

Dome Production Touch Of Miss Harris In 'Old Times'

By PRUDENCE MASON
Essay Staff Reporter

There was a touch of Rosemary Harris in the recent Dome production of Harold Pinter's play "Old Times."

The English actress and wife of local author John Ehle starred in the Broadway production in 1971.

In a session with student actors and Aaron Levin, student director, she answered questions about the play and read sections of the script as a way of explaining in detail what Pinter and Peter Hall, the director of both the original production in London and the New York version, said about it.

Demystifying

It went a long way toward demystifying the play which has a simple plot but a number of possible meanings, Levin said after the meeting.

The meeting of Miss Harris with Levin, Sandra LaVallee, Nancy Mette and Shawn Nelson, cast members, was arranged after William Dreyer, a drama faculty member, had asked Miss Harris to talk with students.

It was not the first meeting for everyone though. Miss LaVallee first met Miss Harris when she was auditioning for a role in the Broadway revival of "The Women," and Levin met Miss Harris on a plane flight shortly after he had seen her in "Old Times" in New York.

The students and Miss Harris talked over tea and cookies at the actress' Penland, N.C., home.

Plot

The plot of "Old Times" begins when a couple, married 20 years, is awaiting the arrival of the wife's former roommate whom she has not seen since her marriage.

The visitor arrives and the three reminisce about old times, hence the title of the play. But there's the rub. Exactly what happened between the three in the past? Were the two women lovers? Did the roommate and husband know one another previously? These questions go unanswered.

Anna, the visitor (the role played by Miss Harris), has a key line in the play: "There are some things one remembers even though they may never have

happened. There are things I remember which may never have happened, but as I recall them so they take place."

Levin asked Miss Harris how many memories in the play she considered to be true. She replied, "Just like all memories, probably the first line." To illustrate her point she recalled a past incident. She had met Pinter at a party several years previous to her appearance in the play. Pinter recalled meeting and talking to her, but she was sure she had never met him before.

Love, Not Sex

She stressed to the cast that "Old Times" is a play about love, not sex. One day she said she lunched with Pinter in a restaurant and tried to pin him down about the sexual innuendos in the play. He became so furious with her he jumped up and screamed, "It's a play about love, not about sex."

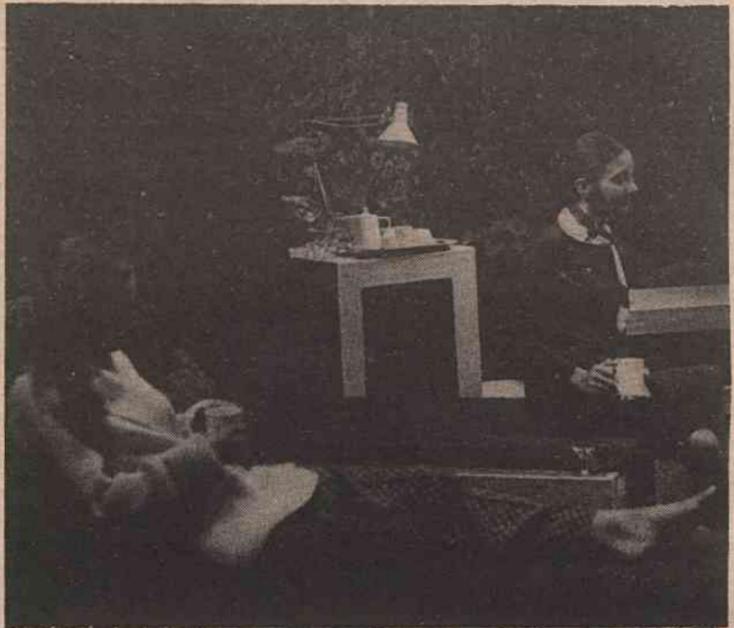
Pinter's plays have been the source of great controversy centered around meaning. At first widely criticized, most of his major works such as "The Birthday Party" and "The Homecoming" are now considered modern classics. Once when asked about the meaning of his plays the usually tight-lipped Pinter quipped, "The weasel, under the cocktail table." Unfortunately much of the press took him seriously and tried to decipher the meaning of that remark as well.

Walter Kerr summed up the trouble most audiences have with understanding Pinter's plays in a 1971 review for the New York Times: "We are not accustomed to the notion that personality can never be known absolutely, that we are one and all isolated, that reality slips like sand through the fingers whenever one tries to hold it possessively in a fist."

Levin and his cast had similar problems understanding the play. Often they tried to find hidden meanings where Miss Harris told them Pinter said there were none. "The play is not metaphysical; it is actually quite realistic," Levin explained.

New York Production

This writer saw the 1971 production of "Old Times" in New York and was



Essay Photo by Bill Wren

Mette, Nelson and LaVallee in "Old Times"

puzzled by what I considered to be a strange piece of blocking. Kate and Deeley, the wife and husband, have been discussing Anna, the visitor. Instead of entering through the door she suddenly comes from upstage where she has been throughout the action of the play and launches into a reminiscence of "queuing all night in the rain". Miss Harris explained that Pinter simply couldn't think of a way to get Anna on stage without breaking the action, so he placed her there from the beginning.

Pinter is famous for writing pauses into his plays. Their meaning has been the subject of much controversy. Levin explains that in life, pauses and silence have as much meaning as what is actually said. He says some are pauses of embarrassment and sometimes people pause when they are trying to remember or when they are trying to weigh their words carefully. It's up to the director and cast to decipher the meaning of those pauses.

Original Script

Levin said that he has adhered strictly

to the pauses and blocking in the original script except when the structure of the set required blocking changes. The original production was on a proscenium stage; the Dome Theatre is three-quarter round.

Pinter writes succinctly. He wrote the play in three days and made only two changes afterwards. He wrote one new line for the original production and changed a pause to a silence in New York.

At the end of the play there is a sharp, abrupt rise in the intensity of the lighting and then a quick blackout. Levin said at first he had likened it to "throwing light on the subject," but now he has changed his mind.

Walter Kerr had exactly the opposite thought when he saw the Broadway production. "No, I thought," he said in a review, "the trick with the lights is saying that people, when fully illuminated, remain exactly as ambiguous as they were in the half dark." Levin agrees.

Text Of Drama Department Survey



DRAMA INQUIRY

MAY 29, 1974

Please take the time to express your views (indifference never brought about constructive change... please exercise this opportunity) In a real effort to evaluate and improve our effectiveness in our work with the faculty we ask that you complete this questionnaire. Please be frank, honest, and objective. To encourage your honest response we ask that you not sign this form. Thank you.

(Please feel free to explain any ~~ambiguous~~ answers that you give in the space provided or use the back of this sheet.)

1. Would you recommend this present Drama Dept. to an interested student applying here? YES NO
2. I am: High School College: Freshmen Soph Jr. Sr.
3. Do you feel the Drama Dept. proceeds in a well organized fashion? YES NO If not, why?
4. (If you answered negatively to the above) Do you feel this disorganization occurred before the resignation of members of the faculty? YES NO Do you feel it will continue? YES NO
5. Whom of the below do you feel is (are) your favorite acting teacher(s)? (if you haven't had any one of these teachers in a class, indicate by circling his name) ~~Beard~~ Beard Hotton Jaeger Pollock Provan Murray Bows none
6. Do you feel that:
 1.just acting teachers should direct major productions? YES NO
 2.just visiting directors should direct major productions? YES NO
 3.visiting directors should direct a majority of the major productions? YES NO
7. Do you plan to return next year (applicable only to H.S. and non-senior students)? YES NO Why? _____
If not, is it due to the present department? YES NO Do you plan to go elsewhere to study? YES NO
8. Do you feel that the Drama Dept. usually considers the student in departmental decisions and policy? YES NO Do you feel that they listen to student opinions? YES NO
9. Do you feel the present DEAN of Drama is:

Highly competent competent weak incapable of running the Dept.

incompetent
10. Do you feel that the casting of non-paying NCSCA graduates in school productions can benefit you? YES NO

11. Do you feel that casting a faculty member in a school production is fair if there is a student here that could do that role? YES NO
12. Do you feel that casting a faculty member in a school production is fair provided that no student auditioned for that particular part or the part is far beyond the ability of the students (age-wise)? YES NO (If you feel that there has been casting of this sort done in the past, please explain on the back.)
12. What do you see as the DRAMA DEPT.'s major problems: (circle one) or more
1. the students 2. the dean 3. the faculty 4. the policy 5. other: _____
Why? _____
13. Do you feel that anything will be done by the Drama Dept. to improve the department as a result of this inquiry? YES NO Why? _____
14. What do you believe the basic goal and concept of this dept. to be? (be as brief or as lengthy as you wish)

use the back if necessary THANK YOU