

Interview: Susan Priver On Returning To Harold Pinter's *A SLIGHT ACHE* After 17 Years

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By Shari Barrett



Seventeen years ago, Susan Priver starred as Flora opposite Henry Olek as Edward with Shelly Kurtz as the match seller in Harold Pinter's *A Slight Ache*, a tragicomedy of manners that takes a funny, ominous, and unsettling journey into the human psyche. All three actors will reprise their roles in a visiting production of Pinter's play, directed by Jack Heller at the Odyssey Theatre in West L.A. from August 26 through October 1.

First produced as a radio play in 1959, *A Slight Ache* was adapted as Pinter's second full-length play, first performed onstage in 1961. It typifies Pinter's Absurdist plays, all ambivalent in their plots, presentation of characters and endings, typically beginning with a pair of characters whose stereotyped relations and role-playing are disrupted by the entrance of a stranger. As the 72-minute play progresses, the audience will see the psychic stability of the couple break down as their fears, jealousies, hatreds, sexual preoccupations, and loneliness emerge from beneath a screen of bizarre yet commonplace conversation.

Susan is well-known to local audiences, having previously starred at the Odyssey as Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and as down-on-her-luck showgirl, Myrtle, in Williams' *Kingdom of Earth*. She has also appeared in plays at the Group Rep, Theatre 40, The Broadwater Main Stage and many others, with extensive experience acting on both theater and film stages.

I decided to speak with her about her experience with both productions of Pinter's play, how she feels her understanding of the play and its characters has changed, what she sees as relevant messages to our disconnected lives right now, and her thoughts on the importance of Absurdist plays in the modern theater world.

Thanks for speaking with me Susan. First, tell me about your early career as a ballet dancer.

I trained at SAB (Balanchine's school that feeds into New York City Ballet), and danced professionally for Eglevsky Ballet in NYC, The Hannover Ballet in Germany, and finally, one of the great regional companies that actually had a few tall dancers, the Cleveland Ballet.

Why did you step away from dancing as your career, and was that the inspiration to write your book *Dancer Interrupted*?

I stepped away when I got fired from the Cleveland Ballet for no apparent reason, other than possibly Reaganomics offering less money for the arts which took a few of us out. I fell into a deep depression for quite a long time, and this breakdown/loss of spirit was the inspiration for my book, yes. It took me a very long time to get to it as writing did not come easy to me.

Have you always enjoyed touring as an entertainer, despite all the challenges?

I toured as a dancer, but never as an actress. The challenges would be harder now, I imagine. But I loved it when I was young.

How did your career in local theater get started?

After studying with a few great teachers, I did a showcase of 4 Dogs and a Bone by John Patrick Shanley at the Loft Theater, which was under Bill Traylor at the time. I got an agent for film from that, but soon was dropped as it was with Triad (a huge agency), and my agent there started getting handed already-made stars whose families were in that agency. That's when I started auditioning for waiver theater. My first play was at the Gene Dynarski theater; I played Gene's daughter in a David Mamet play called Reunion. I got a Drama-Logue award for it, although I have no idea why, but it made me feel, "oh maybe I'm okay at this." I was terribly green at the age of 29 and it took quite a while before I got another play. But I kept on in whatever way I could, always having jobs that allowed me time to study and rehearse.

Do you have a favorite type of play in which to appear?

I love Tennessee Williams' characters because he manages to get to the very soul of a character in his writing. Streetcar was the highlight for me, although Kingdom of Earth resonated for me also. I do still love madcap '40s comedies and have gotten to play a few divas over the years. Love the theatricality!

What challenges do you enjoy when putting up a play?

All of it from building the character, rehearsal, finding the right designers and artists to work with on every aspect. I was introduced to Gary Guidinger and Linda Toliver through Michael Arabian, who directed Kingdom of Earth, and we are artistic compatriots and friends since we met six years ago.

Tell me about the story and characters in *A Slight Ache*.

It's pure Pinter – a mundane situation at a country house in upper-middle class England. A stranger (homeless man/match seller) is lurking outside the couple's back gate, and obsession and a faltering relationship ensue.

In what ways do you feel Pinter's play speaks to the disconnect between people in our society now?

In a different way. I think our obsession with our devices takes us away from really communicating now. Hence the disconnect, allowing us to be there with someone but not really there. Pinter writes about that, even though his characters are not staring at their phones. They're in the same room, but their reality is often from a very different perspective. I think that's true of people today too - we just have more distractions.

After 17 years, how different is it to again be portraying Flora in Pinter's play?

Definitely different and darker somehow. It's harder with more at stake, somehow, and more layers to tear down to get to the truth.

What is it that appeals to you the most about this play?

The challenge to make sense of the complexities of our relationships and the way we perceive the world around us. Submissive Flora blossoms into a version of strength.

What do you hope audiences will be talking about after seeing it?

Not sure right now. Just hope they're taken into this world that we've created.

What is it about Absurdist plays that appeals to you since you have appeared in so many?

Makes my mind work a bit. I'm challenged and that inspires me.

If you could select a dream role you'd like to play, what would it be?

I think I did it - Blanche in Streetcar. There's still Sweet Bird of Youth and Glass Menagerie.

But, of course, they're done so much. Haven't done Coward. Perhaps Hay Fever or the Vortex.

What is your best advice for an actor new to Los Angeles who wants to break into the theater scene?

Audition for theater companies and for local theater when you see it posted on Actors Access or Backstage. Or get in a great class where you can work on your craft. There's also regional theater auditions, so get up on stage as much as you can. It's the only way to learn. And you have to fall down a lot.

Would you like to share your opinion of the WGA and SAG/AFTRA ongoing strikes?

Yay for us all. AI can't take over, and artists should be compensated for all of the work they put in before they even get a paying job. There's so much cost and sacrifice to get good at what they do.

Anything else you would like to share?

Thank YOU so much for your writing and supporting theater and its artists over the years.

Thanks so much!