

Comedy and anguish in Pinter's most moving work

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Ralph bluntly puts it, thinking is no answer to life's meaning.

This is Pinter as we've never quite seen him before: nakedly emotional in his presentation of this bedridden, suburban Lear. But, characteristically, the play also switches wildly between poetic threnody and verbal comedy and weaves in many of his accumulated themes.

There is that hunger for an ascertainable past, the sense that love and friendship are subject to betrayal, the feeling that family life is a brutal battleground of sibling rivalry and paternal bullying. But what makes this Pinter's most moving work is the ineradicable gulf between parents and children.

Ian Holm, returning to the stage after a long absence, gives a superb performance as Andy that reinforces Pinter's emo-

tional impact. Tetchy, ferocious, bullet-headed; he asks with scorching rage, if death is no more than pitch blackness: "What would have been the point of going through all those enervating charades in the first place?" Yet the wonder of this performance is Holm's buried sense of longing for his absent children. I have seen Lears that have moved me less.

Leveaux's production also combines the concrete and the mysterious: the classic Pinter mix. Anna Massey's enigmatic Bel regards her domineering spouse with patient tolerance yet there is no mistaking her hollow-eyed despair when her sons reject her on the phone.

Douglas Hodge, in ill-fitting check jacket, and Michael Sheen, in singlet and shorts, as the two sons, pass the time in name-brandishing games yet

somehow suggest, by replicating their father's behaviour pattern, they are still tied to him. And Claire Skinner as Bridget, hovering over the scene like a ghost, implies that she herself is the victim of some irreparable childhood wrong.

The play is much funnier than I have probably suggested. The piss-taking Pinter humour and the undercutting of verbal pretence are all there. But what makes this an extraordinary play is that Pinter both corrals his familiar themes — the subjectiveness of memory, the unknowability of one's lifelong partner, the gap between the certain present and the uncertain past — and extends his territory. He shows, with unflinching candour, that in an age shorn of systems and beliefs we face "death's dateless night" in a state of mortal terror.

Billington Moonlight Continued

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