about.

At first I started thinking it was some kind of post-traumatic stress thing happening, then I remembered who I was reading and thought more likely it was just some elaborate ploy that all the characters are involved in. Still, who knows?

Anyway, I really enjoyed the writing and the characters, and can't wait to see it come to life when I watch it performed on Broadway next week :D

Jeff says

This play is the perfect example of why it is important to approach a Pinter less as a work of drama and more as a piece of poetry. The power of it is in the rhythms, the images, the shifts in mood, and recalibrations of power between the characters. This is not to say, of course, that there isn't a story being told here, but just that to expect concrete plot points and definitive answers to questions is the wrong lens through which to read this.

Petra Eggs says

No Man's Land is by turns mysterious, poetic, funny and alienating, but mostly it is just mysterious. Pinter's plays do tend to be somewhat open to interpretation, but this one in particular strikes me as gratuitously enigmatic, impenetrable even.

A man, Spooner, an odd-job man and poet, is just someone from the pub who may or may not have known the central character, Hirst, at university, may or may not have had lovers in common or may just be a total stranger. Possibly Hirst, a writer of fame and glory, in his extreme inebrity, just mistook him for someone he once knew, with Spooner playing up to that. What Spooner certainly does is attempt to shake up the placid and unthinking stagnation of Hirst's luxurious life in leafy, expensive and unchanging Hampstead, where Hirst who no longer writes, but waits for death, forever drunk, forever indulged.

Hirst's two manservants, Foster and Briggs might be lovers or might be sleazy accomplices in keeping Hirst drunk and incapable whilst they do whatever it is they do without his knowledge. One is charming, one is a thug, does this have any bearing on anything or are they just (un)consciously the 'light' relief?

Is this about memory, or truth, or the battle for power, or how money is a cushion against existential crises such as nowhere to live, no money for food, or another bottle of whisky? Or is it about how no matter what changes, nothing changes, we are all alone in a no-man's land which 'remains forever, icy and silent'?

Rewritten Feb 11th 2017

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Matt says

After reading this play three times in the last 24 hours, I'm convinced that it is one of the great modern feats of language. It's at once an absurdist comedy and a surreal drama, though neither of those definitions do justice to the play whatsoever. It's just so weird, so funny, so profound and beautifully poetic. There are numerous memorable lines that are both hilarious and insightful. This is a comedic and linguistic masterpiece.

Nick Jones says

I've been reading Harold Pinter over the past two or three months, filling in gaps, getting a clearer sense of his development. I hadn't previously read No Man's Land, although I did go to a production a few years

back. *No Man's Land* moves forward from *Old Times*, but also looks back to earlier work, notably *The Birthday Party*. I find it less successful when it looks back. The duo Foster and Briggs bring to mind Goldberg and McCann from *The Birthday Party* and, at one point, they threaten malevolence in the way the earlier characters did. In the end their function is not the same...or perhaps they are just watered down versions of Goldberg and McCann: threatening but not powerful enough to be malevolent. More successful are the other two, dominant, characters, Hirst and Spooner. And here *No Man's Land*'s concerns are those of Pinter's previous full length play, *Old Times*. A chance meeting (that occurs before the play begins) brings the two men together. Both in their sixties, Hirst is a successful writer, Spooner claims to be a poet, but one who has seen better days. Spooner talks of his past, but it is difficult (or impossible) to know what is genuine and what is fantasy. We can't be sure if they have known each other in the past: at first the evidence is that they haven't, but then Hirst shares memories of times together (and Hirst admits to having an affair with Spooner's wife) – this seems to be fantasy or mistaken identity on Hirst's part, but Spooner happily presumes a shared past. This uncertainty of memory is, of course, created through an uncertainty of language, the playful slippage of Pinter's dialogue. As always with Pinter, the result is puzzling: narrative cannot be fixed – and, to a certain extent, character is also evasive. I suppose this can be regarded as infuriating, but I prefer to think of it as disquieting and provocative.
