

Reviews

Theatre

Space invaders

Celebration and The Room

Almeida Theatre, London

★★★★

More than 40 years separate these plays: Pinter's latest and his very first which together make up a richly entertaining double-bill. Yet, for all their obvious contrasts, I was struck by a curious similarity between the two works: both reveal Pinter's abiding fascination with hermetic, insulated figures who suddenly find their space invaded and their territory threatened.

In *Celebration*, the funniest, feistiest piece Pinter has written in years, the safe haven in question is a smart restaurant where a wedding anniversary is in full, raucous swing. Two married couples, actually brothers and sisters, sit at one banquette: a banker and his wife at another. What Pinter reveals, with a good deal of satirical verve, is the coarse swagger and loutish insensitivity of these walking wallets and their spouses.

But Pinter's play is much more than an obvious attack on the nerdy nouveau riche. Just as in *Party Time* we see a group of smart socialites rejoicing in a "club" which cuts them off from grim reality, so here the diners use the restaurant as a retreat from the outside world: a world in which the two brothers operate as strategy consultants whose job is "enforcing peace". And, as always in Pinter, there is no such thing as a harmless sanctuary: here the threat to an evening

of crude conviviality comes from an intrusive waiter who offers increasingly bizarre, name-dropping tales of a grandfather who seems to have known everyone this century.

Behind the play's wild comedy lurks something strange and incalculable which is beautifully caught in Pinter's fast-moving production. The performances too are spot-on with Keith Allen and Andy de la Tour catching the matching vulgarity of the two brothers, Lia Williams combining sexiness and asperity as the banker's trophy wife and Danny Dyer as the far-from-dumb waiter implying a world of eccentric otherness far beyond the comprehension of these self-absorbed diners.

If the archetypal Pinter situation is one of space-invasion, then you see its origins in *The Room*, first performed at Bristol University in 1957. Here the immured heroine, Rose, finds the rooted privacy which she shares with her silent husband successively threatened by her talkative landlord, a pair of married flat-hunters and by a blind black man call Riley who mysteriously bids her to come home.

The milieu may be miles away from that of *Celebration* but in both womb-like retreats are opened up and anything "foreign" is seen as a potential menace. Admittedly the symbolism is more heavy-handed than in later, greater Pinter but what is extraordinary about his new production is the intensity of feeling between Lindsay Duncan's panic-stricken Rose and George Harris's monumentally imposing Riley.

Michael Billington