

SUNDAY 12 SEPTEMBER 1993

THE OBSERVER

Theatre Michael Coveney

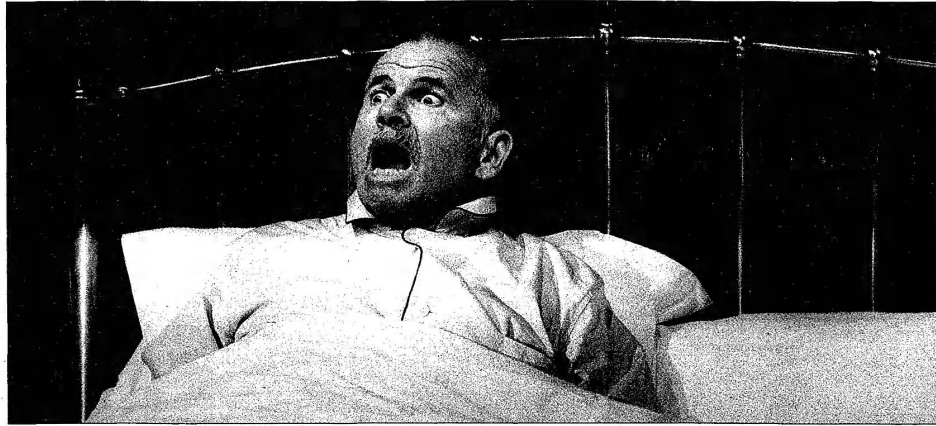
Under a dark moon

HAROLD PINTER'S *Moonlight* (Almeida Theatre), his first full-length piece (it plays for 75 minutes) since *Betrayal*, has the potent evanescence of his earlier disjointed reveries, *Landscape and Silence* (1969), and the purgatorial, between-life-and-death bedroom bleakness of *A Kind of Alaska* (1973).

Bridget (Claire Skinner) floats in a grey void by night. She is isolated, entranced, lost in a jungle, hidden. Her father, Andy (Ian Holm), a crude civil servant who kept his obscene language in the home where it belonged, and who has no remembrance of things past, is dying in bed. His wife, Bel (Anna Massey), sits beside him, confessing her affection for Ralph, a football referee, whose wife, Maria, was Andy's lover.

Andy's younger son, Fred (Michael Stenn), occupies a bed in another location next to him. He and his dominant brother, Jake (Douglas Hodge), slide over memories of Andy, bar-room camaraderie and a strange scenario of war-time contacts culminating in the funeral of Lieutenant Colonel Silvio d'Orangerie whom Fred loved 'like a father'.

They are visited by Maria (Jill Johnson), and then by Ralph (Edward de Souza) who, after years at sea, gave the arts a chance, generally. For a time, it was all fox love, football, the arts, the occasional pint. 'Mind you,' he adds, 'I preferred a fruity white wine but you couldn't actually say that in those days.'



Bed-bound and mesmerising: Ian Holm plays a dying father, who despises his sons but yearns to see his daughter, in Harold Pinter's new offering 'Moonlight' (Photograph by Sue Adler)

Ill and Pinter's Lenny, Holm is mesmerising as the bed-bound bastard who despises his sons ('a sponging, parasitical pair of ponces') and who aches to see his daughter and grandchildren.

David Leveaux's reverential production seems to stutter to several false conclusions, losing rhythm in the last half-hour. Short plays can sometimes seem very long, and the split-level grey design of Bob Crowley requires some awkward movement in a piece which, ideally, should float like a dream.

Dream-merchants loom large in Terry Johnson's reasonably funny *Hysteria* at the Royal Court. Johnson's *Insignificances*, the play filmed by Nicolas Roeg, matched brains with beauty, Einstein with Marilyn Monroe. *Hysteria* elaborates a more factually correct encounter between Salvador Dali and Sigmund Freud. It is transplanted from Elsworthy Road, where Freud lodged for a month in 1938, to a stunning reproduction by Mark Thompson — all encased goddesses and

buddhas, phallic totems, Persian carpets and Viennese furniture — of Freud's resting place, and today's Freud Museum, in Marefield Gardens.

Doing for and to Freud what Michael Hastings did for and to T. S. Eliot in *Tom and Viv*, Johnson jumps on the feminist bandwagon which supposes that Freud's suppression of his findings in his brilliant *Aetiology of Hysteria* lecture of 1896 was a cover for his own infinite sexual experiences and the source of his overriding attribution of

rape and sexual violence to the female victims' fantasy.

The Dali/Freud confrontation is expertly threaded through the intervention of a living case history, Jessica, whom the astonishing Phoebe Nicholls, too long absent from the stage, incorporates as dysfunctional victim, avenging daughter (of an abused mother), pliable model with an available armpit (hello, Dali), nemesis and sex-war bore. The farce episodes never quite gel with the argumentative core of the

play, though I loved the Stoppardian sequence involving Anna Freud's knickers, a bicycle pump and a Wellington boot. Jessie's point (and Jeffrey Masson's in *The Assault on Truth*) is that Freud's rejection of his own seduction theory was a moral sham, not an intellectual advance.

Phyllida Lloyd's engaging production leaves Henry Goodman as the convincing Freud lookalike — white beard, thick accent, mean glasses — stranded in self-pity as the set

melts in a Dali-esque landscape populated with a few unlovely nude models. Tim Potter is a spindly, frenetic Dali in hump-bag-striped jacket and long johns, but the character's existence is desperately contrived.

Stephen Jeffreys, like Terry Johnson, is one of our best new nearly-young playwrights, but *A Going Concern* at Hampstead Theatre is a severe disappointment. In this realistic work with power struggles, Jeffreys has plumbed part of his own past, in the manner of John

Steedman, in the manner of John

Michael Coveney Moonlight

Clipped By:



ianharris

Thu, Jan 2, 2020