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Pinter's Apprenticeship and the BBC

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on unpublished materials from the BBC Archives, this article provides scholars with vital new contexts for understanding Harold Pinter's late 1950s and early 1960s attempts to transform his very earliest radio dramas—"Something in Common," *A Slight Ache*, *A Night Out*, and *The Dwarfs*—into radio broadcasts. The material in the form of memoranda from script readers and producers to whom scripts were sent reveal considerable internal dissent within the staff of the BBC Radio Third Programme Department during this period. In addition to exploring the existing opposition to the radio performance of Pinter's works amongst elements in the BBC Third Programme hierarchy, this article assesses the personalities involved in the decision-making process at the BBC, the performance of Pinter's texts in terms of their broadcasting history, and the ways in which BBC radio drama staff, including Barbara Bray, R. D. Smith, and D. G. Bridson, recognised and encouraged Pinter's genius. These important BBC archival materials afford us with a new understanding of the manner in which the production of Pinter's early works anticipated the contemporary reactions and subsequent critical perspectives of the full-length plays that later defined his career.

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Harold Pinter's initial BBC appearance seems to have been on the BBC Light Programme, a live broadcast on "Focus on Football Pools," initially aired on 19 September 1950. Pinter's first broadcast was followed shortly after, on 31 October 1950, by his speaking on "Focus on Libraries," also a live broadcast on the BBC Light Programme.¹ Pinter's early radio work has attracted significant critical interest, and the present essay contributes to the existing scholarship by adding new substance and depth to our understanding of the selection/production process.² An examination of the material at the Written Archives Centre, BBC, Caversham Park, Reading (henceforth referred to as WAC) reveals that there was considerable controversy within the BBC and its staff as to

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¹Baker and Ross, 213, items J1–2.

²See Michael Billington, *Harold Pinter*, 30, 99–100; *Chignell*, 131–45; and Miller, 403–12, all of whom discuss briefly Pinter and the radio; however, they don't draw extensively or at all with the Memorandum at the BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC). Jacob Stulberg "situates Harold Pinter's radio play *A Slight Ache* alongside the radio-playwriting protocols of its first producer, the British Broadcasting Corporation" (502). He does not, however, use the Memorandum at WAC. See Stulberg, 502–23.

whether or not Pinter's work should be broadcast or televised.³ Furthermore, the reactions of BBC script editors and other personnel within the BBC Third Programme hierarchy reflect the period during which they were written in terms of the atmosphere and diversity of opinion, the perceptions of radio and television drama broadcasting, and critical responses to Pinter. Some of the observations also represent eclectic standpoints that accord, for instance, with ethical and intertextual critical perspectives.⁴

Drawing on unpublished materials from the BBC Archives, this article provides scholars with vital new contexts for understanding Harold Pinter's late 1950s and early 1960s attempts to see his very earliest radio dramas—"Something in Common," *A Slight Ache*, *A Night Out*, and *The Dwarfs*—into radio broadcasts. The material in the form of memoranda from script readers and producers to whom scripts were sent reveal considerable internal dissent within the staff of the BBC Radio Third Programme Department during this period. In addition to exploring the existing opposition to the radio performance of Pinter's works amongst elements in the BBC Third Programme hierarchy, this article assesses the personalities involved in the decision-making process at the BBC, the performance of Pinter's texts in terms of their broadcasting history, and the ways in which BBC radio drama staff, including Barbara Bray, R. D. Smith, and D. G. Bridson, recognised and encouraged Pinter's genius. These important BBC archival materials afford us with a new understanding of the manner in which the production of Pinter's early works anticipated the contemporary reactions and subsequent critical perspectives of the full-length plays that later defined his career.

As it happened, contemporary reactions to Pinter's early radio broadcasting scripts were mixed. Michael Billington observes, "although Pinter took instantly to radio, not everyone in radio took instantly to Pinter."⁵ These differences of opinion and responses are reflected in an almost entirely unpublished series of memoranda,⁶ which this article will examine mainly in chronological order of writing, beginning with Michael Bakewell (3 June 1958) and moving to R. D. A. Marriott (11 July 1958), D. G. Bridson (28 April 1959), Bryan Izzard (20 July 1959), H. Dean (29 June 1960), P. H. Newby (26 October 1960 and 31 October 1960), Val Gielgud (28 October 1960), R. D. Smith (1 November 1960), and others at the BBC. Information about the writers' and their positions in the BBC will be explained, as will the history of the work by Pinter being discussed—largely its broadcasting history. Carrying out these level of archival analysis will afford us with a new understanding of four early Pinter works, including "Something in Common," *A Slight Ache*, *A Night Out*, and *The Dwarfs*.

The first set of observations concerns Pinter's unproduced radio play "Something in Common." According to the BBC WAC records, Pinter's typescript was submitted on 14 April 1958 as an "Untitled Play." The only evidence of the play's existence lies in

³We'd like to thank the staff at the Archives for their assistance and the BBC's policy of not restricting the use of WAC material for journal articles. Thanks are also due to Professor Hugh Chignell of Bournemouth University for his assistance and for his most informative study of *British Radio Drama, 1945-63*. Also thanks are due to Professor John Knapp and Max Hoover for their judicious observations on earlier drafts of this article. In the text of the article, references to unpublished Pinter material submitted for BBC Radio performance, such as "Something in Common," "A Slight Ache," "A Night Out," and "The Dwarfs," citation marks are used; in the instance of subsequent publication, such as *A Slight Ache*, *A Night Out*, and *The Dwarfs* italics are used.

⁴For ethical criticism, see Baker and Biwu, "Fruitful Collaborations," 15, and Tian, 402-20. For intertextuality, see Baron.

⁵Billington, *Harold Pinter*, 95.

⁶The exception being Billington's *Harold Pinter*, where very short extracts from the WAC Memorandum concerning "Something in Common" are cited without identifying their source (96).

the Pinter Scriptwriter file 1 (1957–1962) at the BBC Archives at Caversham, where it languished as an unproduced radio play. Indeed, the typescript was lost and no one connected with the BBC Drama Department at the time remembers anything about it except that it wasn't produced and is somehow related or associated with the subsequent emergence of *A Slight Ache*.

As the archives reveal, there was considerable dispute over whether or not "Something in Common" should even be produced. Michael Bakewell (b. 1931), then a young BBC Third Programme producer and strong supporter of Pinter's work,⁷ supported its production: "I think we could do this," Bakewell wrote. For Bakewell, "Pinter is at his best here. This is extremely concise, very well constructed and puts across a fully detailed experience with remarkable economy. It would make a terrifying yet extremely moving piece of radio." He added that "a few speeches need to be tidied up, otherwise I think this would make excellent material" (3 June 1958). In ink below Bakewell's note, his superior P. H. Newby endorses Bakewell's observations: "I believe that this is worth doing, I wouldn't go as far as Hobson, but I'm sure that Pinter is a man we should try to develop." This is in reference to Harold Hobson's recent and highly influential review of *The Birthday Party* in *The Sunday Times* in which the critic observed that "Pinter has got hold of the primary fact of existence. We live on the verge of disaster."⁸

Others in the BBC Drama Department demurred. Val Gielgud, Head of Productions, as will be seen, was not a great enthusiast, and the difference of opinion was referred up the BBC hierarchical chain to R. D. A Marriott, then assistant director of sound broadcasting,⁹ who opened a lengthy Memorandum by commenting that he does not "very much like acting as a Court of Appeal because although it is easy to intervene in one case it is much less easy to exercise the general editorial responsibility for the Third Programme" (11 July 1958). He had previously rejected N. F. Simpson's *A Resounding Tinkle* and *The Hole* for radio broadcasts and does not "see how anyone can very well accept for [the] Third Programme 'Something in Common' without also accepting *A Resounding Tinkle*." For Marriott, listeners living outside of London should have the opportunity to hear contemporary writers who were the subject of media discussion. Marriott wrote:

surely, when dealing with any kind of contemporary work, inclusion in our programmes does not indicate any faith in the discovery of a literary masterpiece, but merely a belief that it is of sufficient interest for the audience to have the opportunity of making up their own minds.

He concluded, "because we have a monopoly in this medium it is obviously a particular responsibility on us to be catholic in our choice."¹⁰

Reasons for the non-performance of "Something in Common" may have something to do with a disagreement concerning the fee to be paid to Pinter. This is reflected in a note

⁷See Baker, *A Harold Pinter Chronology*, 307; and "Michael Bakewell."

⁸Billington acutely writes that "alone of all critics, he saw the merits of Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* (1958), describing its author as 'the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London' [...] and encouraging him, after the play's box-office failure, to go on writing." See Billington, "Hobson, Sir Harold (1904–1992)". Billington is citing from Elsom, ed.

⁹See Chignell, 132, and Billington, *Harold Pinter*, 96.

¹⁰Marriott. See Billington, *Harold Pinter*, 96; for Simpson (1919–2011), see "N. F. Simpson".

from “Miss H. Dean, [BBC] Copyright Department.” She writes that “on investigation it appears that when this play was originally commissioned in 1958, owing to” Pinter’s agent Jimmy Wax’s “reluctance to accept the suggested fee a contract was never signed” (29 June 1960).¹¹ Dean adds that “it was agreed with the agent that after certain revisions were made to the play and after” the acceptance of “the completed script we would arrange terms. This never appears to have been done and in the circumstances ... we are not proposing to take any further action.” A different perspective on this was given by Pinter, who recalled that “‘Something in Common’ became the substance of a 60-minute radio play he was commissioned to write in July 1958 for a fee of 85 guineas: *A Slight Ache*.”¹²

A Slight Ache also caused considerable internal disagreement at the BBC prior to its broadcast on 29 July 1959. *A Slight Ache* anticipates many of Pinter’s subsequent themes and preoccupations. There are only three characters; in the radio version, as opposed to the stage version, the third character, the Matchseller, doesn’t speak although he is present through movement and sound effects—resulting in ambiguity—a key characteristic in Pinter. In the mind of the listener, he may or may not be present as we experience the life of Edward and Flora: Edward seems to hear him although the radio audience cannot. The play opens with repetition between Flora and Edward who reflect upon honeysuckle, the floral associations echoing a whole area of poetic allusions and motifs. As Flora says: “the whole gardens in flower this morning. The clematis. The convolvulus. Everything” (see the Methuen 1968 edition of *A Slight Ache and Other Plays*). Mundane everyday rituals then intrude: “Pass me the teapot, please” (10), and then a wasp appears in the marmalade—the wasp being the first intruder of the day and Flora and Edward then appear united, although there is a conflict between them typical of the conflict between characters in Pinter’s world: and Edward feels the need to destroy it to kill it.

With this urge comes Edward’s “slight ache” in his eyes, which may be psychological in nature. It can also be interpreted in an erotic way, representing sexual numbness and anticipating subsequent Pinter motifs. Edward kills the wasp, viciously scalding it with boiling water and feeling relieved, whereas Flora his wife, although she wanted the wasp destroyed, reacts to the intrusion of death as an “awful” experience. It is at this juncture that the seemingly innocuous Matchseller, who has become a standard fixture behind the house, is perceived by Edward as a threat, and an irrational danger associated with the premonition of Edward’s own demise. On the other hand, Flora is not as disturbed by the Matchmaker’s perpetual presence and regards him as “harmless.”¹³ In the stage play, the Matchmaker is actually present: clearly, as he is silent, he cannot be physically present in the radio version.

The material at the Caversham archives reflects opposition to broadcasting *A Slight Ache*. A series of memoranda provide insight into the play and a vigorous defense of its qualities. The observations anticipate subsequent academically based critiques.¹⁴ Pinter sent his script to Barbara Bray by September 1958. Archie Campbell, a senior producer, observed in a memorandum that

¹¹For Jimmy Wax (1912–1983), Pinter’s agent, see Baker, *A Harold Pinter Chronology*, 322–3.

¹²Billington, *Harold Pinter*, 96.

¹³Pinter, *A Slight Ache and Other Plays*, 12, 14.

¹⁴For critical discussion of the radio version of “*A Slight Ache*,” see Stulberg, 508–18, and Begley, 98–108.

by no standards could this work be judged a play but, even on the level of a conversation piece, the symbolism, if it exists at all, is obscure. If the script is merely intended as another essay on the 'Recherche du temps perdu' theme

—something that obsessed Pinter for years¹⁵— “its implications are vaguely repellent” (25 March 1959). Two days earlier, Charles Lefeaux, in another memorandum, had described the play as “a claustrophobic and frightening piece which develops its own inner tension and atmosphere, is shot through with sudden revelations of character and ends in terror” (23 March 1959).¹⁶

Who were the people making such judgments? Pinter's advocate at the BBC from the very beginning was Barbara Bray (1924–2010), who after gaining a first-class degree in modern languages from Cambridge in 1953 became a BBC radio script editor. Dan Gunn writes that “she commissioned and translated avant-garde writing, including Beckett and others. She greatly encouraged the early work of Pinter and he was grateful to her throughout his life for her crucial early support.” After leaving the BBC in 1961, “she lived in Paris as a freelance translator” and was very close to Beckett.¹⁷

Campbell, Lefeaux, and Bridson are also of interest in relation to the diverse opinions found in the WAC memoranda on reactions to Pinter's early radio scripts. Archie Campbell (d. 2014), a dramatist and producer, had a lengthy BBC career running from the 1930s until the early 1960s. A list of his BBC and other productions shows that in 1955 he produced the BBC radio broadcast of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Given his experience and involvement with BBC drama, and especially light entertainment, the conservatism displayed in his reaction to Pinter's script is somewhat surprising. By the late 1950s, he was in the twilight stages of his lengthy BBC career and perhaps didn't wish to prejudice his pension, so he played it safe.¹⁸ Stulberg, while not referring specifically to Campbell, suggests that conservatives in the BBC were following strict policy guidelines.¹⁹

Charles Tregoney Lefeaux, a Londoner, actor, and producer (1909–1979), was more sympathetic to Pinter's radio scripts. He enjoyed a lengthy BBC career as Head of the Drama Department Script Unit for the BBC. As a script editor and also a producer for BBC Light entertainment, he produced the famous long-running radio programme on post-Second World War Britain, *Dick Barton*. His filmography spans from 1934 to 1960.²⁰

If there is a relative dearth of information on Campbell and Lefeaux, this is not the case with Pinter's advocate, Douglas Geoffrey Bridson (1910–1970), whose papers are now at the Lilly Library, Indiana University. A radio producer and author, he became known as the “cultural boss of the BBC.” Beginning

¹⁵See Baker, *Pinter's World*, 197–200.

¹⁶The reactions from Campbell and Lefeaux are cited by Billington, *Harold Pinter*, 100.

¹⁷See Baker, *A Harold Pinter Chronology*, 310, and *Pinter's World*, 118–20. In an interview with Brigitte Gauthier, 16 March 2007, Barbara Bray explained her BBC role: “from 1953 onwards, I was in charge of selecting authors and helping them with the technical side of writing for radio, and that was how, among all the writers I came to know in the second half of the 1950s, I met Harold Pinter who is been a close friend ever since.” See Bray, “Pinter's Radio Plays,” 19.

¹⁸For Campbell, see IMDb, “Archie Campbell”; and Deacon and Deacon.

¹⁹Stulberg, 502–03.

²⁰For Lefeaux, see IMDb, “Charles Lefeaux,” www.imdb.com/name/nm0498844/; and “Charles Lefeaux,” *BFI.org*, British Film Institute, www.bfi.org.uk/films-tv-people/4ce2b9f2782d2.

as a freelance writer, [he] then joined BBC radio as a Feature Programmes Assistant for their North Region in 1935. He became the influential Programme Editor for Arts, Sciences, and Documentaries (Sound) from 1964 to 1967 and retired in 1969, having written or produced more than 800 programmes during his career.²¹

There is a lengthy WAC memorandum, dated 28 April 1959, from D. G. Bridson, then the assistant head of features, offering cogent reasons why *A Slight Ache* should be broadcast. Bridson's account is intertextual with ethical critical applications. Bridson writes that he read "this script with pleasure and a good deal of interest. It seems to me eminently worthwhile broadcasting and a serious work of imagination, which is all too scarce in our schedules." Pinter's work owes "a good deal to Ionesco and there are various other slightly reminiscent notes about it." Bridson names in particular Ibsen and Melville.²²

Bridson's subsequently "turns to the 'meaning' of the play," although with the caveat that "with all such subjective writing the 'meaning' is bound to be somewhat personal." He adds, "what, for instance is the 'meaning' of the conversation with the Button-moulder in *Peer Gynt*? Or what is the 'meaning' of the Boyg?" Such questions certainly have ethical critical dimensions.²³ However, for Bridson, the Matchseller in Pinter's *A Slight Ache*

means two things—one for Flora and something quite different—though related—to Edward. He is, in fact, the potential Edward, the character in which all his life Edward has seen himself—the athlete, the success, the excuse for missed opportunities and finally the empty shell which has become the reality.

Bridson adds, "as everything in life has been missed—what Edward sheltered himself from experience under his 'canopy'—his true self has dwindled into the pathetic nonentity in which he suddenly sees himself."

The discussion of Flora is similarly detailed and insightful: "to Flora, on the other hand, the Match-seller, while still representing Edward's one time potential—has now come to represent all that he has in fact failed to become for her." Bridson expands on this thought, writing

in other words, his one-time potential has become his eventual successor—the things in life that she has begun to seek elsewhere. This identity seems to be plainly implied in the references to the rape—obviously a little wishful thinking on her part—and the moment when she notices the mud on the old man's clothes ... she stresses mud as one of the concomitants of the rape itself.

Bridson fails to explain his interpretation of Flora's suggestion of rape, and in his observations on the play writes that Flora "sees in the old man, furthermore, the identity of the child which she has been denied by Edward: whence the talk about giving him a bath, toys etc." According to this account,

²¹See "D. G. Bridson," *Wikipedia*. See also Bridson, "Bridson MSS, The Lilly Library"; and Crook, 204–5.

²²For Pinter and Ionesco, see Bennett, The subject of Melville's impact on Pinter merits further exploration.

²³For instance, "The Button Molder ... embodies the poet's ideas regarding immortality and the existential purpose of the individual life. He appears grim and macabre as, with his huge ladle, he comes to fetch Peer's soul, yet there is a sort of Mephistophelian humor in his tone." See Zucker, 1101. See also Thune, 89–98. Thune writes that "the need to come to terms with one's identity, to explore the many guises of self" and place in society (89). Ibsen was cited very early in reactions to Pinter's work, see for instance in reactions to the London run of *The Birthday Party*. See Shulman; Trewin; and Merritt.

the old man represents the experience of life which she had hoped to find in Edward but which has remained unattained. From now on Edward himself is dead to her: she is more interested in what she has missed in life than in what she has attained: the match-seller has taken over.

Bridson adds, "Perhaps she will take a lover: at any rate, her emotions need to be compensated one way or another."

As he concludes his observations, Bridson writes that "if this explanation doesn't emerge immediately on a first reading, it may be doubted whether it would emerge immediately from a first hearing." Bridson believes that it will "emerge ... *after* the" initial hearing. He doesn't think that his own reading "is by any means the only construction which could be put upon it. The main point surely," Bridson concludes, "is that the work should stimulate such discussion. If it had no integrity as a piece of creative writing, such stimulation would not arise." Essentially, Bridson "think[s] quite highly of the work and [he] recommend[s] that" the BBC "should accept it."

Another producer, Bryan Izzard,²⁴ saw Pinter's play in everyday life. Izzard wrote on 13 April 1959, prior to Bridson's observations and in response to Archie Campbell's negative comments and comparison with Proust's *Recherche du temps perdu*, that "People do talk like this at the breakfast table and perhaps do discharge their worries on people once the initial barrier of recognition has been broken down."²⁵ Recognition of Pinter's innovative qualities are reflected in Izzard's observations on *A Night Out*. Initially a TV play, it was subsequently commissioned by Barbara Bray for the BBC Radio Third Programme as an hour-long play. Jimmy Wax, Pinter's agent, "sold it for 95 guineas to ABC's TV's Armchair Theatre on condition that they transmitted it after the radio broadcast."²⁶ The play, produced by Donald McWhinnie, was broadcast by the BBC Third Programme on 1 March 1960. An account of *A Night Out* is found in the synopsis Pinter submitted with his script,²⁷ and later found in Izzard's endorsement of 20 July 1959. The synopsis is clear:

Albert is dominated by his mother who fights against his desire to live, what is to her, a far too gay life. Albert reacts against this by going to a party where he creates a rather trying scene and by having the start of an affair with a girl. All this conspires to convert Albert temporarily [stet] to almost well-nigh manic-like behavior, but mother soon wins him back.

Izzard's critical observations are prescient: "Mr. Pinter is certainly trying to break new ground, for it is most unlike his previous efforts in having what could be called a very strong storyline." Izzard adds:

Perhaps it is a storyline which we have met many times before. I am not entirely happy about it for that reason, but Mr. Pinter gives very little clue as to how he intends to treat it. Certainly some fascinating things do arise out of the synopsis. I would imagine that the party scenes and the scene with the girl could become particularly powerful, and also the last scene with the crumbling Albert after his temporary elevation. After all, in view of his past ability, I see no reason why new ground cannot be broken with success. Let us go ahead and ask for more.²⁸

²⁴See Hayward.

²⁵Billington, *Harold Pinter*, 100.

²⁶See Billington, *Harold Pinter*, 111; and Baker and Ross, 235–36, item W13.

²⁷For an idea of the method used by Bray and others at the BBC and the way internally fresh suggestions were handled, see Bray, "Pinter's Radio Plays," 20–1; and Stulberg, 509–10.

²⁸See Izzard.

Izzard's observations were approved by others among the BBC radio staff, as his memorandum is endorsed with the initials of colleagues, such as D. G. Bridson and Barbara Bray.

Perhaps the most revealing accounts of BBC internal differences of opinion regarding Pinter's early work finds reflection in an internal memorandum concerning the autobiographical *The Dwarfs*, originally written between 1952 and 1956 as a novel. According to Martin Esslin (1918–2002), who retired after 38 years with the BBC in 1977, the novel “represents a veritable storehouse of raw material from which much of Pinter's later work is drawn.”²⁹ It remained unpublished as a novel until October 1990. In an “Author's Note” to the 1990 version, Pinter observed that “in 1960 [he] extracted some elements from the book and wrote a short play under the same title.” He added that “the play is quite abstract, mainly, I believe, because I omitted essential character of Virginia from it.” He later regarded this as an error.³⁰ Subsequently, *The Dwarfs* went through various incarnations as a stage-play.³¹

Ultimately, there are three incarnations of *The Dwarfs*, including the aforementioned autobiographical novel; the short radio play broadcast on 2 December 1960, in which Pinter omitted the essential character of Virginia; and the stage version first presented on 18 September 1963.³² In the radio version three male friends in their early twenties from the East End of London, Len, Mark, and Pete, engage over an undefined time in fragmentary conversations full of non sequiturs. A plot or story line as such is non-existent. The central character Len's thoughts predominate and the other two characters are submerged and subordinated by his “conversation” or “monologues”/dialogues—they are dwarfs. There is considerable lyricism in the radio version which is missing from the stage version. The radio version cuts away the exterior narrative found in the novel. There are philosophical reflections and lengthy internal monologues by Len that in the stage version are divided up between the other characters. As said, an important omission from the radio version is Virginia or “Ginni” over whom the three male characters are fighting for possession. Another key omission in the stage version but present in the radio version is “the concept of the dwarfs as timekeepers, imaginary beings who keep some kind of physical order.”³³

The Dwarfs, even in its truncated radio version “reflects themes that run throughout Pinter's work: the politics between people and the conscious or unconscious struggle for dominance, power and position between them.” The radio text “also includes conversational non sequiturs, idiomatic usage, interrogative questions, staccato utterances, London topographical references, the naming of various works of art, artists, and cultural icons Cultural, and other innuendos and direct references” transition in a moment “from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the mood of Shakespearean tragedy to that of the local musical hall.”³⁴

As with earlier BBC reactions to Pinter's work, there was considerable difference of opinion concerning *The Dwarfs*, which was eventually broadcast on the Third

²⁹Esslin, 127. For Esslin's career, see Sanford; and Calder.

³⁰Baker and Ross, 224–25, item W2; and Gillen, 1–4.

³¹Baker and Ross, 240–1, item W16.5.

³²See Baker and Ross, 31, 240, items A12 a and W16, respectively.

³³Regal, 43.

³⁴See Baker, *Pinter's World*, 78; and Regal, 42–5.

Programme on 2 December 1960 as a radio play directed by Barbara Bray. There are conflicted voices reflected in a memorandum written by P. H. Newby, the Third Programme Controller, Val Gielgud, and R. D. Smith, a BBC radio producer. Percy Howard Newby (1918–1997) was a novelist, a radio producer, and a leading executive at the BBC. Siân Nicholas in her *ODNB* entry on Newby writes that “in 1958 Newby became controller of the Third Programme, BBC radio’s flagship arts network.... Under his control the Third Programme supported many young writers, including Tom Stoppard”³⁵

Prior to citing Newby’s detailed comments on the radio script for *The Dwarfs*, it is salutary to keep in mind observations made by Pinter many years later and just before his own death. In an interview with Peter Stanford, Pinter, looking back at *The Dwarfs*, refers to the period in which it is set, that of his growing up and his conversations with his friends. He observes that “the term ‘God’ dominates the book to a great extent” as it does the various incarnations of the play.³⁶

Newby’s reaction to Pinter’s radio play was somewhat ambiguous, as expected from an executive needing to be diplomatic and working with highly individualistic producers. Newby’s responses are detailed, judicious, and contain many insights. He wrote on 26 October 1960 that if Donald McWhinnie (1920–1987), the successful producer of Beckett’s *Embers*,³⁷ were to produce *The Dwarfs*, then he wouldn’t be too concerned. Newby commented on McWhinnie “from experience—*Embers*, for example—I knew his ability to illuminate a difficult text and I was content to wait for that illumination” (26 October 1960). However, on re-reading Pinter’s play, Newby believes that it perhaps should be judged “less as a play than as a poem.” If considered in this manner, Newby wrote, *The Dwarfs* takes “its place naturally in a certain sequence of existentialist and quasi-religious statement. Its concern is whether or not the world is meaningful.” Such an observation is very prescient, as exchanges on religion and the existence of God are at the core of *The Dwarfs*. Newby, in his response to the radio version text, takes an ethical critical turn and raises linguistic and philosophical concerns echoing to some extent Pinter’s much later remarks in his interview with Peter Stanford. Newby asks: “is meaning simply an attribute of habit? We have all experienced the phenomenon of saying a word over and over again until it becomes strange.” Newby exemplifies this from specific instances in the text when “Len is hovering on the edge of this meaningless world ... where he tries to take a grip of himself by naming chairs and tables.” Moreover,

worse is to follow. He becomes unsure of his own relationship to the external world and as Pete says ... falls prey to a flux of sensation. He can only perceive; he cannot form concepts. This terrifying regression to the world of a newly-born infant (who doesn’t know which is his own toe and which the corner of the sheet) is an extreme form of not knowing.³⁸

Newby’s interest in psychological approaches is reflected in his analysis of Pinter’s script. Siân Nicholas, in her *ODNB* entry on Newby, points out that whilst at the BBC Newby continued to write novels; indeed, “in 1969 he won the first Booker prize for

³⁵Nicholas.

³⁶See Pinter, “[Interview with Peter Stanford],” 6–7.

³⁷First broadcast on the Third Programme on 24 June 1959, “*Embers*” won a main award at the Prix Italia. Subsequently, in 1962, McWhinnie was nominated for a Tony Award for his screen version of *The Caretaker*. For McWhinnie, see “Donald McWhinnie.”

³⁸Newby, Memorandum, “*The Dwarfs*.”

his fourteenth novel, *Something to Answer for*.” Yet, from Nicholas’s perspective, “Newby failed to fulfil his early promise, as the wry detachment of his earlier novels gave way to a laboured Jungian symbolism.” Newby comments that

at this stage, the Freudian analysis turns into medieval story; mystical accounts of the so-called ‘dark night of the soul’ sometimes tell of devils. In this case, the devils are dwarfs and they are shown not so much as maligned beings but rather people *who know*. The ‘horror’ and ‘disgust’ passages can be paralleled in mystical writings.

In this way, Newby anticipates subsequent applications of Freudian psychoanalysis to Pinter’s texts and especially to the early texts.³⁹

Newby combines a psychological reading with a religious one, writing that “another account of the play would be to say it is an account of Len’s mental breakdown and res-toration to health in a mental hospital.” For Newby,

there is such quasi-religious complexity in the text that I don’t think this would be an adequate account. From one point of view Len is Christ on the Cross (“They make a hole in my side”). He says ‘I’ve lost a kingdom.’

However, Newby doesn’t think that Pinter’s text can be reduced “to any single meaning.” He recognises that “there are some very funny lines.” Newby concludes his memorandum by stating, “of one thing I am sure; it is deeply serious writing and I’ve no doubt we should try to give it as effective a production as possible.”⁴⁰

Two days later, Newby received a response from Val Gielgud. According to Hannah Khalil, Gielgud

was a mass of contradictions: he claimed to want to move away from theatre-style productions on radio, but was from a theatre background; he pushed the boundaries and experimented with the form, and yet he was more at home with Shakespeare than he was with contemporary writing; he recognized that radio was for the masses, but he loathed soap operas or anything too populist.

He didn’t appreciate Beckett: “if it weren’t for him Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting For Godot* would have had its first public performance on radio rather than the West End stage in 1955 – as he rejected it.”⁴¹

Gielgud’s attitude to Pinter was negative. Gielgud appreciated Newby’s observations concerning McWhinnie as producer of *The Dwarfs*, as the Sound Department received “more than adequate proof of his ability in dealing with scripts that look less than promising on paper.” Gielgud told Newby in his 28 October 1960 memorandum that Newby must “decide whether” he was prepared, in his capacity of Controller of the Third Programme, “to underwrite ‘The Dwarfs’ with somebody else in the producer’s chair.” In the end, Barbara Bray produced it. Gielgud tells Newby, “I find the play Incomprehensible.” Secondly, “there are several passages in it which I feel should in no circumstances be broadcast at all”—a reference to what he considered to be its scatological passages. Thirdly, Gielgud hadn’t much confidence in Barbara Bray, with whom he had discussed *The Dwarfs*. Gielgud observes “that I am compelled, after questioning Mrs. Bray, about

³⁹See for instance Gabbard; and Merritt.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Khalil.

the content and meaning of the play, to doubt whether she is more capable of interpreting it to the actors than she was in interpreting it to me.”⁴²

Gielgud is also unable to agree with Newby “that any author’s reputation should be assumed as being of such a calibre [stet] that we abdicate our critical and editorial function regarding his work.” Gielgud agrees “that if the piece is to be done it should be given ‘as effective a production as possible’, but how to guarantee you such a production in the circumstances frankly I do not know.” He concludes by saying that he dislikes “falling back on the equivalent of a Court of Appeal, but do you not think that this is perhaps a case when” arbitration is called for?⁴³

Three days later, on 31 October, Newby responded. He began by correcting Gielgud, telling him that he has “never taken the view that an author’s reputation should cause us to abdicate our critical and editorial function.” Newby believes “*The Dwarfs* to be a serious and considered piece of writing and my reason for asking you to carry on with the production is based on that judgment.” Newby reminds Gielgud that the “BBC commissioned the play,” and announced it.⁴⁴ Newby feared that what he refers to as “our suppression of the play would bring it under close scrutiny from the outside world and” he doesn’t “think any claim that the play is incomprehensible is going to carry much weight,” adding that he is “naturally concerned about this because the good repute of the Third Programme is in question.” As to the question of the need for a producer, Newby asks, “we can bring back Donald McWhinnie for the job?” Newby is even willing to “gladly meet the charge out of programme allowance.” In fact, to repeat, Barbara Bray produced the play. It is evident that Newby is using the continuing need of the BBC Third Programme to maintain its reputation, as its existence was continually under threat.⁴⁵

Gielgud’s response, assuming that he made one, is not in the Caversham files. There is, however, a detailed memorandum from the colourful Reginald Donald Smith (1914–1985). Smith was a mentor of Pinter. He had acted as an assessor for the London County Council and assisted Pinter to obtain “a fee-paying grant to go to a drama school.”⁴⁶ Smith found *The Dwarfs* to be “though disturbing, a very moving piece.” He wrote to P. H. Newby, on 1 November 1960 that, in his view, the play is a depiction of its writer’s struggle to find his own identity and personal values in a world where public values appear to have disintegrated and “where disasters threaten on all sides.” Smith wasn’t only referring to the threat of nuclear annihilation. The “Ban the Bomb” campaign, represented by the Aldermaston marches and Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, was then in full throttle. However, unlike such creative contemporaries as Arnold Wesker and Bernard Kops, Pinter didn’t play an active part in the Campaign.⁴⁷ Pinter’s anger at the threat of annihilation is certainly found in the “nightmare passages”

⁴²Gielgud, Memorandum, “*The Dwarfs*.”

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Part of Gielgud’s hostility to Pinter’s drama probably owes its origins to Pinter’s disregard for the tenets of radio drama laid down in Gielgud’s books on radio drama (see Gielgud, *How to Write Broadcast Plays*, and *The Right Way to Radio Playwriting*. The forthcoming drama “has been publicized,” for instance, in an interview with Kenneth Tynan on the BBC Home Service recorded on 19 August 1960 and broadcast on 28 October 1960, and short extracts from this interview appeared in *The Radio Times*, the weekly magazine announcing forthcoming BBC radio and television programmes (20 October 1960). For the Tynan interview, see Baker and Ross, 214, item J10.

⁴⁵Newby, Memorandum, “*The Dwarfs*”. See Carpenter and Hewison.

⁴⁶For Smith, see Billington, *Harold Pinter*, 20; and Thomas.

⁴⁷See Baker, *Pinter’s World*, 145–83 for an assessment of Pinter’s political and religious engagement.

in *The Dwarfs*. For Smith, Pinter's drama reflects the despair of a person searching for meaningful personal relationships, only to find loneliness.

Pinter's radio dramas came of age during an era of tremendous flux. The period after 1945, as Jeanette Thomas observes, "was a time of great freedom and excitement in radio ... The Third Programme had just been established"—it first broadcast on 29 September 1946 and played a key role in disseminating the arts before being replaced by BBC Radio 3 in 1967. According to Thomas, "Features producers were given virtually free rein: Smith was one of a band of versatile producers who flourished in these conditions." The throwing off of the shackles of post-war austerity in the late 1950s and 1960s inevitably witnessed a counter reaction. This was represented, for instance, in the figure of Mrs. Mary Whitehouse. Public theatre performance up to its abolition in 1968 had to run the gauntlet of the Lord Chamberlain's Office.⁴⁸ It is hardly surprising, then, that what Smith refers to in his Memorandum to Newby as the "somewhat scatological passage" in the play should receive comment. Exactly what Smith is referring to is unclear, as references to testicles, as well as idiomatic words for the female anatomy, occur throughout the various versions of *The Dwarfs* and do not meet the definition of scatological. Smith regarded this ostensible "scatological passage" as, in his words, "that of a sensitive man fighting off despair through a kind of macabre comedy, and I think the analogy is with Swift⁴⁹ and not with the current vogue for low-life vulgarity and pornography."⁵⁰

Interestingly and revealing of the changes that Pinter made, the subsequent novel version has 31 short chapters.⁵¹ Smith refers to "nineteen scenes" in the manuscript for the radio production, which he regarded "individually well shaped." For Smith, "the connections between them of course are poetic in that the logical theatrical transitions are dropped in favour of dissolving from similar mood to similar mood or in favour of cutting from one mood to a contrasting one." The difficulty of Pinter's play is in its density of texture, with Smith adding that "like many types of moments of painful transition in their development, the author is struggling for a clear statement which will help him to resolve his spiritual difficulties." In handwriting at the foot of Smith's typed memo, which is signed by Val Gielgud, is the note: "again in fairness I think you should do this. I am clearly in my favourite position of a minority of one!"⁵²

As noted earlier, *The Dwarfs* was broadcast on the BBC Third Programme on 2 December 1960 and rebroadcast on 20 December; it was produced by Barbara Bray, who had commissioned the play. Evidence of her faith in the quality of Pinter's drama is found in her note authorising payment, dated 26 September 1960: "the script of the hitherto entitled play by Harold Pinter, now entitled *The Dwarfs* has been completed and accepted, and I should be grateful if the remainder of the fee could be paid."⁵³

As the BBC's unpublished archival materials resoundingly demonstrate, the production of Pinter's radio plays was hardly a foregone conclusion. Indeed, the internal political struggles not only reflect the preferences and proclivities of the times, but also a

⁴⁸See Shellard, et al., 133–84. See also Warnock.

⁴⁹The subject of Pinter and Swift merits additional study. According to Billington, late in his life, Pinter's "eyes sparked" [sic] at the mention of the name of Swift, "one of his idols," at a Dublin Writer's Festival. See *Harold Pinter*, 389.

⁵⁰Smith.

⁵¹An omitted chapter from the unpublished novel appears in *The Pinter Review*. See Pinter, "From: *The Dwarfs* (unpublished novel)," 5–7. See also Gillen, 134–5, item D8a.

⁵²Smith.

⁵³Bray, Memorandum, *The Dwarfs*.

skepticism, at times, regarding the playwright's literary merits. At the same time, Pinter clearly owed a significant debt for the support afforded by his advocates at the BBC during his early career. They provided a vehicle for his work, and they encouraged and believed in him in contrast to the dissenting voices—informed, no doubt, by the prevailing practices and thematic interests of the day—that would have barred him from the radio airwaves. Pinter's work clearly represented an artistic vanguard that, at the particular moment in which his radio plays were under consideration at the BBC, was not ready to be embraced by all of the powers that be. It is doubtful that, without the insight and assistance of his proponents, he would have broken through the morass and seen his genius be allowed to flourish—let alone be rewarded almost half-a-century later with a Nobel Prize.

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