

Michael Billington finds comedy and anguish in writer's first full-length play for 15 years



Pinter's most moving work

HAROLD PINTER's new play, *Moonlight*, will come as a shock to those who have lately pigeonholed him as a writer of brittle polemics. It emerges, in David Laively's fine production at the Almeida, as a deeply poignant, raffishly comic, emotion-charged study of the gulf between parents and children and the anguish of approaching death.

In its 75 minutes it carries echoes of earlier Pinter plays, including *The Homecoming* and *No Man's Land*, but what stirs the heart is the direct confrontation with mortality.

On stage level we see two adjacent bedrooms above them is a very ghostly ancient space. In one room lies Andy: a coarse, brutal former civil servant fighting against the dying light. He yells for his absent sons, battles his wife Bel and is witness to an equivocal friendship with Ralph, an amateur soccer referee, and his lust for Ralph's wife, Maria, with whom he and Bel both had affairs.

In another bedroom we see Andy's two estranged sons, Jake and Fred: out-of-control fantasists indulging in parodic, compulsive business games but finally denying the call to their father's side. Meanwhile in the space above we glimpse the wraith-like figure of Andy's daughter, Bridget (possibly dead), who embodies the final affliction for which he desperately yearns.

Beckett, the poet of terminal stages, inevitably comes to mind. What masterly moves are in Pinter's image of a man confronting death in a spirit of acceptance and acceptance.

Andy's public self has clearly been one of private order: in death he lacks, aside from his bodily embarras, the consolation of family or sustenance behind. This implies Pinter, the dilemmas of modern man.

"Rationality," announces Andy, "went down the drain years ago." Or, as his claim:

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London luvvies out in force

Joanna Coles
Arts Correspondent

YOU COULD hear the excited chattering along Upper Street, Kilgerton, Antonia and Melvyn, David Hare and Nicole Farrah, Joan Bakewell, Paul Eddington, Nicola Pegg.

"Oh it's not your usual glitzy West End opening, it's not your glitterati, swayed the PM man at the Almeida Theatre. "It's much more intelligent... much more intelligent than that."

In other words, it was the moment London's luvvies had been waiting 15 years for. The world premiere of Harold Pinter's first full-length play since 1978.

In fact, many argued he simply couldn't do it any more; that the master of *The Caretaker* and *Birthday Party* had long since sold out to film scripts. Until last night, when finally they saw

Austin

I JUST SIPPED OUT
London: out of the picture

one: "I can't sleep. There's no moon. It's so dark. I..." (The fullstop after "dark" had unfortunately been printed as a comma in the first version.)

Why had Britain's most celebrated playwright chosen a 300-seater fringe theatre for his new work? "It's the intimacy of the space that Harold likes," said the PM man.

Starring Anna Massey and Ian Holm, *Moonlight* is the story of a bourgeois family who come together as their father dies.

"He's in cracking form, it was very funny and totally non-political," said Joan Bakewell afterwards.

Melvyn Bragg seemed more hesitant. "Terrific... I'm still trying to work it out," he said. "But I think it was terrific, yes, very good."

But there was a bewildered silence as the curtain fell and the applause only just stretched to three bows.

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Billington Moonlight

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