Revisiting the Game: One More Look at Structure in *The Caretaker*

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As Harold Pinter embarks upon his fifth decade of playwriting, the briefest glance over his work of the past forty years will reveal he has not utilized the three-act structure since *The Caretaker* in 1960. Indeed, coming so early in his playwriting career, there may be temptations today to recall *The Caretaker* fondly for its characters[1] and dramatic situation but to dismiss its overall structure as one reflecting a young author's still maturing development. The very foundations of characterization and dramatic tension in *The Caretaker*, however, rely upon structural — not structuralist — matters and observations, including stage directions.

The case for stage directions echoes critics Martin Esslin and Roman Ingarden, among others. As Esslin wrote,

> Roman Ingarden differentiates the "Haupttext" (main text) and the "Nebentext" (subsidiary text) of a play, the latter consisting of stage directions, while the former comprises the words that are actually spoken on the stage by the actors. Thus the "Haupttext" is the only portion of the text that is available to the spectators of a performance as a producer of meaning, while the "Nebentext" appears in the form of other non-verbal sign systems.[2]

Esslin explained the "Nebentext" always remained more important that the "Haupttext."[3] Similarly, neo-Aristotelian Sam Smiley noted that stage directions encompass "all the visual and auditory specifications that do not melt into dialogue."[4] According to Smiley, there are three kinds of stage directions — introductory, environmental, and character.[5] Information offered by stage directions, of course, may often be incorporated into dialogue, but sometimes a playwright will communicate things to a reader which a live audience need not distinctly recognize. In Pinter's case, for example, an audience member may not consciously benefit by distinguishing between a pause, a slight pause, and a silence. A pause, in Smiley's notation, would "melt" into the dialogue, no doubt providing emphasis of some type; a stage direction for a silence imparts a different meaning to the reader, yet an audience could no doubt understand the play on equal terms by perceiving the silence as simply another pause. Stage directions remain a privilege of the reader, yet they are vital to a complete understanding of *The Caretaker*.

In *The Caretaker*, Aston takes home Davies, an old tramp. After spending the night with Aston, Davies meets Aston's brother, Mick, who identifies himself as the true owner of the property. Mick and Aston alternately harass and humiliate Davies, treating him with both kindness and contempt, and each brother extends to Davies an offer to become the caretaker of the establishment. Davies attempts to join their household in much the same manner as Spooner will try in *No Man's Land*, by striving to make himself an asset. The closing pages of the script include what is perhaps the most significant stage direction:

> Silence. Mick does not look at him.

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1 It is tempting, for example, to think mystery novelist Robert Barnard had Davies in mind when he described an "old cadger who turned out to be a semi-derelict, on his way from Sidcup, and on his way back there" in *Out of the Blackout* (Woodstock, Vermont: Foul Play Press, 1995), p. 91. This work, originally published in 1984, reflects a theatric literacy and mentions West End runs of *Hay Fever* and *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, among other plays.

2 Martin Esslin, *The Field of Drama* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 80.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

4 Sam Smiley, *Playwriting: The Structure of Action* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 219.

5 *Ibid.*

> A door bangs.
> Silence. They do not move.
> Aston comes in. He closes the door, moves into the room and faces Mick. They look at each other. Both are smiling, faintly.[6]

Any study of Pinter's stage directions must cite the profound insight of Robert P. Murphy, who used the above stage direction as a point of departure for his entire examination of *The Caretaker*.

Murphy's study concluded the action of the play represents a cruel game Aston and Mick play on Davies.[7] His study has been taken to task, notably by Thomas F. Van Laan, who also considered the "faint smile" but felt "the revelation is too stunning to be entirely convincing."[8] Graham Woodroffe noted that connotations of "caretaker," in addition to looking after a place, include "being careful" or "taking care" and, significantly, "'take care of'… understood not in its altruistic sense but as a euphemism for intimidation."[9] Woodroffe also observed,

> The word "caretaker," denotes both a situation and a place. It is a place that Davies can never occupy since it is a purely hypothetical vacancy, a product of Mick's fertile imagination and of Aston's benevolence.[10]

The critical camp of Davies-as-victim receives its greatest support from a study of the play's structure.

A Forboding Scene

The Caretaker begins in silence. The brothers utilize an isolated upstairs room for their game, a room distant from the front entrance of the house, so the noise generated by a downstairs arrival will grant Mick enough time to escape comfortably. Mick sits alone in the junk-filled room, taking note of its contents. Pinter's inventory includes an arbitrary Buddha, seated on top of the gas stove. Mick even "stares at the bucket" which hangs from the ceiling to catch dripping water (7). When an off-stage door bang is heard, followed by muffled voices, he leaves — he "moves silently to the door" and "closes the door quietly" (7). These actions show Mick's desire to shield his presence in the house. Pinter apparently allowed this quality to develop over the course of re-writing the play. The first draft did not call for a background of silence and isolation, and there was a noisy family of Indians living below the brothers.[11] There was also a brief on-stage appearance by a woman resident. Although the first draft made no mention of Mick's shoes, the second draft of *The Caretaker* described Mick (on an unnumbered page) as follows: "Movement very smooth on rubber shoes, silently."[12] In published versions, Pinter discarded separate notes on the characters, favoring instead the stage directions specifying quiet movements.

Mick's stealthiness also gives a premeditative quality to the very placement of objects around the room. In fact, the bed ultimately assigned to Davies is directly behind the gas stove. Aston tells Davies the stove is too heavy to move (21), and Davies expresses definite fears about it.

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6 Harold Pinter, "*The Caretaker*," in *The Caretaker and The Dumb Waiter* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), pp. 74–75. Hereafter, page numbers will be given in the text.

7 Robert P. Murphy, "Non-Verbal Communication and the Overlooked Action in Pinter's *The Caretaker*." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 58 (February 1972), p. 47.

8 Thomas F. Van Laan, "*The Dumb Waiter*: Pinter's Play with the Audience." *Modern Drama*, 24 (December 1981), p. 501.

9 Graham Woodroffe, "'One Says Yes, the Other Says No': A Psychoanalytic Investigation of a Slip of the Tongue in Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*." *Literature and Psychology*, 32 (1986), pp. 4–5.

10 Graham Woodroffe, "Taking Care of the 'Coloureds': The Political Metaphor of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*." *Theatre Journal*, 40 (December 1988), p. 499.

11 Harold Pinter, *The Caretaker*, [3 drafts, 1960], Manuscripts Collection, The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

12 *Ibid.*

DAVIES Eh, I was going to ask you, mister, what about this stove? Imean, do you think it's going to be letting out any… what do you think?

ASTON It's not connected.

DAVIES You see, the trouble is, it's right on top of my bed, you see? What I got to watch is nudging… one of them gas taps with my elbow when I get up, you get my meaning? (26)

By the third act, Davies' fears have increased.

DAVIES What about this gas stove? He tells me it's not connected. How do I know it's not connected? Here I am, I'm sleeping right with it, I wake up in the middle of the night, I'm looking right into the oven, man! It's right next to my face, how do I know, could be lying there in bed, it might blow up, it might do me harm! (59)

Adding to the bed placement problem is the fact Aston insists upon keeping the nearby window open, thus causing rain to fall on Davies' head. And Davies explains it would not be possible for him to sleep in a reverse position with his feet in the draught (53). Returning to the end of the first act, Davies, left alone by Aston after his first night in the room, reflects upon an empty blue case: "Had a sheet and pillow ready in here" (28). This observation strengthens the implication that the brothers planned their game with care.

The Scene's Influence on Davies

Davies' observations about his new, if temporary, residence suggest a continuum for the entire drama: Davies continually responds to his environment, alternating between security and paranoia. The brothers also arranged to give Davies a false sense of security. Aston hands the tramp a spare set of keys — one key for the room and another for the front door (24). Davies later locks himself in the room, after twice checking the hall outside, and begins to examine everything (27). Mick gains entrance to the room using his own key and silently watches Davies, intending to frighten him (28).

Alone, Davies also "grimaces" when he notices the suspended bucket — this is really his second observation of it — and tells himself, "I'll have to find out about that" (27). If the bucket were placed there to contribute to an atmosphere of intimidation, its purpose succeeds. The first time Davies experiences Mick and Aston jointly, the bucket and leak provide the brothers with ground for nearly a page of dialogue. The tramp can only manage a single question.

DAVIES (*abruptly*) What do you do?They both look at him.What do you do when that bucket's full?

Pause.

ASTON Empty it. (37)

Nothing succeeds like intimidation.

Davies does, at times, feel secure with Aston. The first act finds several signs of trust. Initially, Aston saved Davies from getting a cracked head (10). After bringing him home, Aston gives Davies a pair of shoes and, countering Davies' rejection of them — Davies prefers shoes which are "no good" yet still comfortable (15) — gives him some money (19). Davies, however, succumbs to the increasingly cruel tactics of Mick, such as getting chased in the dark by an electrolux (45), and transfers his distrust, not to Mick, but back to Aston. This reveals Davies' vacillating sense of disorientation, a condition nurtured from Mick's first encounter with the tramp; at that meeting, Mick told Davies he was the "spitting image" of his "uncle's brother" (31) — the genealogy itself creates no small degree of confusion — yet, within a minute, Mick says "a bloke" he knew in either Shoreditch or Aldgate was also a "dead spit" of Davies (32).

Davies remains unnerved after the bucket discussion, evidenced by Aston's presenting him with what he calls Davies' bag.

DAVIES Oh thanks, mister, thanks. Give it to you, did they?

Davies crosses back with the bag.

Mick rises and snatches it.

MICK What's this?

DAVIE Give us it, that's my bag!

MICK (*warding him off*) I've seen this bag before.

DAVIES That's my bag! (38)

Davies repeatedly insists the bag is his property, retrieved by Aston from Davies' former place of employment. Yet after fighting for it, physically, and engaging in further conversation with Aston, Davies suddenly cancels all claims.

DAVIES Eh, look here, I been thinking. This ain't my bag.

ASTON Oh. No.

DAVIES No, this ain't my bag. My bag, it was another kind of bag altogether, you see. I know what they've done. What they done, they kept my bag, and they given you another one altogether.

ASTON No… what happened was, someone had gone off with your bag.

DAVIES (*rising*) That's what I said!

ASTON Anyway, I picked that bag up somewhere else. (41)

The bag incident embodies the brothers' success at catching Davies off-guard. First, Aston tells Davies the bag is his own, and Davies agrees. Since all of Davies' worldly possessions except for his papers are in his missing bag, Davies could hardly be mistaken about identifying the bag unless he truly felt confused and disoriented. Yet the attacks by Mick, both verbal and physical, do leave him dazed and in the very state Aston and Mick wish to place him. Aston's later admission, that he really picked up a different bag, does not faze Davies or arouse suspicion in the old man; instead, the tramp pokes through the bag and even seems pleased with some of its contents.

For Davies, the turning point against Aston is solidified when Aston relates the story about his hospital treatment. From that moment, Davies regularly complains about Aston, blaming him for the lack of a bread knife (58), the dangers of sleeping next to a gas stove (59), not joining Davies in conversation (58, 60), the lack of a clock (62), waking him up in the middle of the night (66), the lack of heat (66–67), and for accusing him of both making noises in his sleep (66) and stinking (70). Davies yells at Aston, "Who ever saw you slip me a few bob? Treating me like a bloody animal! I never been inside a nuthouse!" (67)

Davies actually befriends Mick.

DAVIES […] Because I can tell you, your brother's got his eye on you. He knows all about you. I got a friend there, don't you worry about that. I got a true pal there. (67)

This defense repeats what Davies earlier observed to Mick about Aston.

DAVIES He's no friend of mine. You don't know where you are with him. I mean, with a bloke like you, you know where you are. Mick looks at him.

I mean, you got your own ways, I'm not saying you ain't got your own ways, anyone can see that. You may have some funny ways,but that's the same with all of us, but with him it's different, see? I mean at least with you, the thing with you is you're…

MICK Straightforward.

DAVIES That's it, you're straightforward. (61)

But Davies' most annoying complaint against Aston is a smile.

DAVIES Listen! I wake up in the morning… I wake up in the morning and he's smiling at me! He's standing there, looking at me, smiling! I can see him, you see, I can see him through the blanket. He puts on his coat, he turns himself round, he looks down at my bed, there's a smile on his face! What the hell's he smiling at? What he don't know is that I'm watching him through that blanket. (63)

Murphy, incidentally, did not discuss this smile, yet Aston's smile foreshadows the ultimate faint smile with which Murphy credits the meaning of the play.

Other Components of the Game

The bag incident is only one part of the game. There is also violence, dishonesty, and intimidation. Murphy noted the stage direction, "Aston stands, goes to the sideboard drawer, right, picks up the statue of Buddha, and puts it on the gas stove" (40). This action sets the stage for Mick's third act smashing of the statue, a violent act which unnerves Davies considerably (74). What Murphy did not mention is that Pinter, always a craftsman, places the Buddha on the stove in the script's opening description. Recalling the careful placement of objects, Aston and Mick find it desirable to have the Buddha close to Davies' corner of the room. Aston's moving the statue corrects an earlier shift of the object, when Davies picked up the Buddha himself (17).

Aston lies to Davies about ownership of the house.

DAVIES This your house then, is it?
Pause.
ASTON I'm in charge. (12)

Aston later concedes the house belongs to Mick. (40) Coupled with Aston's original lie about the bag, Davies has two reasons to distrust him; but, as indicated, the tramp accepts the situation. Underscoring this acceptance is Davies' acceptance of the offer of the job of caretaker, a position Aston suggests.

ASTON You see, what we could do, we could… I could fit a bell at the bottom, outside the front door, with 'Caretaker' on it. And you could answer any queries.
DAVIES Oh, I don't know about that.
ASTON Why not?
DAVIES Well, I mean, you don't know who might come up them front steps, do you? I got to be a bit careful.
ASTON Why, someone after you?
DAVIES After me? Well, I could have that Scotch git coming looking after me, couldn't I? All I'd do, I'd hear the bell, I'd go down there, open the door, who might be there, any Harry might be there. I could be buggered as easy as that, man. (43–44)

Davies, who has been given good reason to suspect the motives of Aston and Mick — audiences may even detect Aston's slight slip of the tongue in the above passage, changing from the collective "we" to the more falsely personal "I" — only anticipates the inherent danger of another intruder.

Again reflecting irony, Mick wins Davies over to his side with the simple offer of a cheese sandwich and the equally benign explanation, "We just got off on the wrong foot." — only moments after the terrifying electrolux sequence (47). It may also be noted Pinter specifies the electrolux "is not seen till used" (6). In the second major exchange between Davies and Mick, the brother plants additional seeds of confusion.

MICK […] I can't help being interested in any friend of my brother's. mean, you're my brother's friend, aren't you?
DAVIES Well, I… I wouldn't put it as far as that.
MICK Don't you find him friendly, then?
DAVIES Well, I wouldn't say we was all that friends.
[…]
MICK I'm sorry to hear my brother's not very friendly.
DAVIES He's friendly, he's friendly, I didn't say he wasn't…
[…]
MICK No, he just doesn't like work, that's his trouble.
DAVIES Is that a fact?
MICK It's a terrible thing to have to say about your own brother. […] What would your advice be?
DAVIES Well… he's a funny bloke, your brother.
MICK What?

DAVIES I was saying, he's… he's a bit of a funny bloke, your brother.
Mick stares at him.
MICK Funny? Why?
DAVIES Well… he's funny…
MICK What's funny about him?
Pause.
DAVIES Not liking work.
MICK What's funny about that?
DAVIES Nothing.
Pause.
MICK I don't call it funny.
DAVIES Nor me.
MICK You don't want to start getting hypercritical. (47–50)

Mick skillfully puts Davies on the defensive, then offers him the job of caretaker. Davies agrees and even asks Mick to get another pair of shoes for him.

Davies attempts to convince Mick to place Aston in the hospital again, but Mick now turns brutally against the tramp, citing a false claim never actually made by Davies that he will do first class interior decorating (72). Mick then verbally assaults Davies and smashes the Buddha. The brothers tell Davies he must leave, and the old man unsuccessfully argues for permission to stay, even admitting he makes noises in his sleep (75) and, in a last ditch effort, suddenly finding comfort in the too tight and laceless shoes donated by Aston (78). Davies, whose interaction with his hosts and surroundings vacillates throughout *The Caretaker*, falls victim to the ruse Pinter revealed in stage directions. Aston's refusal marks the opposite condition Davies cited earlier by claiming to Mick, "I was brought here!" (34)

Pinter offers as much detail in stage directions in *The Caretaker* as in other early plays, beginning with *The Room*, but they acquire greater significance by containing hidden non-verbal communication which can clarify the entire play. Pinter's theatric sound effects — the dripping bucket and the electrolux — are identifiable and not abstract, as were the long keen and laugh of *The Hothouse*. By concealing information within playscript structure, Pinter utilizes a writing habit which will extend into future works, such as *The Collection*'s early identification of James as "a figure" and "voice" instead of by character name and *Old Times*' specific reversal of set pieces between its two acts. When examining a Pinter play, structure always deserves paramount consideration.