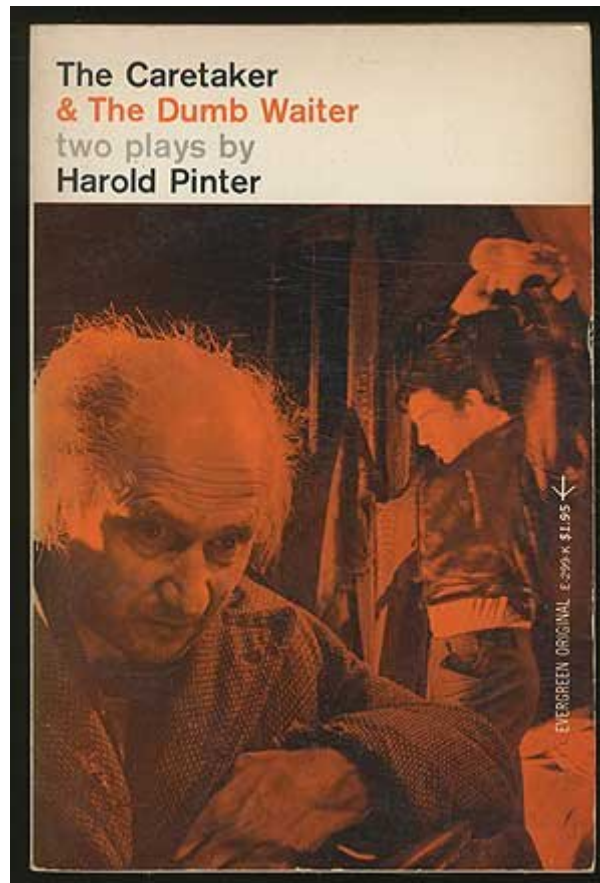


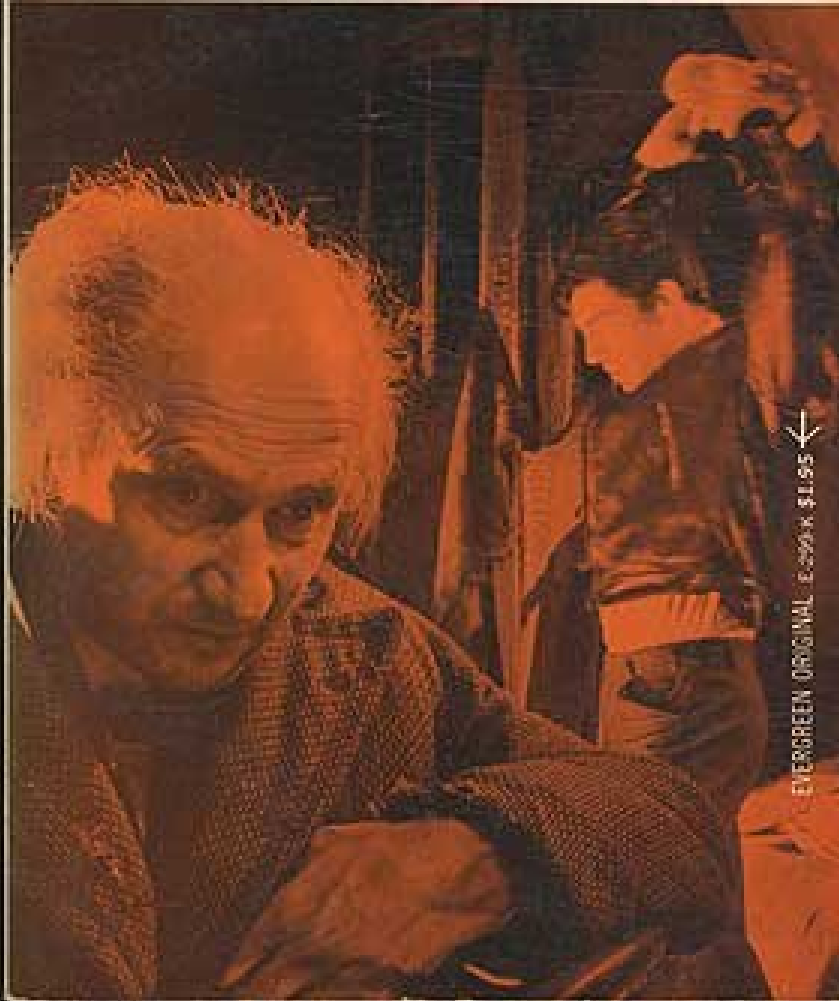
THE CARETAKER & THE DUMB WAITER: TWO PLAYS BY HAROLD PINTER



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The Theater of the Absurd Strikes Again!

By John F. Rooney

"The Dumbwaiter" (1957) is a long one-act play by Harold Pinter displaying his Theater of the Absurd traits, but in a more tightly focused view than in some of his other work. Ben and Gus are waiting in a play reminiscent of Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" (1952). They are like Estragon and Vladimir in the Beckett play except those two hapless souls are still waiting.

Ben and Gus are sticking around to do a job, something sinister, apparently a killing, but these two hit men, if that's what they are, are rather pathetic. There's an antipathy between the two. They have revolvers. In the claustrophobic set, a basement room, the two men get cryptic and hilarious food order notes from the dumbwaiter up above. They send up little snacks that Gus had brought with him (the food proves to be unsatisfactory). A speaking tube also connects them with whomever. Ben is the leader, and his cohort Gus seems like a fumbling clownish oaf.

As usual the dialogue has its comic riffs, repetitiveness and inanity. The two petty criminal are under the direction of a boss just as Goldberg and McCann were in Pinter's "The Birthday Party".

What happens is puzzling and baffling in this dark comedy. There is an undertone of violence with terror lurking. Neither character is quite sure of anything. Things are unnerving, uncertain, and menacing. The unknown is often scarier than the known. In a Pinter play people don't seem to be able to exert their wills; they are manipulated and toyed with just as Pinter is manipulating and toying with the audience.

It has been said that Pinter's characters lack sympathy for each other, spirituality or any craving for it. It's an existential world. The evil presence offstage must be obeyed. It's a mystery within an enigma, but fun for adventurous theatergoers.

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

You get a bit out of your depth sometimes, don't you?

By Aco

One review, until now, is pathetic. This book, featuring two of the absurd, menacing, weighty master's early works is terrific.

The Caretaker, along with The Homecoming, The Birthday Party and Old Times is one of Pinter's best,

ultimately important, works. It is in my opinion one of the great post-WWII English plays.

The Dumb Waiter, similar to The Caretaker in its setting and brother-like characters, while being a long one-act, is creepier still and more enigmatic.

The Caretaker is about a vagabond named Davies, who is taken into a run-down room in a run-down house by Aston, who lives there, and collects things in it, and is the brother of Mick, who owns the building. Initially the relationship between Davies and Aston is kind, generous and progressive. Davies, used to trudging through life homeless is taken aback at the trust and goodwill offered by Aston. When Mick arrives later, Davies must feel out the differing attitude, as Mick looks after his brother, and isn't so easily trusting of the ragged and scruffy Davies. But eventually Aston seems odd (and delivers an amazing monologue testifying to his possible insanity), and Mick more level headed, and both at different times offer Davies a job in the house, as Caretaker.

But Pinter being Pinter, the goodwill is possibly unreal, or something else entirely. There is a vague confusion to the play, a lack of specifics, and the characters, in classic masculine style, only say what they think they need to, i.e.:

Davies: What do you do-? What do you do...when the bucket's full?

Pause.

Aston: Empty it.

Pause.

Davies, somewhat boxed into the house by weather and possibility never knows his place, as the brothers, who rarely are in the room together, keep him off balance. The truth becomes elusive, as do the facts. One never knows one's place, or how each feels about the other. A scary moment comes when Davies, flustered by the erratic behavior of Aston, calls him "nutty" to his brother, Mick. To which Mick replies: "You get a bit out of your depth sometimes, don't you?"

The Dumb Waiter is more absurd than The Caretaker. Two guys, possibly hitmen, possibly waiters, staying in a basement room, awaiting orders to do something, must contend with a dumb waiter that begins to descend with notes requesting food. The room clearly not a kitchen, and they not sure what is going on upstairs, instead put the little food they have in the dumb waiter, which ascends and descends several times. The trapped nature of Gus and Ben lends that Pinter menace to the story. Each has a gun, and seems ready to kill. But a lack of information, either known to them, or expressed by them so we know, keeps the lid on the proverbial pot.

These both are classic plays. I highly recommend this book.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Outstanding miniature study in character (No spoiler)

By Jonathan Arnowitz

The Caretaker is an excellent Pinter play where his famous deliberate pacing is used to tell the story of a power struggle between a homeless man trying to manipulate his way into taking over a house. For the Caretaker, Davies, it is the hope of a place to stay a roof over his head. For the older brother, Mick it's a chance to make something of a house gone to waste. The younger mentally disturbed brother, the most vulnerable, is at the mercy of his brother Mick. The play is a fascinating balance of power as the pendulum swings towards one and then the other. No one is really sure who is in charge of the situation until the very end.

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