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MICHAEL BILLINGTON finds Pinter's mysteries decoded in *The Birthday Party* at the Lyttelton

Party power

"ART is long," wrote Randall Jarrell, "and critics are the insects of a day." An unflattering image, but highly applicable to Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, which 36 years ago was slammed by all the serious, save Hobson, and now turns up at the Lyttelton in a superbly crafted production by Sam Mendes that confirms its status as a modern classic.

Part of its endless fascination lies in its elusiveness. What we actually see is clear enough: Stanley, a truculent recluse living in a seaside boarding-house, is reduced to a state of terrorised catatonia by Goldberg and McCann, two agents of an undefined organisation. But, as with any poetic metaphor, its final meaning is up to us. I see it partly as a personal play about the pressures on the obstinate artist to conform to society's rules — 10 years earlier, of course, Pinter himself had been a conscientious objector — and partly as a directly political play about the arbitrariness of state power. Reading the programme's list of productions, it's intriguing to guess at its impact in Johannesburg, Ankara, Warsaw or Prague.

What emerges from Mendes's fine production is the idea of life itself as an endless chain of dominance and terror. This version starts, in a mood of deceptive sunniness, with a jaunty *Housewives Choice*-type jingle as Tom Piper's seaside living room set is trucked forwards. But, after the initial comedy of breakfast-time banalities, we come to realise that Pinter is displaying a microcosmic world in which everyone is linked by bonds of fear.

Meg, the indecently maternal landlady, is terrorised by Stanley who plays on her nightmares of being carted off in a van. Stanley himself is physically menaced by the darkly violent and obsessive McCann who is himself in thrall to the nervously jovial Goldberg. And — as this production makes clearer than any I have seen — Goldberg himself is sweatingly terrified of whoever his masters may be. It is rather as if the medieval chain of being had suddenly appeared in Eastbourne or Worthing, proving

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that each of us exists, simultaneously, in a state of bullying dominance and covering subservience.

It is all there in Pinter's play but the production articulates it with stunning clarity. For a start, Anton Lesser's Stanley is not simply some spineless victim but — exactly like Josef K in *The Trial* — a figure compounded of arrogance, paranoia and unspoken guilt. Snarling, furtive and unshaven, Lesser visibly enjoys making Meg's skin crawl. It is a startlingly un sentimental portrait of the nonconformist outsider. And Lesser's bottled rage and violence only makes his final transformation into a mute, black-suited insider all the more shocking.

Bob Peck redefines Goldberg

by avoiding all trace of the stereotypical Jewish uncle figure. At first, I thought dangerously so. But gradually you realise the point of the stiff gestures, the manic neatness, the hands that even when pawing the obliging Lulu's body have a strange surgical detachment. This is a man whose key philosophy is "Follow the line, the line, McCann, and you can't go wrong." And what Peck gives us is a stultified organisation man whose synthetic past and interrogative manner mask a pure and absolute terror. The wages of conformity, Peck cunningly suggests, is insecurity.

My only cavil is that Dora Bryan, for all her comic skill, is encouraged to play the landlady, Meg, as a Dickensian slattern in drugged stockings and pumps: I see the character as menacingly voluptuous. But there is ironclad support from Nicholas Woodeson, as a stubby, balding McCann who clearly uses the organisation to legitimise his violence; from Emma Amos as a gauche seductive Lulu with a Peg's Paper notion of morality; and from Trevor Peacock as a humane but politically impotent Petya. And Tom Piper's illuminating set reminds us that this one seaside boarding-house is surrounded by the winking lights of myriad others. In the end, that is precisely what makes *The Birthday Party* such a great, disturbing play: the suggestion that the power play Pinter so graphically depicts is an infinitely extendable metaphor for domestic, social and political relationships the world over.

In rep at the Lyttelton, National Theatre, London SE1 (box-office 071-828 2252).



Tower of terror... Bob Peck as Goldberg (right) and Nicholas Woodeson as McCann. HENRIETTA BUTLER

Billington On The Birthday Party

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