

DEATH OF HAROLD PINTER

2008: Harold Pinter is unique amongst contemporary dramatists. His works have had a profound influence on fellow playwrights throughout the Western world and his incomparable and highly charged plays are held up as masterpieces of the 20th Century. In addition, he has received more and greater honours than any other living playwright: a CBE at 36, he was made a Companion of Honour in 2002 and, in 2005, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

He began as a rep actor, playing such roles as murderers, policemen, and parts like Iago, John Worthing, Mr Rochester, Maxim de Winter in "Rebecca" and even Lancelot Spratt in the comedy "Doctor in the House". From this background sprang an amazing talent.

As a playwright, poet, actor, director, and screenwriter he was the most original, stylish and enigmatic writer in post-war British theatre. His major works, "The Caretaker" (1960), "The Homecoming" (1965) and "No Man's Land" (1975), created a new atmosphere and tension in theatre writing by withholding information about characters and motives, something which up to then had been thought essential to the audience's enjoyment of a play.

His works were usually set within the claustrophobic confines of one room, seedy in his earlier work but increasingly elegant later. They dealt with confrontation between a variety of people, from vagrants and prostitutes to middle-class married couples and self-proclaimed poets. They were usually set in circumstances of underlying menace or violence and always phrased in language that was precise, elegant and often very funny.

In 1975 his personal life received much publicity when he left his wife, Vivien Merchant, to live with Lady Antonia Fraser, who, at the time was married to the Conservative MP, Sir Hugh Fraser. Vivien Merchant, who spiralled into depression and alcoholism, continued to fuel press interest and attempted to humiliate the couple by refusing to sign the papers for a decree absolute. She died two years after their divorce in 1980. The negative publicity and his marriage to Lady Antonia began a new period in Pinter's writing, which became increasingly vociferous, emphasising his political beliefs, his strong anti-Americanism, and left-wing activism. He became more and more volatile when questioned on his political beliefs and quickly developed a reputation for irascibility. However, none of this affected the great admiration and influence of his works. He will clearly be remembered as one of the most influential, and possibly greatest playwrights of the 20th Century. He died on Christmas Eve at the age of 78.

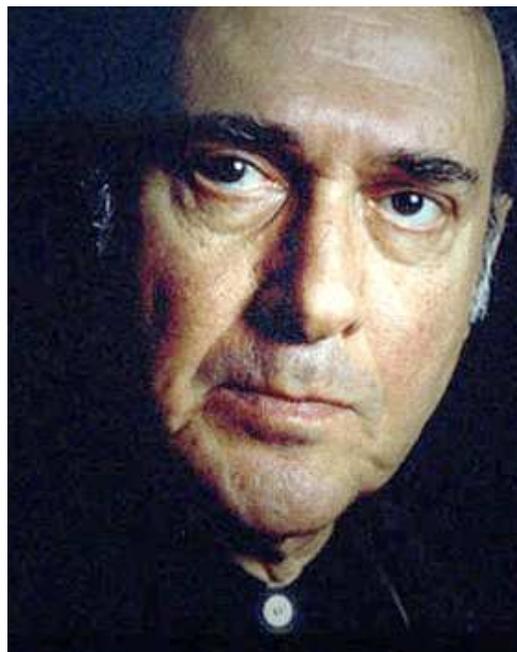


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An actor for all seasons

2008: In 1955 he played Hamlet in Moscow, as part of the first British company to visit the USSR since the Revolution. At Stratford-on-Avon and the Aldwych (1962/3) he played King Lear in Peter Brook's legendary production for the RSC, and gave what is generally agreed to be the greatest performance of Lear in the 20th century.

In 1966 he won an Oscar for his Sir Thomas More in "A Man for All Seasons". In 1979 his Salieri in the stage version of "Amadeus" was so brilliant that it was a shock when he was not offered the same role in the film version. And even as late as



1996 he was being acclaimed for his John Gabriel Borkman at the National.

Paul Scofield, one of the towering actors of the age has died at the age of 86. It is believed that he turned down the offer of a knighthood, but he did accept a CBE in 1956 and in 2001 was created a Companion of Honour.

Frankly, dear Trevor, the critics don't give a damn

2008: Sir Trevor Nunn's ability to turn long, classic novels into theatrical hits was proven with the RSC's "Nicholas Nickleby" (1980) and "Les Misérables" (1985 and still running). So it seemed he stood a good chance with his new production of Margaret Mitchell's American Civil War novel "Gone With the Wind" at the New London.

Three hours and 40 minutes after the curtain-up, the critics were unanimously damning. Much criticism was aimed at Margaret Martin, described as a "Californian health worker" responsible for book, music and lyrics, but Sir Trevor himself was criticised for failing to decide whether he was directing a musical, an epic history, or a Brechtian type play with songs. The last attempt at a musical "Gone with the Wind" was a 1972 flop at Drury Lane, but had many redeeming features and is fondly remembered by older theatregoers. The present one lasted 79 performances and is better forgotten as soon as possible, according to one newspaper.

Hamlet without the Prince

2008: David Tennant, the latest Dr Who in the TV classic, was an outstanding Hamlet in Stratford on Avon this autumn. The play transferred to London's Novello Theatre in December for a limited six-week sold-out run. Sadly David Tennant suffered a prolapsed disc during previews and was unable to perform for the first five weeks, during which time the role was played by his understudy Edward Bennett. David Tennant returned to his role on 3 January 2009, and appeared until the run ended on 10 January.