

Harold Pinter and Theater of the Absurd

Harold Pinter was born October 10, 1930 in Hackney, east London, and died on December 24, 2008. One of the best-known British contemporary playwrights, he wrote 29 plays and was the recipient of a 2005 Nobel Prize. He was also an actor, director and a cricket enthusiast.

Pinter's distinctive writing style is often called *Pinteresque*. His use of colloquial language, numerous clichés, unpolished grammar and illogical syntax create dialogues that reflect day-to-day speech. A *Pinteresque* atmosphere ignites the feeling of anxiety, but also arouses interest—a spectator can sense that something is wrong, even though the dialogues do not directly state it. Characters talk, but the words are often devoid of any content. The action does not proceed smoothly or in chronological order, presenting the absurdity of human existence.

Pinter is frequently classified as a representative of the Theatre of the Absurd. The term was coined by Martin Esslin, who in 1961 published a book in which he described a mode of playwriting shared by European dramatists including Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Arthur Adamov and Jean Genet. Pinter was added to this quartet of playwrights in subsequent editions. According to Esslin, the beginnings of this type of drama can be seen in the late 19th century, when in 1896 Alfred Jarry staged *Ubu Roi* ("Ubu the King") in Paris, a nonsensical play about the adventures of a brutal usurper of Polish throne. *Ubu Roi* anticipated one of the main characteristics of Theatre of the Absurd: its tendency to externalize and project outwards what is happening in the deeper recesses of mind, but grotesquely magnified and exaggerated. Pinter used this exaggeration and explicitness of human psychological processes in his plays to present a realistic vision of the world deprived of faith in purposefulness of human existence.

According to Pinter, his play *A Kind of Alaska* was influenced by the book "Awakenings" by neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks, which recounts the remarkable story of a group of patients who contracted sleeping-sickness during the great epidemic just after World War I. Frozen for decades in a trance-like state, these men and women were given up as hopeless until 1969, when Dr. Sacks gave them the then-new drug L-DOPA, resulting in an astonishing, explosive, "awakening" effect. The book recounts the moving case histories of these patients, their lives, and the extraordinary transformations which went with their reintroduction to a changed world.