

Harold Pinter is famous for his pauses. Who better to direct a play about a decade when all emotion was put on hold? **Michael Billington** checks out *The Late Middle Classes*

Ten years of solitude

The fifties are back in fashion. Along with a Conran exhibition, *From The Bomb To The Beatles*, we now have a new Simon Gray play, *The Late Middle Classes*, that harks back to post-war values. Although it's a slow-burning work, it evokes with racking fidelity a period when emotions were as carefully rationed as eggs and butter.

One also detects a touch of autobiography: like his child protagonist, Gray was born on a small Hampshire island and boasts the unusual Christian name of Holliday. And although the play is framed by two short scenes set in 1982, the bulk of the action takes place 30 years earlier. What Gray carefully charts is the repressions of the period. Holly's father is a pathologist and his mother a queen of the local tennis club, and although outwardly affectionate, their marriage contains its own subterfuges. Even more crucially, the love that Holly's bachelor Austrian music teacher clearly feels for the boy is treated as something dirtily disgusting.

In writing about the fifties, Gray consciously apes its dramatic forms. I don't mind the echoes of *Rattigan* or a play like Philip King's *Serious Charge*, in which a vicar was accused of what the *News Of The World* used euphemistically to call "interference". But audiences today are quicker on the uptake than in the fifties, and Gray spends too long on exposition before getting to the dramatic meat.

When he does finally arrive, he has a vital point to make: that, in a repressed world, children become the vehicles of adult passion. Celia, Holly's over-bred, under-educated, emotionally starved mother constantly begs the boy to declare his love for her. And the piano teacher, tethered to his sherry-swilling immigrant mother, finds in Holly an outlet for his own thwarted affections. In the past Gray has often seemed an acerbic observer, but here he shows unusual sympathy



Bottling it all up... Harriet Walter plays an under-educated, over-burdened housewife in Simon Gray's latest work

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for the sexually and emotionally solitary.

Harold Pinter, directing his eighth Gray play, also gets the details exactly right: not just the obvious things like a father's shyness about discussing masturbation with his son but, even more importantly, the sense of guilt that pervaded fifties life. In the play's most resonant line, Nicholas Woodeson, as the piano teacher

who delights in inflicting disciplinary games on the boy, says: "It is through the punishment we shall find the sin." More than all the references to powdered eggs or the Third Programme, that line brought back to me in a flash the decade's aroma of culpability.

But Woodeson's is only one in a set of first-rate performances. Harriet Walter as Celia marvelously evokes the pathos of the

middle-class woman who, trained for nothing except marriage and motherhood, is forced to dramatise her own essentially vacant life. James Fleet as her pathologist husband artfully suggests a man more at ease with the dead than the living. Angela Pleasence as the piano teacher's mum, furtively hiding her drink or covering in terror at every knock at the door, adds to the atmosphere of guilt,

and Sam Bedi is simply extraordinary as the Jamesian Holly who views adult manoeuvres with unnerving impassivity.

Mae West famously liked a guy who took his time. Mr Gray certainly does that. But, in the end, he recreates the furtiveness and shame of the fifties with almost eerie exactitude.

At the Palace Theatre Watford (01923 225671), till April 10

Late Middle Guardian Billington

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