

Harold Pinter: Theater's angry old man

At the Prize of Europe, the playwright is all politics

By Porter Anderson



TORINO, Italy (CNN) -- Two weeks to the night after the Olympic flame was extinguished in this Italian Alpine city, something as good as gold was conferred on a long-proved mental athlete.

Harold Pinter -- one of a handful of English-language writers whose work has powerfully affected two generations of European and North American theater -- was onstage Sunday in the ornate 300-year-old Teatro Carignano to receive the 10th Premio Europa per il Teatro, or Prize of Europe in Theater. Buoyed by a standing ovation from the Premio jury and the packed theater audience of artists, critics and politicians, Pinter made his way to center stage using a now-indispensable blond-wood cane. At 75, he strikes a notably erect figure, favoring a classic black-on-black wardrobe. His face is constantly animated by thought. Ideas seize him. Pinter loves to express himself. But if anyone thought this London-born son of a dressmaker would rhapsodize on the career that began in 1948 with his arrival at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, they were surprised. The task of Europe, he told the assembly, "is to resist the power of the United States" -- a political and cultural force so virulent, Pinter said, that it may "destroy" Europe. Speaking in short phrases and breathing with some difficulty after a protracted period of ill health, the prizewinner was on stage for only a few minutes. Assisted in walking by Torino Teatro Stabile translator Alessandra Serra, the man of the hour distilled the past decade of his work down to these few, quick, vehement comments. He was clearly touched by the honor of the Premio Europa but focused on what the prize's rationale describes as his "moral rage against injustice." Less than five minutes after his name had brought the gilt-and-crimson house to its feet, the writer of plays from 1957's "The Room" to 2000's "Celebration" was making his exit -- leaving the several Americans on hand acutely discomfited, and even some of his European colleagues admitting to feeling the sting of his fury. Members of the International Association of Theatre Critics, gathered by their president, Ian Herbert, in Torino to hold a world congress in association with the prize ceremony for Pinter, spoke passionately afterward. Their accents from South Korea, Russia, France, Finland, Greece, the Netherlands, Turkey and many other languages wove a verbal tapestry of questions. At a reception in one of Torino's many opulent Savoy-era palaces, under the sheen of chandeliers and the glazed surveillance of Baroque figurines, the issues were laid out:

- How had a half-century career of such profound influence in theater and literature been compacted to so stony a political message as Pinter's?
- Does a person of Pinter's genius do himself any favors by attaching his late-life persona to such blistering commentary?
- And can such strident activism hit its mark? Or is something nearer the subtlety of his famed dialogue a more effective vehicle?

The road to Torino

Harold Pinter is to late-20th-century British theater what Tennessee Williams is to mid-century American stages.

Plays including "The Birthday Party" (1957), "The Dumb Waiter" (1957), "The Caretaker" (1959), "The Homecoming" (1964), "Old Times" (1970), "No Man's Land" (1974) and "Betrayal" (1978) caught a linguistic rhythm -- the legendary "Pinter pause" -- and an air of social unease that resonated throughout the English-speaking world and in myriad translations.

He was married first to the actress Vivien Merchant (the first, chilling Ruth in "The Homecoming"). Following a 1980 divorce, Pinter married writer-historian Lady Antonia Fraser.

Across both relationships, Pinter has captured what the Swedish Academy described in December when awarding him the 2005 Nobel Prize in literature as a "comedy of menace" with "domination and submission hidden in the most mundane of conversations." What's generally meant as a "Pinter play" in the purest sense usually revolves around one or more characters who are imposing on themselves a constricted, even deprived existence in order to hold off a presumed but uncertain threat. This is the provenance of one of the most haunting lines in Pinter's entire canon, the moment in which Anna, one of a possible romantic triangle of characters in "Old Times," says calmly, "There are things I remember which may never have happened but as I recall them so they take place."

By the mid-1980s, Pinter's political interests pervaded his work, particularly in concerns about state torture ("One for the Road," 1984; "Mountain Language," 1988; and "The New World Order," 1991). In Torino, French director Roger Planchon staged a 90-minute collection of short, pointed plays from Pinter's latest work, culminating in the ruling-class sneer of "Party Time" (1991). And in "Art, Truth & Politics," a lecture Pinter created for his receipt of the Nobel, the man's terms finally were clear and harrowing, both for the United States and for his own British government. The United States, Pinter wrote in that lecture, is "brutal, indifferent, scornful and ruthless." It "no longer sees any point in being reticent or even devious. It puts its cards on the table without fear or favor. It quite simply doesn't give a damn about the United Nations, international law or critical dissent, which it regards as impotent and irrelevant. It also has its own bleating little lamb tagging behind it on a lead, the pathetic and supine Great Britain." "How many people do you have to kill before you qualify to be described as a mass murderer and a war criminal?" he asked in his text. "One hundred thousand? More than enough, I would have thought. Therefore it is just that Bush and Blair be arraigned before the International Criminal Court of Justice."

Leavening and leverage

Two days before Sunday's Premio Europa gala, a quieter and sometimes intensely funny Pinter spoke a more forgiving -- but never less urgent -- message. Not up to the many interviews media members had requested, he consented to the request of the prize's faithful secretary-general, Alessandro Martinez, and sat onstage at the Carignano, for an interview with Michael Billington of London's Guardian newspaper. "I really would like to make a distinction," Pinter said then. "There really are many Americans who are as disgusted as I am" with U.S. foreign policy. He cited messages from Americans thanking him for his Nobel Prize commentary. In the sort of "gruesomely funny" (his term) anecdote this man clearly enjoys, Pinter answered a question about whether awards help sustain him in times of infirmity, with the story of how he fell last autumn in Dublin, Ireland. Cracking his head on some pavement, he was hospitalized, then transported back to London. "Two days later, I woke up to find that I'd been given the Nobel Prize in literature. So life is really full of ups and downs, you see." Hospitalized again in December with a serious skin disorder and difficulty breathing, he was unable to be in Stockholm, Sweden, to receive the Nobel. "But I didn't die, the doctors got me through it, and here I am," he said, evidently delighted to be able to receive the Premio Europa in person.



Actor Jeremy Irons reads from Pinter's "The 'Special Relationship' " on Sunday in Torino at the Premio Europa gala.

And in a tribute prepared by Dublin's renowned Gate Theatre, actors Michael Gambon and Jeremy Irons (who starred in the 1983 film version of Pinter's work "Betrayal") read from Pinter's writings, passages alternately droll and daunting. At last, the economy of this writer -- whose spare, unique idiom crystallized a new drama of modern anxiety -- fell like breaking glass, brittle and cutting in spoken delivery. Irons followed Pinter's terse, angry prize-acceptance comments with a sardonic interpretation of the 2004 poem, "The 'Special Relationship' ":

The bombs go off / The legs go off / The heads go off / The arms go off / The feet go off / The light goes out.

Despite such bleak visions, Pinter's determination embraces hope: "There does seem to me to be more public awareness now," he says, "... of what actions our societies and our countries actually take and have taken. And what it means. And what torture actually is."

And in the winter of his illustrious career, the playwright likes to talk of his characters having lives of their own. "They surprise me."

The role he has assigned to himself, the artist-adamant, may at times surprise him, too. But he wryly insists he's earned his stance as the angry old man of modern theater.

"I've written 29 damned plays," he cracks. "Isn't that enough?"