

Getting together over a Pinter

BENEDICT NIGHTINGALE celebrates the Nobel laureate in Turin

Harold Pinter may have been too ill to accept the Nobel Prize for Literature in December, but he was well enough to come to Turin at the weekend to accept the Europe Theatre Prize. It was presented at a giant Pinterfest, in which papers were delivered by academics and critics from all over, performances of his work were given by actors including Michael Gambon and Jeremy Irons, and the dramatist answered questions about his work, his politics and the Nobel prize itself. Pinter (pictured, with his interpreter) looked pretty good too. Despite a walking stick he waved cheerily in response to a standing ovation and talked about the "ups and downs" of recent months. The ups included the terse, Pinter-style phone call from an eager Swede that, according to the dramatist himself, came out of the blue.

"Harold Pinter?" "Yes." "You have won the Nobel prize." "Oh, have I?" "Yes." "Thanks."

But there were downs too. The announcement of the award occurred just after Pinter had fallen on a slippery pavement and cracked his head so badly that he appeared in TV interviews looking like a battered war-victim. And barely had he finished preparing his Nobel acceptance speech than he inexplicably succumbed to a virus usually found among Brazilian Indians. This took him to intensive care and, he mildly informed his audience, almost to death.

He felt the way that he once did when he was swimming in the sea and realised a current was sweeping him away. He knew that he'd die if he didn't force himself to do what his lungs found almost impossible: keep going, stay breathing, stop drowning. "You don't think at all. You don't have time for that. You just experience it. You desperately fight to keep alive."

That story was probably the dramatic highlight of the symposium, even though this included Roger Planchon's French-language stagings of the terse, angry plays that Pinter has written in the past 20-odd years — *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language* and the rest — and poems and bits of plays delivered by some fine British actors. To hear Gambon deliver the famous, seemingly irrelevant speech from *No Man's Land* in which a rich man's protector warns a pushy, greedy intruder that it's relatively easy to drive into the one-way system near the Post Office Tower but desperately hard to get out was to hear Pinter-speak at its most menacingly metaphorical.

Then there were talks attended by critics and practitioners from everywhere from Korea to Malta, Russia to Japan. The 200-odd journals represented went from the major American and European newspapers to titles such as *Vest*, *Vash*, *Dosug*, *Vreme*, *Znak*, *Hystrio* and *Norsk Shakespeare Teatertidsskrift*. Some of the lectures sounded daunting — what of Susan Hollis Merritt's "(Anti)Global Pinter: an Inter(con)textual reading of Pinter's Nobel lecture"? — but this was one of many that brought passion to an appreciation of Pinter.

I had feared a conclave of Teddies: not a picnic with cuddly toys, of course, but a gathering of clones of the arid academic who comes from his American campus to London to shed his embarrassing wife. Like Teddy in Pinter's *Homecoming*, several lecturers did come from the US, but if they had anything to shed, it was political dismay. It's hard to believe that anyone could match Pinter's outrage at American foreign policy, but the professorial Donald Freed and Frank Gil-

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len did just that, the one summing up his country as a "merciless, remorseless, unremitting engine" that was dominating and dooming the world, the other comparing the new Nobel laureate to the Euripides who died challenging the self-serving myths of an increasingly bellicose Athens.

Interviewed by his biographer Michael Billington, Pinter himself spoke much as he did in his Nobel speech, accusing America of being unconcerned with any interest but its own, confessing his shame at what he saw as Tony Blair's subservience to George Bush, denouncing the bombing of Iraq as a war crime.

But the conversation also ranged elsewhere. No, he didn't mind if women took male roles in his plays. Yes, his characters invariably did



and said things in his plays that surprised him, but sometimes he shocked them by cutting a pause or a line. Yes, he had great admiration for several contemporary playwrights, notably David Hare. Yes, he was more likely to write poetry than drama in the future: "I've written 29 damn plays — isn't that enough?"

There were funny moments, as when the bibliographer Bill Baker recalled asking Pinter to list his works, only to be told it would be "like drinking my own bathwater", and suggestive ones, as when it emerged that the Pinter play performed most often in Italy was the relatively minor

Dumb Waiter, in which two assassins await a victim who turns out to be one of them. Given the nation's traditional luck with its politicians, up to Silvio Berlusconi, that seemed apt. But the last political word came from the Pinter of today.

The presentation itself occurred in a 300-year-old theatre of Rococo grandeur and was preceded by stupendously dull speeches in which everyone wordily thanked everyone. Then in limped Pinter, not just to accept his Europe prize from the Mayor of Turin but to return to his prime theme. It was Europe's responsibility to stand up against the power of the US — "and I hope to do that for the rest of my life" of