I have no doubt that history will recognize Harold Pinter as one of the most influential dramatists of all time, a perennial inspiration for the way we look at modern theater. If other playwrights use characters and plots to put life under a microscope for audiences, Pinter hands them a kaleidoscope and says, “Have at it.” He crafts multifaceted plays that speak to the depth of his reality and teases and threatens his audience with dangerous truths. In *No Man’s Land*, Pinter has Hirst attack Spooner, who may or may not be his old friend: “This is outrageous! Who are you? What are you doing in my house?”¹ Hirst then launches into a monologue beginning: “I might even show you my photograph album. You might even see a face in it which might remind you of your own, of what you once were.”² Pinter never fully resolves Spooner’s identity, but the men’s actions towards each other are perfectly clear: with exacting language and wit, Pinter has constructed a magnificent struggle between the two for power and identity.

In 1958, early in his career, Pinter wrote *The Hothouse*, an incredibly funny play based on a traumatic personal experience as a lab rat at London’s Maudsley Hospital, proudly founded as a modern psychiatric institution, rather than an asylum. The story of *The Hothouse*, set in a mental hospital of some sort, is centered around the death of one patient, “6457,” and the unexplained pregnancy of another, “6459.” Details around both incidents are very murky, but varying amounts of culpability for both seem to fall on the institution’s leader, Roote, and his second-in-command, Gibbs. Fearing the play to be too political, Pinter shelved it for several decades. Later,

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² Pinter, *Complete Works: Four*. 137
looking back at the 1982 American premiere, Pinter noted *The Hothouse* was likely a play written well before its time:

…whereas *The Hothouse* “would have been taken as a fantasy, as something remote and surrealistic” when it was written in 1958, “I felt that was not the case then, and I know it is not the case now. In 1982 it cannot be denied that it fits in with the facts of life today. The real political hypocrisy and brutality are now blatant. We cannot be fooled by them any longer.”

I recently chose to direct a production of *The Hothouse* that premiered February 2011 in Oberlin College’s Little Theater, intending to find the dramatic equilibrium between the “reality” in the world of the play and what Pinter feared would seem like surreal fantasy. The frequently overt humor of the play seemed delightfully mismatched with its deeply political and satirical content, and using the former to accentuate the latter posed a challenge to me as a director. However, as I studied the play and Pinter further, I found that the parallel in Pinter’s writing between what is decidedly funny and what is decidedly not is precisely calculated to be an effective, dynamic literary tactic.

The Oxford English Dictionary’s most modern definition of humor is: “The faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it in speech, writing, or other composition; jocose imagination or treatment of a subject. Distinguished from wit as being less purely intellectual, and as having a sympathetic quality in virtue of which it often becomes allied to pathos.” The dark, extreme sense of humor Pinter uses in *The Hothouse* strengthens and brings forward the social and satirical content that inherently dwells beneath the surface of the play. This Pinteresque formula of accentuating reality with theatricality creates a dynamic equilibrium of humor and menace.

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In physical chemistry, the term *dynamic equilibrium* refers to “a state of dynamic balance in a reversible chemical reaction when the reaction velocities in both directions are equal.”\(^5\)

Within the human body, dynamic equilibrium is “the condition of balance between varying, shifting, and opposing forces which is characteristic of living processes.”\(^6\)

Pinter’s humorous devices act as opposing forces to his plays’ shocking content. This push/pull energy constructs a very effective rhythm within Pinter’s writing that translates well to the stage. This form of equilibrium is largely the concept around which I directed *The Hothouse*.

Irving Wardle famously defined a number of Pinter’s plays as “comedies of menace;”\(^7\)—plays that depict very dark realities under more innocuous surfaces. On these surfaces, humor often manifests in forms as varied as slapstick, black comedy and wordplay. Pinter touches on this in his Nobel lecture, “Art, Truth and Politics.” Talking about political theater, he says:

> The characters must be allowed to breathe their own air. The author cannot confine and constrict them to satisfy his own taste or disposition or prejudice. He must be prepared to approach them from a variety of angles, from a full and uninhibited range of perspectives, take them by surprise, perhaps, occasionally, but nevertheless give them the freedom to go which way they will.\(^8\)

Pinter uses the humorous elements of his writing to, as he says, take his characters by surprise.

Often this humor can also surprise or shock the audience. This surprise or shock, while pervasive in Pinter’s theater, comes out much more overtly in his poetry:

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American Football
A Reflection on the Gulf War

Hallelujah!
It works.
We blew the shit out of them.
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We blew the shit right back up their own ass
And out their fucking ears.

It works.
We blew the shit out of them.
They suffocated in their own shit!

Hallelujah.
Praise the Lord for all good things.

We blew them into fucking shit.
They are eating it.
Praise the Lord for all good things.

We blew their balls into shards of dust,
Into shards of fucking dust.

We did it.

Now I want you to come over here and kiss me on the mouth.9

This poem, an unabashed criticism of the Gulf War in 1991, was so shocking when it was written that many newspapers refused to print it; one paper replied to Pinter, “The trouble is the language, it’s the obscene language.”10 “American Football” is shocking not only in its abundant foul language, but in the homoerotic undertones revealed most overtly in the last line, and in its publication at a time of otherwise widespread patriotism.

Michael Billington, Pinter’s biographer, characterized this poem’s “exaggerated tone of jingoistic, anally obsessed bravado” as hiding a “controlled rage”11 within Pinter, which shows up both in Pinter’s commentary on the poem’s publication history and in the poem’s subject matter itself:

[American] tanks had bulldozers, and during the ground attack they were used as sweepers. They buried, as far as we know, an untold number of Iraqis alive… My poem actually says, ‘They suffocated in their own shit.’ It is obscene, but it is referring to obscene facts.12

12 Pinter, Harold. “Blowing up the Media.”
“American Football” is made all the more powerful as a reflection of reality. The poem’s voice, an exaggerated American embodiment, is rude, raucous and rancorous. American football players are living, breathing armored tanks obscenely rewarded for mowing down every human in their paths; the poem’s tone captures the violence behind this metaphor and translates it into a subtext for the American bulldozers. On one hand, this self-assured voice exudes blissful ignorance of the malevolent nature of its actions; it crudely and self-righteously praises its Lord in lauding the destruction it has caused. On the other hand, this praise can read as the voice openly flaunting its malevolent atrocities, especially when paired with its brazenly macho request to “come over here and kiss me on the mouth.” These ludicrous contradictions give the voice a certain theatricality that contrasts with the horrific reality of the war; Pinter is evoking real people who were buried alive. This greatly strengthens the poem’s satirical message.

*The Hothouse* uses very similar tactics to “American Football,” frequently catching its audience off guard. The same kind of tension between reality and theatricality can be seen in an exchange between Roote and Lush, a debauched staff member lower down on the food chain:

Roote. Give us a drink.  
Lush fills the glasses.  
Lush. Why have you given up visiting the patients?  
Roote. I’ve given up, that’s all.  
Lush. But I thought you were getting results?  
Roote. (staring at him) Cheers.  
Lush. Weren’t you getting results?  
Roote. (staring at him) Drink your whisky.  
Lush. But surely you achieved results with one patient very recently. What was the number? 6459, I think.  
Roote throws his whisky in Lush’s face. Lush wipes his face.  
Lush. Let me fill you up. (He takes Roote’s glass, pours, brings the glass to Roote, gives it to him.) Yes, quite a substantial result, I should have thought.  
Roote throws his whisky in Lush’s face. Lush wipes his face. Lush takes Roote’s glass, pours, brings the glass to Roote, gives it to him.  
Lush. But perhaps I’m thinking of 6457.  
Lush grabs Roote’s glass and holds it above his head, with his own. Slowly he lowers his own.  
Lush. Cheers.  
He drinks, and then gives Roote his glass.13

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This moment builds in ridiculous humor to a climax; immediately afterwards there is a pause, Roote berates Lush, and the subject of conversation uncomfortably switches to the heating. Roote’s conflict with Lush teems below the surface before this fight, and afterwards the conflict silently escalates as Roote learns just how much Lush seems to know about his dealings; it again comes to a head when Lush notes that a duck in the understaff raffle is “as dead as patient 6457, if not deader.” But while Lush’s needling contains several serious accusations, the physicality of the fight it sparks is anything but serious. Even though as “played by Pinter and a subversively nonchalant Tony Haygarth, it became a classic piece of comedic business,” the fight itself is based on a very real incident. Pinter tells us:

I was in Ireland in 1950...touring with Mac. We were in a place called Roscrea and one night I was drinking in a pub with Pat Magee and Joe Nolan who was both the business manager and an acting member of the company. We were all pretty pissed and Joe Nolan raised his glass to me and said, “Cheers, you filthy Yid.” I threw my whisky straight in his face and he took off his glasses and wiped his eyes. He then said, “Another whisky for the gentleman,” handed me the glass and repeated his remark: “Cheers, you filthy Yid.” Again, I threw my whisky in his face. This happened a third time and then he wiped his eyes and said, “I can’t afford any more whiskies.” Joe Nolan was pretty stupid, so it was hard to take his anti-Semitism too seriously, but I never forgot the incident and worked it into the play.

I directed the whisky-throwing moment in my production with this real incident in mind.

Afterwards, Roote began to seriously distrust Lush, genuinely dismissing most of his suggestions, and Lush took several opportunities to get back at Roote, later pouring his whisky out onto Roote’s shoes. Roote and Lush get into several overt fights, but this is the beginning of a cold war between the two men, the stakes of which are Roote’s integrity and, as we later find out, both Roote’s and Lush’s lives. This kind of relationship is probably why Michael Billington said, “The Hothouse is one of Pinter’s best plays: one that deals with the worm-eaten corruption of

14 Pinter, The Hothouse. 104.

bureaucracy, the secrecy of government, the disjunction between language and experience.”

Though the play is rife with slapstick and broad humor, these elements actually exacerbate its darker elements.

“American Football” is certainly ludicrous, expressing pride in the unspeakable and clearly going beyond the scientific or intellectual to appeal to pathos. The poem, a condensed exemplar of Pinter’s writing, takes disturbing elements from reality in order to enhance their symbolic content. In The Hothouse, Pinter obfuscates these kinds of elements and relegates them to subtext, both darkening them further with a sense of atrocity and lightening them with the sometimes theatrical or ridiculous facades under which they reside. The kind of satire personified in the overzealous sports heroes of “American Football” dwells deep within characters like Roote and Lush. While Roote and Lush may inhabit their dramatic scenarios very realistically, it is when Pinter escalates these scenarios to ridiculous levels that they have the potential to become their most poignant. The best response Roote can muster to Lush’s accusation of rape and murder is to throw whisky in Lush’s face. This slapstick rebuttal has the effect of being an extremely humorous retort to an extremely serious assault. In this moment, both buffoonery and menace are operating at full force in opposite directions; on one hand the audience is laughing at the absurdity of the situation, but on the other they have just seen another piece of evidence supporting the goings on in the institution being quite sinister in nature. Such an extreme defense on Roote’s part indicates the severity of the situation, whether or not Lush’s accusations are true. Pinter frequently assaults his audience with exceptionally disturbing and threatening facts of this

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16 Billington, The Life and Work of Harold Pinter. 105.
ilk, challenging actors and directors to bring forth their reality while acknowledging their sometimes over-the-top nature.

Pinter’s dialogue is very rhythmic and deliberate. Depending on how it is played, this rhythm may seem hesitating, patient, feverish, or any combination of the three. Pinter’s ubiquitous pauses contribute to this rhythm and can play in ways just as varied as his dialogue. Peter Hall, a frequent collaborator of Pinter’s, advised, “A pause in Pinter is as important as a line. They are all there for a reason. Three dots is a hesitation, a pause is a fairly mundane crisis and a silence is some sort of crisis.”17 Pinter, speaking about productions that hold religiously to this method, said, “These damn silences and pauses are all to do with what’s going on…and if they don’t make any sense, then I always say cut them.”18 Pinter’s self-deprecating denunciation of the pausophilia his work inspired accentuates that, from a playwright’s point of view, the pauses are of course very important, but a pause should be a shared line of dialogue for everyone in the conversation onstage. Just as different actors may choose different operative words for the same sentence, each pause will have a different character or may not even outwardly be timed as a pause at all.

As Hall describes it, a pause is best interpreted as an acting beat rather than a strict dictator of onstage pacing and rhythm. A pause-heavy section of Pinter can easily read like comic revue:

**Roote.** Which one is 6459?  
**Gibbs.** She’s a woman in her thirties—  
**Roote.** That means nothing to me, get on with it. What does she look like? Perhaps I know her.  
**Gibbs.** Oh, there’s no doubt that you know her, sir.  
**Roote.** What does she look like?  
**Pause.**  
**Gibbs.** Fattish.  
**Roote.** Darkheaded?

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17 “Cut the pauses…says Pinter.” February 11, 2007. [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/stage/theatre/article1364686.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/stage/theatre/article1364686.ece)

18 “Cut the pauses…says Pinter.”
Gibbs. (Sitting.) Not fairheaded, sir.
Pause.
Roote. Small?
Gibbs. Certainly not tall.
Pause.
Roote. Quite a sensual sort of face?
Gibbs. Quite sensual, yes, sir.
Roote. Yes.
Pause.
Roote. Yes, she’s got a sensual sort of face, hasn’t she?
Gibbs. I should say it was sensual, sir, yes.
Roote. Wobbles when she walks?
Gibbs. Oh, possibly a trifle, sir.
Roote. Yes, she wobbles. She wobbles in her left buttock.
Gibbs. Her left, sir?
Roote. Well, one of them. I’m sure of it.
Gibbs. Yes, she has a slight wobble, sir.
Roote. Yes, of course she has.
Pause.
Roote. She’s got a slight wobble. Whenever she walks anywhere…she wobbles. Likes eating toffees, too…when she can get any.
Gibbs. Quite true, sir.
Pause.
Roote. No—I don’t think I know her.19

In my production of The Hothouse we played this section as rapid-fire, a choice that came very naturally based on the increasing suspense of the moment; the ending line consistently garnered uncomfortable laughter. The moment’s ever-so-slight pauses were very quick, jarring crises that briefly exposed the exchange’s underbelly. The more information Roote guesses correctly, the further he implicates himself in 6459’s pregnancy, especially after having repeatedly denied knowledge of it. Gibbs, such an apparent straight arrow in so many ways, becomes suspect as well; soon after this scene Lush brashly inquires, “Are you the father, Gibbs…Or the old man? Is the old man the father?”20 What was at stake as Roote and Gibbs discussed 6459 in this pungent exchange gave the scene a distinct build, and the rising tension paired with a lack of clear resolution made the moment much more exciting while maintaining the play’s dynamic equilibrium. To interpret Roote’s final answer as a clear admission of guilt would absolve Gibbs

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19 Pinter, The Hothouse. 40-42.
20 Pinter, The Hothouse. 53.
of responsibility. Conversely, the line as an honest denial would absolve Roote to a degree. The scene is constructed such that if Roote might be guilty, but Gibbs is overlooking his culpability, both men’s motives are drawn into question, as are those of the institution they run. This tension creates an atmosphere of menace beneath the overt humor of the exchange.

The beat between Roote and Gibbs regarding 6459’s appearance mirrors one from ten minutes earlier in which Roote inquires about patient 6457’s appearance with the same set of criteria and receives identically noncommittal but affirmative answers. Gibbs never once contradicts Roote in either interrogation, building the moment sharply and suspensefully towards an uncertain and exciting climax. Later, Gibbs and Lush consistently contradict each other to great humorous effect in describing Lamb to Roote, evoking the same kind of tension a third time. I directed these sections to be even more rapid-fire than the first, all echoing a pattern of dialogue from another famous Pinteresque work:

Abbott. Well, let’s see, we have on the bags, Who’s on first, What’s on second, I Don’t Know is on third...
Costello. That’s what I want to find out.
Abbott. I say Who’s on first, What’s on second, I Don’t Know’s on third.
Costello. Are you the manager?
Abbott. Yes.
Costello. You gonna be the coach too?
Abbott. Yes.
Costello. And you don’t know the fellows’ names?
Abbott. Well I should.
Costello. Well then who’s on first?
Abbott. Yes.
Costello. I mean the fellow’s name.
Abbott. Who.
Costello. The guy on first.
Abbott. Who.
Costello. The first baseman.
Abbott. Who.
Costello. The guy playing…
Abbott. Who is on first!
Costello. I’m asking YOU who’s on first.
Abbott. That’s the man’s name. 21

For Abbott and Costello, this rapidly building rhythm is a natural part of comic revue and is calculated perfectly to provoke laughter in their audiences. Pinter uses this same device successfully in *The Hothouse* to provoke both laughter and dramatic tension. The scene has very high stakes; Roote may expose his possible culpability for 6459’s pregnancy to Gibbs, who may already know. This makes this moment all the more dynamic while still maintaining the play’s senses of uneasiness and uncertainty. The humorous writing style of this beat greatly contributes to its menacing elements, and the combination of those elements creates the dynamic equilibrium integral to the play’s style and effectiveness.

Charles Spencer, reviewing a 1995 production of *The Hothouse* starring Pinter as Roote, argued the following:

> Watching Harold Pinter’s starring performance in his own play *The Hothouse*, you realise that we lost a magnificent comic actor when this former denizen of tatty reps transformed himself into Britain’s greatest living dramatist. The play itself reinforces the impression of recent years that, although Pinter’s pause-filled plays undoubtedly are menacing, enigmatic, and all the other adjectives associated with that handy word Pinteresque, he is, perhaps above all else, a wonderfully funny writer. I have a hunch that while he was establishing his reputation as an important dramatist, Pinter and his directors deliberately played down his gift for gags, concentrating instead on all that was murky, avant-garde and unsettling in his work.22

Spencer here observes the traditional separation of the humorous and the Pinteresque. Closely reading Pinter’s texts can expose the humor he uses to augment the unsettling things he is writing about. Susan Smith, analyzing the term “Pinteresque” in her paper “‘Pinteresque’ in the Popular Press,” concludes that this term of many meanings has a fairly uniform style when ascribed to Pinter’s writing and others’. One example she uses of this style is as follows:

> The dialogue goes like this.
> **Receptionist.** First I must ask you to sign the credit card slip for your room.
> **Me.** Why?
> **Receptionist.** I haven’t had a fax or letter from you, so I have to ask you.

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Me. But you took down my credit card number!
Receptionist. It’s our policy.
Owner. (Emerging from the bar:) Any problems?…
[Receptionist.] No, no…They were confused, they didn’t understand our policy…
[Owner.] Confused eh?
Husband. Suppose we hadn’t turned up—what would you have done then?
Receptionist. We wouldn’t have done anything because we haven’t got your address.
Me. Yes you have. I gave it to you over the phone.
Receptionist. We require written evidence.
Me. You didn’t say so at the time.
Receptionist. It’s our policy…”

This exchange has the same “Pinteresque” dialogue structure as the passages before. On its surface, the dialogue is very sparse and establishes the perspectives of each character and the rules by which they abide (“It’s our policy”), but the conflict below is much deeper. The couple checking into the hotel aren’t just talking about policy, they are attempting to gain access to their room and protect their money. What can read and play as a curt exchange in which simple bits of important information pass over their relayers’ heads can simultaneously read and play as a struggle for power filled with escalating accusations and deep mutual hatred. This characteristic of Pinter’s work exposes the multifaceted nature of dialogue so as to gently expose its deep and often menacing motives while maintaining the mostly polite, cheery, tactful, humorous, and quintessentially British veneers that must by societal necessity mask those motives.

The subject matter of Pinter’s plays is almost entirely drawn from his personal experience and other real-life events in which he has invested himself. Where “American Football” is based on the Gulf War, and The Hothouse is based on Pinter’s experience at the Maudsley Hospital, each play has some point of inception in real life experience. Billington examines Pinter’s style in this regard:

All his early major plays – The Birthday Party, The Hothouse, The Caretaker, The Homecoming – were triggered, to a greater or lesser degree, by personal experience; but Pinter’s genius is to apprehend the

universal meaning that lies within the particular moment. This is what distinguishes the true artist from the mere recorder of events: the ability to incorporate her or his experience and at the same time transcend it.  

Where Pinter’s early plays are based on personal experience, his later and more overtly political plays draw largely from current events of their time. A constant thread through Pinter’s career as a playwright is his ability to inject reality into his plays. In particular, Pinter’s experience at the Maudsley seems to have a profound influence on *The Hothouse*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*. Pinter tells the story thusly:

I went along in 1954 to the Maudsley Hospital in London…as a guinea-pig. They were offering ten bob or something for a guinea-pig and I needed the money desperately. I read a bona fide advertisement and went along. It was all above board, as it seemed. Nurses and doctors all in white. They tested my blood-pressure first. Perfectly all right. I was put in a room with electrodes. They said, “Just sit there for a while and relax.” I’d no idea what was going to happen. Suddenly, there was a most appalling noise through the earphones and I nearly jumped through the roof. I felt my heart go…BANG! The noise lasted a few seconds and then was switched off. The doctor came in grinning and said, “Well, that really gave you a start, didn’t it?” I said, “It certainly did.” And they said, “Thanks very much.” There was no interrogation, as in [*The Hothouse*], but it left a deep impression on me.

Pinter sees no legitimate scientific application for this kind of treatment either at the Maudsley or in *The Hothouse*’s soundproof room. Pinter’s recounting of the incident is not at all far off from how Gibbs and Cutts subject Lamb to what they will only refer to as “experiments.” Neither Gibbs nor Cutts will give Lamb a straight answer as to why he is being tested, leaving Lamb blissfully unaware that these tests will in fact be a form of torture. Upon being assured he is part of scientific experimentation, Lamb readily accepts that he is under no danger; the same kind of psychological trick that was played on Pinter in real life. Pinter exposes the disregard for human life in real-life psychological method and uses the interrogation scene to comically exaggerate this disturbing fact.

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26 Pinter, *The Hothouse*. 63.
The interrogation is a very funny scene with very disturbing undertones. Billington characterizes the scene as “comic, terrifying and structurally pivotal…both parties to [the] interrogation, questioner and victim, are contaminated by the process. Lamb begs for more questions, as if addicted to the drug of self-revelation, while Miss Cutts is sexually aroused by the control-room.”27 From the beginning, when Lamb enters the room with Cutts, things are clearly amiss. Lamb, however, seems quite oblivious to this fact, and plays the part of the good—if sycophantic—test subject. It is only when the electrodes and earphones are introduced that Lamb begins to sense something is wrong. The audience, moreover, gets brief glimpses of the kind of procedure Lamb is about to undergo:

Lamb. Earphones?
Gibbs. Yes, same principle. Plugged in at the socket on your head, plugged in at the other end in our control room. (Cheerily:) Don’t worry, they’re nice long leads, all of them. Plenty of leeway. No danger of strangulation.
Lamb. (laughing) Oh yes. Good.
Gibbs. By the way, your predecessor used to give us a helping hand occasionally, too, you know. Before you came of course.
Lamb. My predecessor?
Cutts. Could you just keep still a second, Mr Lamb, while I plug in the earphones?
Lamb is still. She plugs.
Cutts. Thank you.28

When I directed this scene, I added a “pop” sound when the earphones were plugged in; Lamb jumped in fear upon hearing the noise, and Cutts was clearly sexually stimulated at what she had just done. Hearing what Lamb heard helped the audience see the scene from Lamb’s perspective, which made things all the more disturbing when the fate of his predecessor began to come into question. To calm Lamb down, Gibbs put on a mask of cheeriness counter to his previous stoicism; this worked both to keep Lamb in his chair and to amplify the menacing atmosphere.

27 Billington, The Life and Work of Harold Pinter. 105.
28 Pinter, The Hothouse. 66.
the audience had begun to understand. The audience laughed along with Lamb at Gibbs’s joke about strangulation, but the tone of the scene had clearly begun to sour.

After frenetically asking Lamb a series of questions about women and his social life over a microphone, Cutts and Gibbs play several sounds through Lamb’s earphones loud enough to knock him to the floor. I created several rather loud, grating sounds for my production that the audience shared in hearing. After this traumatic moment, Cutts asks the following:

Cutts. Are you virgo intacta?
Lamb. What?
Cutts. Are you virgo intacta?
Cutts. Are you virgo intacta?
Lamb. Yes, I am, actually. I’ll make no secret of it.
Cutts. Have you always been virgo intacta?
Lamb. Oh yes, always. Always.
Cutts. From the word go?
Lamb. Go? Oh yes. From the word go.²⁹

In my production, we slowed the pace a great deal for this moment; this allowed for a reprieve from the rapid-fire nature of the interrogation thus far. Cutts began this line of questioning while Lamb was getting back into his chair, almost knocking him back over with shock; this consistently garnered uncomfortable laughter. The audience almost definitely sees Lamb’s being brought to the soundproof room as a ploy to unfairly scapegoat him for 6459’s pregnancy. The embarrassing revelation that he is a virgin unquestionably absolves him and reminds the audience of his predicament. The fact that Cutts and Gibbs keep interrogating him makes clear their malicious intent, and what initially almost looks to be a quirky game of questions begins to descend into a disturbing torture scene. After a tangent about “the law of the Wolf Cub Pack,”³⁰ Cutts asks, “Do women frighten you?”³¹ and she and Gibbs briskly alternate through twenty-two

²⁹ Pinter, The Hothouse. 73-74.
³⁰ Pinter, The Hothouse. 74.
³¹ Pinter, The Hothouse. 74.
more clarifying questions. When they give Lamb even a second to respond, the subject instantly changes:

Lamb. Well, it depends what you mean by frighten—
Gibbs. Do you ever wake up in the middle of the night?
Lamb. Sometimes, yes, for a glass of water.32

The glass of water garnered one of the biggest laughs in my production, but the audience’s laughter quickly turned to discomfort as the interrogation ended. Gibbs and Cutts built from speaking in a low register to almost screaming; at this level, the sexual undertones between them came out fully, and the uncomfortable and perverse idea that Lamb’s torture was a kinky game began to pervade the room. Hearing arousal in the interrogators’ voices was simultaneously hilarious and threatening, punctuating the dynamic equilibrium of the scene.

Pinter’s 1958 play, *The Birthday Party*, includes a very similar interrogation sequence, though without electrodes or earphones. Goldberg and McCann, two men of questionable profession, come to a seaside boarding house in search of Stanley, whose origins are also a curiosity. Stanley, who may have been a medical prisoner like Lamb, clearly fears Goldberg and McCann. When the three are finally alone together, Goldberg and McCann subject Stanley to a long interrogation filled with questions equally ridiculous to those in *The Hothouse*:

Goldberg. Is the number 846 possible or necessary?
Stanley. Both.
Goldberg. Wrong! Is the number 846 possible or necessary?
Stanley. Both.
Goldberg. Wrong! It’s necessary but not possible.
Stanley. Both.
Goldberg. Wrong! Why do you think the number 846 is necessarily possible?
Stanley. Must be.
Goldberg. Wrong! It’s only necessarily necessary! We admit possibility only after we grant necessity. It is possible because necessary but by no means necessary through possibility. The possibility can only be assumed after the proof of necessity.
McCann. Right!
Goldberg. Right? Of course right! We’re right and you’re wrong, Webber, all along the line.33

The wordplay in this section could almost come directly out of a Tom Stoppard play. However, underneath the clever wording lies a clearly malicious intent; it seems Goldberg is asking these numerical questions solely to accuse Stanley of being wrong. What begins as a niggling on Stanley’s nerves becomes profound agitation, the likes of which drives Stanley insane.

\[
\text{Goldberg. Why did the chicken cross the road?} \\
\text{Stanley. He wanted to—he wanted to—he wanted to…} \\
\text{McCann. He doesn’t know!} \\
\text{Goldberg. Why did the chicken cross the road?} \\
\text{Stanley. He wanted to—he wanted to…} \\
\text{Goldberg. Why did the chicken cross the road?} \\
\text{Stanley. He wanted…} \\
\text{McCann. He doesn’t know! He doesn’t know which came first!} \\
\text{Goldberg. Which came first?} \\
\text{McCann. Chicken? Egg? Which came first?} \\
\text{Goldberg and McCann. Which came first? Which came first? Which came first?} \\
\text{Stanley screams.}\]^{34}

The questions throughout the interrogation are an increasingly silly series of non-sequiturs. Taken on their own, the questions would be rather funny. But watching these vapid, random questions lead to a profound emotional effect on Stanley creates a strong equilibrium with the underlying humor of the situation. Goldberg and McCann subjugate Stanley with limericks and logic games, contaminating this type of verbiage's usually innocent nature.

*The Dumb Waiter*, written in 1957 and first performed in 1960, takes this kind of verbiage to the other extreme, allowing its vaudevillian qualities to dominate the play’s voice. Ben and Gus, two assassins, spend the play in a room waiting for their next intended target to arrive. They pass the time exchanging humorous banter about semantics and dealing with a mysterious dumb waiter in the room, through which the two receive increasingly complicated food orders such as “Macaroni Pastitsio [and] Ormitha Macarounada.”^{35} To placate the people upstairs, the two

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34 Pinter, *Complete Works: One*. 62.

35 Pinter, *Complete Works: One*. 152.
decide to send some of Gus’s snack food up. Gus yells up the elevator shaft to announce the bountiful contents of the dumb waiter: “Three McVitie and Price! One Lyons Red Label! One Smith’s Crisps! One Eccles cake! One Fruit and Nut!…Cadbury’s!…One bottle of milk! Half a pint! (He looks at the label.) Express dairy!”36 This inventory is absurdly pitiful; the cheap food cannot hope to fulfill the exorbitant needs from upstairs. When the two hit-men try to contact the people upstairs through a speaking tube, they learn just how useless their snacks proved:

Gus. (tube at mouth) I can’t hear a thing.
Ben. Now you speak! Speak into it!
Gus looks at Ben, then speaks into the tube.
Gus. The larder’s bare!
Ben. Give me that! (He grabs the tube and puts it to his mouth.) Good evening, I’m sorry to—bother you, but we just thought we’d better let you know that we haven’t got anything left. We sent up all we had. There’s no more food down here. (He brings the tube slowly to his ear.) What? (To mouth.) What? (To ear. He listens. To mouth.) No, all we had we sent up. (To ear. He listens. To mouth.) Oh, I’m very sorry to hear that. (To ear. He listens. To Gus.) The Eccles cake was stale. (He listens. To Gus.) The chocolate was melted. (He listens. To Gus.) The milk was sour.
Gus. What about the crisps?
Ben. The biscuits were mouldy. (He glares at Gus. Tube to mouth.) Well, we’re very sorry about that. (Tube to ear.) What? (To mouth.) What? (To ear.) Yes. Yes. (To mouth.) Yes certainly. Certainly. Right away. (To ear. The voice has ceased. He hangs up the tube. Excitedly) Did you hear that?
Gus. What?37

The rhythm here recalls Abbott and Costello, especially with Ben repeatedly saying “What?” before he speaks it into the tube. This conversation punctuates that the possibility of a real restaurant operating upstairs is laughably unlikely. However, what is on the surface a schticky vaudeville scenario is actually much more complex. As the senior hit-man on the job, Ben often takes control of the situation at hand; this instance is no exception. Ben forces Gus to give up his snack food, communicates with the people upstairs when Gus cannot, and takes charge of the plan for the hit; poor Gus is unable to properly remember all of the instructions, forgetting that he must draw his pistol. Ben also recounts several disturbing stories from the newspaper, and displays a good deal of open hostility towards Gus. Something fishy is clearly going on, and

36 Pinter, Complete Works: One. 152.
37 Pinter, Complete Works: One. 155-156.
while the audience is unaware of its exact nature, it pollutes moments like this one with a veneer of distrust. The ending of the play heavily implies that Gus is the intended hit; even if Ben is interpreted as having been unaware of this fact, a good director would make sure to monitor the slow, unassuming build up until its sudden revelation. This build largely manifests itself in the dynamic equilibrium created in *The Dumb Waiter*’s increasingly uneasy comedy routines.

* A Night Out, written in 1959 and performed in 1960, is a much more realistic play than *The Hothouse* or *The Dumb Waiter*. The plot of the play concerns an office drone in his late twenties, Albert, who obligatorily attends an office party against his mother’s protestations. Pinter, eschewing the more ridiculous scenarios of his earliest plays, uses his wit exceptionally subtly throughout *A Night Out*. For example, at the party, the chief accountant, Gidney, strikes up a conversation with Albert:

  Gidney. *(drinking, with Joyce)* Anyway, I’m thinking of moving on. You stay too long in a place you go daft. After all, with my qualifications I could go anywhere.  
  He sees Albert at the bar:  
  Gidney. Couldn’t I, Stokes?  
  Albert. What?  
  Gidney. I was saying, with my qualifications I could go anywhere. I could go anywhere and be anything.  
  Albert. So could I.  
  Gidney. Could you? What qualifications have you got?  
  Albert. Well, I’ve got a few, you know.38

Gidney immediately changes the subject back to his own imminent successes, abandoning talk of qualifications. Neither man, it seems, is able to back up his self-aggrandizement and both mostly retreat from the issue. This exchange exposes the kind of verbal defenses to which these two men are predisposed. Pinter had written a very similar exchange in *The Hothouse*, albeit one with much more bravado:

  Rooto. Well, I’m sick to death of it! The patients, the staff, the understaff, the whole damn thing!  
  Gibbs. I’m sorry to hear that, sir.  
  Rooto. It’s bleeding me to death.

38 Pinter, *Complete Works: One*. 222.
Lush. Then why do you continue?
Roote looks at him.
Roote. Because I’m a delegate.
Lush. A delegate of what?
Roote. (calmly) I tell you I’m a delegate.
Lush. A delegate of what?
They stare at each other.
Roote. Not only me. All of us. That bastard there. (To Gibbs.) Aren’t you?
Gibbs. I am.
Roote. There you are.
Lush. You haven’t explained yourself.
Roote. Who hasn’t?
Lush. You can’t explain yourself.
Roote. I can’t?
Lush. Explain yourself.
Gibbs. He’s drunk.
Roote. (moving to him) Explain yourself, Lush.
Lush. No, you! You explain yourself!
Roote. Be careful, sonny.
Lush. (rising) You’re a delegate, are you?
Roote. (facing him squarely) I am.
Lush. On whose authority? With what power are you entrusted? By whom were you appointed? Of what are you a delegate?
Roote. I’m a delegate! (He hits him in the stomach.) I was entrusted! (He hits him in the stomach.) I’m a delegate! (He hits him in the stomach.) I was appointed!
Lush backs, crouched, slowly across the stage, Roote following him.
Roote. Delegated! (He hits him in the stomach.) Appointed! (He hits him in the stomach.) Entrusted! He hits him in the stomach. Lush sinks to the floor. Roote stands over him and shouts:
Roote. I AM AUTHORIZED!39

In *A Night Out*, Albert and Gidney wisely choose to avoid further exposing each others’ inadequacies; Pinter allows his characters’ senses of self-importance to clash ever so slightly, wittily revealing how unfounded they are. This scene from *The Hothouse* takes a much more extreme route, crescendoing the literal and figurative greenhouse effect in the play. Though Roote has had the porter, Tubb, turn off all the heating in the building and asserts that “the temperature must have dropped,”40 the atmosphere of the play has begun to palpably thicken. Lush, driven to his breaking point, boldly chooses to drive Roote over the edge with him.

Roote’s and Lush’s senses of self-importance are so overly profound and unfounded as to lead to

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39 Pinter, *The Hothouse*. 130-133.

40 Pinter, *The Hothouse*. 126.
a serious walloping. Six hits in the stomach is ridiculous overkill for any disagreement of the
sort, and Roote’s assault proves both hysterical and scary.

When I staged this scene, Lush was incapacitated on the floor after the first three hits, and
was then recipient to three painful-looking kicks to the stomach. This proved just as dramatically
satisfying as it was terrifying. The previously boisterous Lush was silenced at last. Roote was
clearly willing to take things to the limit to protect his reputation and standing, even if it was
only a sham at this point. His violent tirade is an effectively written slapstick routine, but when
staged with realistic combat, the slapstick went far past the comfortable Three Stooges zone.
This transgression counteracted the absurdity of the situation to form a better equilibrium in the
scene. While Roote’s exclamations are delightfully satirical, his actions go so far as to remind the
audience of his malicious and self-preserving intentions.

*The Caretaker*, written and first performed in 1960, propelled Pinter to stardom. In the play,
a brain-damaged victim of shock therapy, Aston, brings an old tramp, Davies, to his home. When
Aston leaves briefly to fetch Davies’s bag for him, Davies begins to root through Aston’s things.
Aston’s brother, Mick, enters and attacks Davies physically and verbally. When Aston returns
with Davies’s bag, Mick begins to play a game of keep-away, which turns into the following
situation:

> *Aston picks up the bag.*
> **Aston**. You thieving bastard…you thieving skate…let me get my—
> **Davies**. Here you are. (*Aston offers the bag to Davies.*)
> **Mick** grabs it. **Aston** takes it.
> **Mick** grabs it. **Davies** reaches for it.
> **Aston** takes it. **Mick** reaches for it.
> **Aston** gives it to **Davies**. **Mick** grabs it.
> Pause.
> **Aston** takes it. **Davies** takes it. **Mick** takes it. **Davies** reaches for it. **Aston** takes it.
> Pause.
> **Aston** gives it to **Mick**. **Mick** gives it to **Davies**.
> **Davies** grasps it to him.
> Pause.
Soon after, breaking a pause, Davies delivers a delayed punchline: “Eh, look here, I been thinking. This ain’t my bag.” This section recalls the vaudevillian tendencies of *The Dumb Waiter* and even moreso Roote’s assault of Lush in *The Hothouse*, but deals with them in a very true-to-life scenario. Like in *The Hothouse* and *The Dumb Waiter*, the physical choreography is very deliberately written and has the danger of playing as slapstick. However, as with Roote and Lush, there is a very dynamic undercurrent of menace in the scuffle. David Jones, writing about his 2003 production of the play at the Roundabout Theatre Company, characterized this kind of undercurrent thusly:

> Every conversation becomes a poker game, an evasion—anything to avoid an admission, a confession, or even a fact that could be used against you. But these flights of evasion often have the most hilarious exuberance to them. I believe Harold is a great comic writer, a great satirist as well as a man who has earned the right to appropriate Eliot's line: “I will show you fear in a handful of dust.” The trap with Harold's work, for performers and audiences, is to approach it too earnestly or portentously. I have always tried to interpret his plays with as much humor and humanity as possible. There is always mischief lurking in the darkest corners. The world of *The Caretaker* is a bleak one, its characters damaged and lonely. But they are all going to survive. And in their dance to that end they show a frenetic vitality and a wry sense of the ridiculous that balance heartache and laughter. Funny, but not too funny. As Pinter wrote, back in 1960: “As far as I am concerned *The Caretaker* IS funny, up to a point. Beyond that point, it ceases to be funny, and it is because of that point that I wrote it.”

The sequence is very funny up to the point Davies finally gets his bag; exhausted and violated, he retreats. Everyone, the audience included, is then given a moment to reflect on what just happened. This supports the palpable stakes in the scene, and the reality within this exaggerated kind of routine. The importance of the bag is accentuated, and the fight over it *extremifies* the relationships between all three characters. The bag sequence culminates with the uncomfortable point Pinter speaks of, a tipping of the scene’s equilibrium from humor to menace. Without the

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42 Pinter, *Complete Works: Two.* 50.

humorous elements of the scene, Mick’s menace would have much less meaning; when the audience feels the scene’s shift from low comedy to bald seriousness, it punctuates the emotional trauma Davies is experiencing and the dynamic nature of his relationship with Mick.

Another example of this kind of shift in balance can be seen in *Trouble in the Works*, one of Pinter’s 1959 revue sketches. The sketch is a hilarious satire of bureaucracy, portraying a factory worker, Wills, approaching the man in charge, Mr. Fibbs, to bring news of an employee revolt in the works. Apparently, Wills informs Mr. Fibbs, “the men have…well, they seem to have taken a turn against some of the products…They just don’t seem to like them much any more.” After learning of the workers’ disdain for the factory’s phallic products from brass pet cocks to hemi unibal spherical rod ends and parallel male stud couplings, Fibbs brokenly asks, “What do they want to make in its place?” In the original production, Wills’s answer, the sketch’s final line, was “Brandy balls,” a type of candy. However, in a 2007 performance of Pinter’s sketches, the final line was changed to “Trouble.” The collection’s reviewer was curious and did a little dramaturgical research into the matter:

The interesting emphasis in the boss-employee relationship is reinforced by a change to the final line, when the manager asks the shop steward what the men want to make in place of the offending items. In the published version the reply is ‘brandy balls’ but here it has been changed to ‘trouble’, which is apparently what Mr Pinter originally wanted until he was censored by the BBC. It gives the whole scene political edge and far greater purpose.

With the final line changed, the sketch retains its absurdity, but the distinct undercurrent of malice in Wills’s report is emphasized. The satirical element of the sketch is amplified by the

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44 Pinter, *Complete Works: Two*. 237.

45 Pinter, *Complete Works: Two*. 239.

46 Pinter, *Complete Works: Two*. 239.

open declaration that, indeed, Mr. Fibbs’s factory is in real danger of riot and destruction. This bald, one-word threat stands in equilibrium with the wordy wit of the rest of the sketch; it is an unsettling way to end an otherwise verbally complex and rich scene, and punctuates the internal fear a person in power might experience at the threat of an altered status quo.

This kind of satire is omnipresent in *The Hothouse*; from the moment Gibbs breaks the news to Roote regarding 6459’s baby, Roote begins an uphill battle to restore order in the institution. In discussing the mistakes of the possible perpetrator, Roote cites the tenets of this kind of order:

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Roote. *(standing)* Well, one of them’s slipped up, hasn’t he! One of them’s not been using his head! His know-how! Common or garden horsesense! I don’t mind the men dipping their wicks on occasion. It can’t be avoided. It’s got to go somewhere. Besides that, it’s in the interests of science. If a member of the staff decides that for the good of a female patient some degree of copulation is necessary then two birds are killed with one stone! It does no harm to either party. At least, that’s how I’ve found it in my experience. *(With emphasis.)* But we all know the rule! Never ride barebacked. Always take precautions. Otherwise complications set in. Never ride barebacked and always send in a report. After all, the reactions of the patient have to he tabulated, compared with others, filed, stamped, and if possible verified! It stands to reason. *(Grimly.)* Well, I can tell you something, Gibbs, one thing is blatantly clear to me. *Someone* hasn’t been sending in his report!
Gibbs. Quite, sir.
Roote. Who?
Gibbs sits on the sofa and puts his hand to his mouth.
Gibbs. I think I know the man.\(^{48}\)
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In Roote’s words, adherence to the requirements of paperwork and policy are essentially a moral law. Raping patients, a blatant moral transgression, is acceptable under these rules. Taking this absurd thought on its own would create a very flat satirical message. However, the fact that Roote may likely be the perpetrator himself complicates things. Roote rants for a long while about the seriousness of the situation, and clearly understands many of its ramifications—at least for himself. Roote’s citation of the absurd rules of the institution is not only a reminder of their power, but a defense of his actions on a deeper level. Roote uses the essentially cockamammy rules he is tasked with upholding as an excuse for his own possible guilt. The ridiculousness of the

\(^{48}\) Pinter, *The Hothouse*. 43.
situation balances with its seriousness, and the resulting volatility creates a dynamic atmosphere for Roote and Gibbs to navigate. Directing this scene, I placed particular emphasis on Gibbs’s reactions and intentions; I blocked the scene such that both his and Roote’s faces were generally visible and the timing and tone was such that Roote and Gibbs were both clearly talking on levels beneath the surface. Gibbs humorously mimicked Roote on the line “never ride barebacked” and taunted Roote with “I think I know the man,” and Roote’s emphasis on “Someone hasn’t been sending in his report” directed the blame towards Gibbs. By emphasizing the ridiculousness of the rules and the active blame in the scene, we were able to communicate just as much about the relationship between Roote and Gibbs as we did about the play’s satirical elements. Giving the audience a brief glimpse of the power struggle between the two men helped set up Gibbs’s later mutiny and accentuated the seriousness behind their generally humorous boss-employee relationship.

Near the end of The Hothouse, and just after he has been pummeled by Roote, Lush provokes a second physical encounter, taunting Gibbs for coming to assassinate Roote. The encounter starts off quite similar to some of Pinter’s other well-blocked moments:

Lush. He didn’t mean it. Honestly. Don’t be downhearted. Now give me the knife and we won’t say another word.
Sudden silence.
All still. Gibbs and Lush stare at each other.
Lush makes a tiny movement to his jacket.
Immediately Gibbs rises, with a knife in his hand.
Lush faces him, a knife in his hand.
Roote seizes the bayonet from his desk, comes above them, covering them both, grinning.
Silence. All knives up.
Suddenly a long sigh is heard, amplified.
The knives go down.
A long keen is heard, amplified.
They look up.
A laugh is heard, amplified, dying away.
Silence.
Lush. What was that?
Roote. I don’t know. What was it?
Gibbs. I don’t know.\textsuperscript{49}

This turn of events is, quite simply, very scary. The sound design I used for the voices heard throughout the play was particularly jarring; I had the voice actors for this section communicate clear malicious intent. Moments of real violence in \textit{The Hothouse} are clearly meant to offset its more humorous ones, and the sounds in this particular moment can effectively bring the tone much further away from anything remotely funny. I blocked Roote to dramatically jump on the desk before brandishing the bayonet, a hilarious moment when paired with his playfully sinister grin. The sounds after the silence fully counteracted this hilarity. The men’s reactions afterwards were fearful and defensive, particularly the physically and emotionally broken Lush’s. When Roote commanded Lush to go search the halls with Gibbs, Lush’s line, “I don’t want to go with him”\textsuperscript{50} provoked uncomfortable sympathy in the audience. The almost playful atmosphere of the fight, at least from Roote’s perspective, had a residual effect on the even tenser post-fight atmosphere. Where beforehand the raucous satirical elements of the play are in force, afterwards its more serious elements take focus and amplify the sense of danger that makes the play so dynamic.

This kind of danger is prevalent in Pinter’s \textit{One for the Road}. Written in 1984, \textit{One for the Road} is a textbook example of the overtly political plays Harold Pinter began to write in the 1980s after the release of \textit{The Hothouse}. The play, with a cast of three men and one woman, tells the story of a boy, Nicky, his father, Victor, and mother, Gila, who are all imprisoned because the boy has spat at government soldiers. Their interrogator is a flamboyantly sinister and snide alcoholic named Nicolas. Once played by Pinter himself, Nicolas plays sinister mind games with

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{49} Pinter, \textit{The Hothouse}. 135.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Pinter, \textit{The Hothouse}. 137.
\end{itemize}
Victor, poses inappropriate and uncomfortable questions to Nicky, and makes brash sexual advances at Gila. By the end of the play it is implied that Nicolas has cut out Victor’s tongue, repeatedly raped Gila alongside his soldiers, and killed Nicky. Though most of the play’s content is implied, it nonetheless has the potential to be very difficult for its audience. However, its dark sense of humor makes it a very watchable and engaging play that is easily relevant twenty-five years after its original premiere. The reality of *One for the Road*’s content makes its more over-the-top elements all the more resonant. At the top of the play, Nicolas assaults Victor thusly:

_Nicolas._ What do you think this is? It’s my finger. And this is my little finger. I wave my big finger in front of your eyes. Like this. And now I do the same with my little finger. I can also use both...at the same time. Like this. I can do absolutely anything I like. Do you think I’m mad? My mother did. (_He laughs._) Do you think waving fingers in front of people’s eyes is silly? I can see your point. You’re a man of the highest intelligence. But would you take the same view if it was my boot—or my penis?^51_

Played with flippant gusto, Nicolas can become dually horrifying and hilarious. He drinks upwards of four glasses of whisky in the first scene alone, the last appropriately being “one for the road.”^52_ His every move is perfectly calculated to manipulate, tease and overpower; he repeats and repeats the questions “why,” and “why not” over ten times in a row in conversation with Gila,^53_ and using this stubborn resolve he dominates her without effort. This strong, menacing demeanor makes Nicolas the perfect representative of the totalitarian governments Pinter wishes to lambast. Many of Nicolas’s nearly jocular statements would be funny if victims of rape and torture weren’t sitting across from him as their target. The presence of Victor, Gila and Nicky stifles this overt humor and renders Nicolas an exceptionally dynamic character. *One for the Road* blatantly places blame on Nicolas for the things he has done; this makes his choices

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^51 Pinter, *Death, etc.* 37.

^52 Pinter, *Death, etc.* 40.

^53 Pinter, *Death, etc.* 48.
throughout the play increasingly shocking and makes him much more interesting and complicated.

The biggest shock in *The Hothouse* comes when we hear the patients escape from their rooms, causing feverish, chaotic mayhem; the blame for the incident is unclear, but its terrifying scope is what is most important. In the vein of my sound effects from before, I constructed a horrific cacophony of screams and door slams culminating in a loud, dramatic bang paired with a quick blackout. The lights quickly flashed up on the play’s culminating scene, which Martin Esslin succinctly characterizes thusly:

In the end Gibbs reports to a bureaucrat in Whitehall that the entire staff has been killed—by the inmates? Or, indeed, by Gibbs himself?—in an orgy of bloodshed. The play ends with the poor forgotten victim, Lamb, in the soundproof room, still “sitting in the chair, earphones and electrodes attached, quite still.”\(^54\)

I staged this scene to place focus on Gibbs; Lobb, the bureaucrat, is stunned at his rather matter-of-fact revelation that alongside Roote and Cutts being stabbed to death, “Lush, Hogg, Beck, Budd, Tuck, Dodds, Tate and Pett, sir, were hanged and strangled variously.”\(^55\) The audience could see on Gibbs’s face that he was clearly pleased at this fact. Lobb, whose gender I changed to evoke a strong Margaret Thatcher type, began to show signs of suspicion and frustration, but could not directly act on them. Lobb is bound by the same kinds of ridiculous bureaucratic rules in the world of the play that Roote and Gibbs are, noting that she “can’t really do anything until the report has gone in and the inquiry set up.”\(^56\) This report, compiled by Gibbs, will likely absolve him of any responsibility he may have in the escape of the patients and the slaughter of the staff. I also chose to have Lamb sitting in the background during the scene itself, punctuating


\(^{55}\) Pinter, *The Hothouse*. 150.

\(^{56}\) Pinter, *The Hothouse*. 152.
the sinister doings behind the polite social veneers Gibbs and Lobb must maintain with each other. This forced politeness acts contrarily to what is clearly a menacing situation, allowing it and the insurmountable horror of what we have just seen and heard to drive the dynamic equilibrium of the play to its conclusion.

Pinter uses abject terror like this to great effect in his 1988 play *Mountain Language*. At the end of the first scene, two soldiers crack wise while intimidating and sexually abusing an innocent woman:

*Sentence. The Officer and Sergeant slowly circle her. The Sergeant puts his hand on her bottom.*

**Sergeant.** What language do you speak? What language do you speak with your arse?

**Officer.** These women, Sergeant, have as yet committed no crime. Remember that.

**Sergeant.** Sir! But you’re not saying they’re without sin!

**Officer.** Oh, no. Oh, no, I’m not saying that.

**Sergeant.** This one’s full of it. She bounces with it.

**Officer.** She doesn’t speak the mountain language.

*The Woman moves away from the Sergeant’s hand and turns to face the two men.*

**Young Woman.** My name is Sara Johnson. I have come to see my husband. It is my right. Where is he?

**Officer.** Show me your papers.

She gives him a piece of paper. He examines it, turns to Sergeant.

**Officer.** (cont.) He doesn’t come from the mountains. He’s in the wrong batch.

**Sergeant.** So is she. She looks like a fucking intellectual to me.

**Officer.** But you said her arse wobbled.

**Sergeant.** Intellectual arses wobble the best.

*Blackout.*

The Sergeant’s sexual pleasure paired with the Officer’s jocular attitude make intellectual indifference very difficult for an audience. And, as Billington argues, “The more we sense that the military are ordinary men doing a routine job, the more shocking the play becomes.”

“Intellectual arses wobble the best” is a harsh, witty and extraordinary curtain line, and in another context audiences might even laugh at it. However, according to Pinter, this play is “brutal, short and ugly. But the soldiers in the play do get some fun out of it. One sometimes forgets that torturers become easily bored. They need a bit of a laugh to keep their spirits up. This

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58 Billington, *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter.* 313
has been confirmed of course by the events of Abu Ghraib in Baghdad.” The searing reality of *Mountain Language* reveals itself in moments like this. The fact that the soldiers speak ludicrously only further accentuates the astonishing sickness of the play’s otherwise routine scenario. As political theater very close to agit-prop, *Mountain Language* appeals to pathos. Pinter’s chief tool towards this end is the soldiers’ sick humor.

Even though the Sergeant in *Mountain Language* probably wouldn’t recognize it, when he cracks his joke about intellectual arses, this serves as the dramatic culmination for the scene. It should be a surprising moment, for the Young Woman and the audience, on par with his grabbing of the Young Woman’s bottom. The menacing tone of the rest of the scene is still present and operating, but the Sergeant’s sick sense of humor mixes itself in to create a much more effective moment than if he had berated the Young Woman in a less witty manner. The soldiers periodically crack wise in this manner, such as in the line “What language do you speak with your arse,” balancing lines with more strictly malicious content like “Show me your papers” and “She looks like a fucking intellectual to me.” The fact that the soldiers get a kick out of what they are doing makes the scene disturbing, but the greatest threat the scene poses is if the audience itself were to laugh along. A good director would threaten the audience with this fact; the soldiers should not be played for laughs, but they should certainly provoke laughter and/or enjoyment in each other, behavior quite close to the former. Billington highlights these same kinds of threatening, realistic aspects as integral to *The Hothouse*:

...this sinister setting, where patients have numbers, are permanently locked up and can be raped or murdered without anyone outside being the wiser, ‘is like the secret police headquarters of *One for the Road* or the military prison in *Mountain Language.*’ Both statements are true: the play works as institutional comedy and political prophesy. What this revival proved, however, was its ability to switch mood and tone at lightning speed. One minute it’s high absurdity as Roote, having provided a lasciviously detailed description of patient 6459, denies all knowledge of her. But a moment later, you

feel a chill in the spine as Roote, asked what should be done with the newborn baby, brusquely replies ‘Get rid of it.’

The absurdity of Pinter’s dramatic situations resonates well with their sick reality; this kind of dynamic equilibrium greatly augments the effectiveness of his satire.

_Celebration_, Pinter’s last full play, was written and first performed in 2000. It concerns several groups of wealthy patrons at an upper-crust restaurant. Two characters, Lambert and Matt, are “peaceful strategy consultants,” and Pinter implies that this job entails a good deal of worldwide bloodshed at their command. The various restaurant-goers are snobbish and self-important, and much like the voice of “American Football,” they are dubiously oblivious to the kinds of sexual and moral mayhem their occupations outside the restaurant perpetuate. Billington discusses the purpose of this play thusly:

On one level, Celebration is a comic satire on the nerdy nouveau-riche. They are coarse, greedy, loud, and raffish. But, if that were all Pinter were saying about them, the play would be as snobbish as one or two London critics superficially assumed…Pinter is not just taking the piss out of a group of walking wallets or writing a comedy of grotesquely bad manners: he is writing a quasi-political play in which wealth, greed, vanity, and sexual loutishness symbolise both moral emptiness and hermetic isolation from the real world of pain and suffering.

This kind of isolated emptiness is communicated most effectively in the Waiter, who keeps interrupting the people at various tables to tell stories about his grandfather. One such interaction plays like this:

**Waiter.** Do you mind if I make an interjection?
**Matt.** Help yourself.
**Waiter.** It’s just that a little bit earlier I heard you saying something about the Hollywood studio system in the thirties.
**Prue.** Oh you heard that?
**Waiter.** Yes. And I thought you might be interested to know that my grandfather was very familiar with a lot of the old Hollywood film stars back in those days. He used to knock about with Clark Gable and Elisha Cook Jr and he was one of the very few native-born Englishmen to have had it off with Hedy Lamarr.

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60 Billington, _The Life and Work of Harold Pinter_. 366.
61 Pinter, _Harold Pinter: Plays 4_. 496.
Julie. No?
Lambert. What was she like in the sack?
Waiter. He said she was really tasty.
Julie. I bet she was.
Waiter. Of course there was a very well-established Irish Mafia in Hollywood in those days. And there was a very close connection between some of the famous Irish film stars and some of the famous Irish gangsters in Chicago. Al Capone and Victor Mature for example. They were both Irish. Then there was John Dillinger the celebrated gangster and Gary Cooper the celebrated film star. They were Jewish.
Silence.
Julie. It makes you think, doesn’t it?
Prue. It does make you think.\textsuperscript{63}

After this point, the table ignores the Waiter and changes the subject. The Waiter’s interjections serve as fanciful non-sequiturs, and are simultaneously delightful and sad. Facts about his grandfather replace real conversation points, and their related subjects of discussion are exposed as essentially vapid. In this specific instance, the only moment of excitement comes from the sexual potential of Hedy Lamarr; after a bit of bawdy humor, the subject is quickly exhausted and the resulting silence may feel very empty. The conversation does not, as Julie and Prue contend, provoke thought.

The Waiter is an awkward and enthusiastic young man not unlike Lamb, but instead of becoming a target for patently dark doings, he simply remains a meek outsider among the play’s brash cast of characters. This isolation makes his soliloquy at the end of the play all the more resonant: he reveals, “My grandfather introduced me to the mystery of life and I’m still in the middle of it. I can’t find the door to get out. My grandfather got out of it. He got right out of it. He left it behind him and he didn’t look back.” The lights then fade out on him before he can “make one further interjection.”\textsuperscript{64} This ending is dark and curious, and the anticlimax punctuates this; just as the restaurant’s patrons repeatedly brush him off, so does the ending of the play itself. Whatever curiosities his final interjection hides—whether or not they are non-sequiturs

\textsuperscript{63} Pinter, \textit{Harold Pinter: Plays 4}. 484-485.

\textsuperscript{64} Pinter, \textit{Harold Pinter: Plays 4}. 508.
like before—remain unknown. This provides a dark punchline that echoes the behavior of the otherwise nonchalant, self-important and destructive cast of characters.

Francesca Coppa, discussing Pinter’s early work, said the following:

In an early book on George Bernard Shaw, G.K. Chesterton noted that ‘amid the blinding jewelry of a million jokes’ one could generally ‘discover the grave, solemn and sacred joke for which the play was written’. Pinter’s works also tend to have identifiable ‘sacred jokes’ which reproduce the larger play in microcosm: Pinter uses the tendentious joke structure on the micro level as well as the macro. We may not, in the final event, find the larger work funny, but that does not mean that the play is not constructed like a joke. Rather, our failure to laugh may be an indication that we, the audience, have come to side (or have been taught to side) with the victim over the victimiser.65

Watching Pinter’s heavier plays like *The Birthday Party* and *The Caretaker*, the audience will not be in stitches, but they will most likely see the inherent ludicrousness in the plays’ mostly realistic scenarios. Plays like *The Hothouse*, *The Dumb Waiter* and Pinter’s sketches have a greater number of funny moments, but their heightened situations can nonetheless effectively produce feelings of disgust and terror in their audiences. Plays like *Celebration* and *A Night Out* may initially seem to concern banal or trivial situations, but their dynamic and menacing natures reveal themselves in subtly heightened manners. Pinter’s most political plays like *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* take their situations to insane extremes, accentuating the inherent contradictions in real life issues. Pinter’s style, regardless of his methods, provokes the distinct feeling in his audience that despite what may feel very real in his plays, something is deeply wrong. Pinter makes a connection with his audiences to show them their realities’ most disgusting truths. These plays expose a range of truths from internal vices like greed and self-aggrandizement to external acts of malice like torture and murder. In every instance of exposure, Pinter allows the audience to question the instance’s veracity—the setup—and then assures them

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that something is indeed amiss—the punchline. The different natures of dynamic equilibrium between humor and menace in each of Pinter’s plays help create this type of dramatization.

After Gibbs and Cutts finish interrogating Lamb in *The Hothouse*, they seemingly abandon him. When it has been a while without any contact over the microphone, Lamb begins to speak:

__Lamb.__ Any more questions?
I’m quite ready for another question.
I’m quite ready.
I’m rather enjoying this, you know.
Oh, by the way, what was that extraordinary sound?
It gave me quite a start, I must admit.
Are you all right up there?
You haven’t finished your questions, have you?
I’m ready whenever you are.
__Silence.__
__Lamb Sits.__
_The red light begins to flick on and off._
__Lamb looks up, stares at it._
_We hear the loud click of a switch from the control room._
_The microphone in the room has been switched off._
_The red light gradually grows in strength, until it consumes the room._
__Lamb sits still.__
__Curtain.\(^66\)"

This is one of the most important moments in the play. Lamb is left alone and defenseless, and against all logic begins to ask for more questions—the same kinds of questions that have just left him in a tizzy. It is clear to the audience that Lamb is in serious danger; it may even be clear to Lamb himself. He is nonetheless honestly motivated to continue the experiment, out of a need to be useful, to be recognized, to be loved, or some other mostly innocent motivation. In my production, this moment was lonely, scary and exposed. Lamb, whom I intended the audience to identify with throughout the first act, had just essentially been destroyed right in front of their eyes. And while the audience consistently laughed at “I’m rather enjoying this, you know,” this humor began their descent into an understanding of the situation’s hopelessness. The final moment of the play, revisiting the catatonic Lamb, was somber and disturbing; to ironically

\(^66\) Pinter, *The Hothouse*. 77-78.
accompany this atmosphere in the overall spirit of the show, we played a slowed rendition of Ella Fitzgerald’s rendition of “Blue Skies.” *The Hothouse*, largely a raucous and funny play, is filled with moments of pathos and emotional weight. From Lamb’s moments alone to Roote learning of 6459’s pregnancy to Lush’s hesitancy to search the halls with Gibbs, the play gives frequent reminders that, though its situations seem absurd, this absurdity is a reality for the characters onstage. This tactic of affirming the realities in theatricalized situations gives Pinter’s plays a deep sense of sympathy, the ability to make strong social comments, and the feeling that the ostensibly impossible can be real—and out to get us.