

Pinter with panache

IT'S 40 years since *The Caretaker* premiered in London and turned its relatively unknown young author, one Harold Pinter, into a fêted star overnight. There have, of course, been numerous revivals down the years and countless stagings around the world, but Patrick Marber's first-rate production, newly arrived at the Comedy Theatre, is particularly welcome.

Not only does it mark an important anniversary, but it also shows the play, from the vantage-point of a new century, to be an unalloyed masterpiece — as fresh today as ever.

Its audacious simplicity still startles. A man called Aston (Douglas Hodge) brings an elderly tramp called Davies (Michael Gambon) into a dilapidated room in west London. The old man attempts to become part of the furniture, but comes up against the less charitable instincts of Aston's younger brother Mick (Rupert Graves). There is talk of the vagrant being taken on as the caretaker. In fact there is a good deal of talk about all manner of things, as a series of comical and savage power games are played out. By the end, the situation remains as enigmatic as at first, but everything has changed.

Pinter's extraordinary way with words may no longer carry the same element of surprise that it did back in 1960. If anything, audiences these days are a little too primed. This first-night crowd — stuffed with celebrities — laughed knowingly in all the right places. But it's what informs the patter that counts.

Pinter's assessment of human nature is vivid, raw and shocking. Beneath the civilities and dancing rhythms of everyday conversation lies man's brutalised and brutalising essence. The resulting tension alternately tickles your ribs and knocks the stuffing out of you.

When Davies staggers into Rob Howell's exquisitely realised junkyard of an attic-room, its peeling, stained roof apparently in imminent danger of collapse, you see a man on his last legs. His shambling bulk is hugely eloquent

Theatre

The Caretaker
COMEDY THEATRE

of an arduous life on the road, his craggy face has been weather-beaten to death. He looks as though he has been dragged through every mudfield, lavatory and oil slick in the world.

Gambon ranges Davies's accent accordingly, sliding from Welsh to Irish to Bangladeshi to cockney and all points in between. This hugely risky strategy chimes perfectly with the footsore wanderer's comically hazy recollection as to who he is and where he's from — if only he could get to Sidcup, runs his refrain, and get his papers.

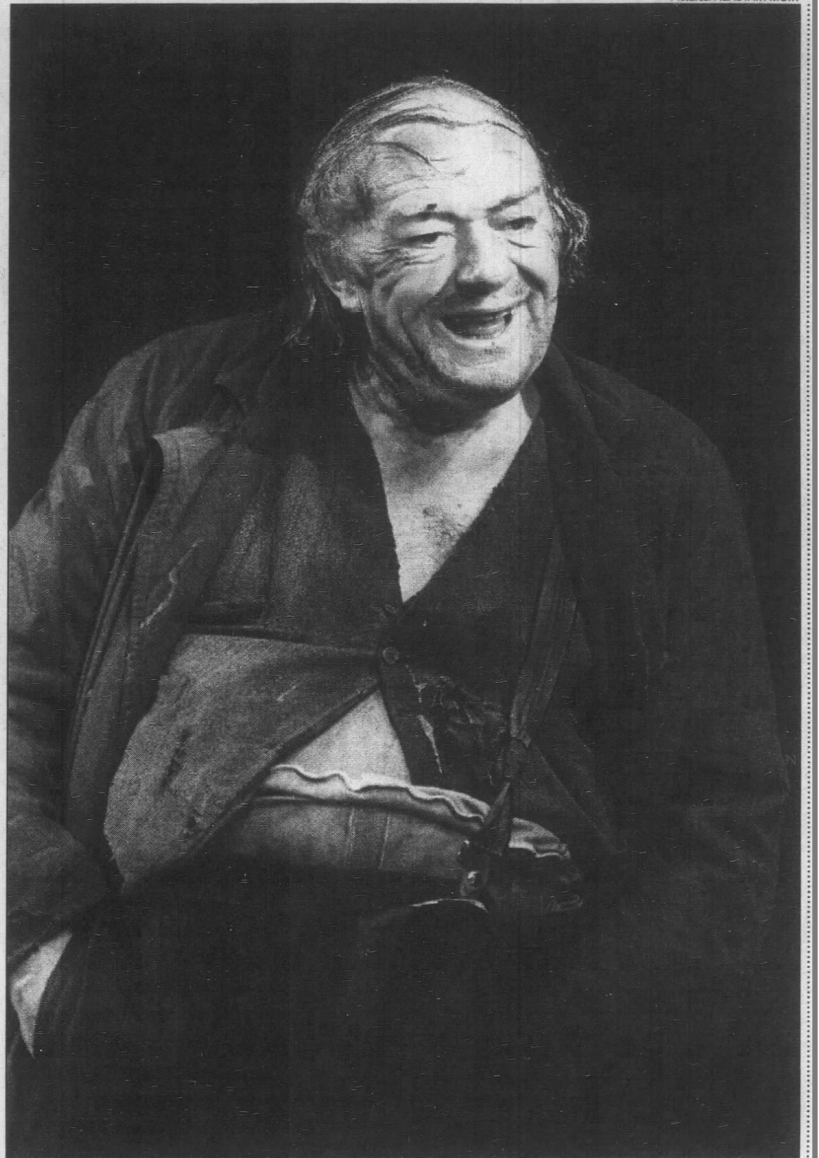
The great running gag is that beggars can be choosy. Mouth permanently agape, eyes furtively shifting, Gambon strikes just the right balance between pushiness and pitifulness. Pride at the bottom of the pile is ridiculous, but also the last possession destitute humanity can call its own.

Gambon's is a *tour de force* performance — but it's not a show-stealer. Slicked-up like a Teddy Boy, Graves is outstanding as the vicious wide-boy, Mick. Teeth glinting, he plays with Davies with all the cruelty of a cat half-killing a small bird. Common pleasantries — "Who do you bank with?" — are wielded like knives; the great set-piece wind-ups are discharged with machine-gun precision.

Douglas Hodge is infinitely touching as the poor, vacant Aston, twitching alone on his bed as he recalls the nightmare ordeal of electric-shock treatment way back. In his pathetic determination to build a shed and sort the place out, the sad pun of the play's title is brought chillingly home: no one has taken care of these misfits. If you're going to do Pinter, you've got to be spot-on — and, line by line, this production is as spot-on as it gets.

Until January 13. Tickets: 020 7369 1731

Dominic Cavendish



Well taken care of: Michael Gambon's performance as Davies is a *tour de force*, but not scene-stealing

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ianlharris

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