

Pinter's powers at their lowest ebb

HAROLD PINTER turns 70 this year and he is marking the occasion by directing an intriguing double bill of his own work. *The Room*, which begins the evening, was Pinter's first play, written in four frenzied days in 1956 when the dramatist was a broke actor appearing in Rattigan's *Separate Tables* at the Pavilion Theatre, Torquay.

Then, after the interval, we get the premiere of *Celebration*, which is set, like *Separate Tables*, in a dining room. There, however, the similarities end. Rattigan's moving drama takes place in a dowdy private hotel and is shot through with compassion for its desolate characters. Pinter's new play is little more than a crude, extended sketch, set in a swish establishment frequented by rich white trash whom the dramatist portrays with contempt.

It was greeted with gales of sycophantic laughter by the first-night audience, but it strikes me as further evidence of Pinter's sad decline as a dramatist. He hasn't written an indisputably great play since *Betrayal* in 1978, and if *Celebration* had come from the pen of an unknown writer I suspect it would have been curtly rejected by every management in town.

One of the curved banquettes in Pinter's restaurant is occupied by a pair of cockney barrow boys turned "strategy consultants" and their wives. A wedding anniversary is being celebrated. The men are familiar Pinter types — thugs with a strong line in fake

Theatre

The Room/Celebration

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smiles and heavy menace — and there is a suggestion that they may be involved in crime or arms dealing. The women are the tarty variety who appear with such monotonous and misogynistic regularity in the playwright's work.

Over at the next table sits a banker and his wife. The banker has just had an affair with what he charmingly describes as "a scrubber", and the wife, an improbably glamorous infants-school teacher, takes revenge by describing all the hanky-panky she enjoyed behind the filing cabinet when she was a secretary. The language is crude, the jokes dodgy, the attitude to women contemptible.

As always the dramatist/director has no trouble in creating an edgy atmosphere, and there are one or two funny moments, most notably a waiter who keeps interrupting the diners and reeling off preposterous lists of the famous people his grandfather knew, from TS Eliot to the Three Stooges.

All credit to the cast, who give the game impression that they believe they are appearing in a play of real substance, rather than a shallow *jeu d'esprit*. There is excellent work from Keith Allen and Andy de La Tour as the thuggish brothers, Lindsay Duncan and Susan Wooldridge as their wives, Steven

Pacey and Lia Williams as the adjacent couple and Danny Dyer as the delightful interjecting waiter.

Several of the same actors appear in *The Room*. The amazing thing about this short play, set in a drab bedsit in the 1950s, is that Pinter miraculously found almost all of his stylistic tricks in his first drama. The bullying, the unease, the *non sequiturs*, the long silences and the air of mystery are all present and correct — so much so that the play now seems more like a brilliant parody of Pinter rather than the work of real originality it undoubtedly was when first produced.

Lindsay Duncan gives an outstanding performance as the room's nervous, worn-out occupant, married to a silent brute and besieged by various unsettling visitors. And Eileen Diss's sets for these two plays — the one evocatively capturing the shabby poverty of 40 years ago, the other the stylish modernism of the present — show just how dramatically times have changed. The plays might be taking place in different centuries, not different decades.

For all the high production values, though, the double bill does Pinter's reputation no favours. The early piece now seems mannered, while the new one seems downright repellent.

This review appeared in some editions yesterday. Tickets: 020 7359 4404.

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26 Apr 2025