

An interminable slog through Pinter's politics

THIS double bill of plays by Harold Pinter lasts less than an hour. However, those worried about getting value for money (top price: £24.50) shouldn't worry. The two shows seem interminable. By the time you stagger out into Sloane Square, you half expect to find bare trees and snow on the ground.

There are some who claim that Pinter's explicitly political plays are just as fine as his richer and more enigmatic earlier work, but it is hard to see how anyone, apart from his most slavishly devoted fans, can seriously take this point of view.

Sketchy, paranoid and self-righteous, they strike me as the product of a dramatic imagination in steep decline, going through the same old routines and desperately trying to achieve a measure of significance by claiming that the work is urgently political.

Mountain Language (1988) was inspired by the Turkish attempt to suppress the Kurdish language, but it is clear that Pinter was also issuing an awful warning about the evil potential of the Great Thatcherite Repression. The language of the brutal soldiers guarding political prisoners at a sinister camp is unmistakably English vernacular while one of their victims, who sees her husband being tortured, is called Sara Johnson — not, I imagine, a common name among the Kurds.

Theatre

Mountain Language/Ashes to Ashes
ROYAL COURT THEATRE

Katie Mitchell's intense, shocking production, with the deafening sounds of helicopters and barking dogs, creates a nightmarish impression of state-regulated cruelty, most notably in the deeply upsetting scene between a bleeding, shaking prisoner and his mute, traumatised mother. But the characters are types, not people, meaning that audience reaction is one of generalised concern rather than specific sympathy; and Pinter's suggestion that Britain is indistinguishable from more oppressive regimes seems shrill and impertinent, not least to those who have suffered under real state tyranny.

Ashes to Ashes (1996), again directed by Mitchell, is a subtler and more haunting piece, but, once again, paranoia gets in the way of Pinter's art. It consists of a dialogue between a woman, Rebecca (Anastasia Hille), and a man, Devlin (Neil Dudgeon), sipping drinks in a comfortable country house.

In the opening moments, Rebecca describes a disturbing sado-masochistic relationship with a lover who made her kiss his fist and put his hands round her throat, but who nevertheless

"adored" her. It is not clear at first whether Devlin is formally interrogating her about this man, who, it emerges, was involved in state atrocities, or whether he is merely a jealous lover picking at the scabs of his partner's past affair.

Like the great plays of Pinter's mid period, most notably *Old Times*, *Ashes to Ashes* mixes dream-like memory with desire, though here the memories combine the personal with shocking glimpses of the apparatus of state repression.

Yet, once again, though superbly performed and directed, and with the balance of power subtly shifting between the two troubled characters, the play is marred by Pinter's insistence that all this could be happening in Britain today. The woman describes people being marched into the sea by "guides" in Dorset. Come off it, Harold! One feels like screaming. Is Lyme Regis notorious for its death camps?

Such a response may seem over literal. But it strikes me that Pinter is hitching an undignified ride on other people's all-too-real suffering, under all-too-real tyrannies, in order to excoriate a nation, Britain, that rightly allows him complete freedom to indulge his fantasies.

Tickets: 020 7565 5000

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19 Aug 2026