

The Homecoming

By plucking a glittering star out of the firmament, director Damian Cruden has had his hands burned

By [Jonathan Kerridge-Phipps](#)

Tuesday 9 June 2009



The author has made the decision to revisit his original review in light of some errors. [Read the apology.](#)

Production: The Homecoming

Venue: York Theatre Royal

Rating: **

Damian Cruden, in plucking a glittering star out of the firmament, has had his hands terribly burned. Our artistic director's announcement that *The Homecoming* was going to be staged at the Theatre Royal, made within days of Pinter's death last Christmas Eve, struck me immediately as a cringingly obvious move, a distasteful venture designed to cash in on a famous corpse. I had no idea that the production itself would transpire to be the most tarry-fingered piece of tomb raiding since Lord Carnarvon's day. All artistic larceny, the misuse of any halfway decent work, is unfortunate; the bastardisation of beauty on this scale amounts to a sort of crime against morality. I speak forcefully, but I fear with a degree of justification. This staging was a wayward tribute that befitted a pauper rather than a prince, and a complete waste of time. Of course one had to be listening very carefully, (the banging seats of the departed were a distraction) but from the back of the dress circle it was possible to hear a playwright slowly turning in his grave.

A taut, figurative tale of male barbarism and female emancipation, *The Homecoming* is the best play by the greatest of all modern playwrights, which makes having to write this review doubly troubling. For the benefit of those not intimately familiar, (excuse the hyperbole but like *Hamlet* and *Inspector Morse*, you don't watch this stuff, you live it) it tells of a prodigal son's return; Teddy is a doctor of philosophy at an American university, who comes home with his wife Ruth after an absence of some years. The reason for his seemingly self-motivated exile is elusive, but we assume it has something to do with a communication breakdown with his hardy, alpha-male father, Max, and his younger brother, the streetwise wannabe

pimp, Lenny. A third brother, a shying simpleton named Joey and an uncle, camp-as-a-row-of-tents and called Sam, complete the dramatis personae. In the bleak, male-oriented domesticity of the familial living room, (closely resembling the Hackney of Pinter's formative years) a savage, seriocomic power-play ensues from this unhappiest of reunions that revolves around the seductive Ruth: who will gain control over her, and to what end? Or is hers the hand, unlikely as it seems, that ultimately rocks the cradle?

Done well, *The Homecoming* is still as relevant and thrilling as the day it was finished, arguably more so. What a pity, then: with the notable exception of the excellent Suzy Cooper (fittingly enough the stand-out turn, given that this is Ruth's play) each actor was guilty of a casual sloppiness that threatened to undermine every moment of import. Simple blocking went awry, scuppering the staging's poise and balance. Lines were fluffed, fumbled and, horror of horrors, ad-libbed. Call me pedant, but given that these were professionals, I found this unacceptable. The worst culprit of this latter felony was Sam Hazeldine, (a lamentably feeble, almost at times lachrymose Lenny) who, with a perverse wilfulness that baffles me still, improvised whole sections of dialogue. Mr. Hazeldine, I must sadly report, is not the master of contemporary idiom that Mr. Pinter was, and living proof that even RADA drops a clanger or two. His random effusions were as brainless as they were impotent, blunting the scalpel-fine edge of Pinter's unique diction. Overall, the tenor of the piece was flat and far too plausible, as dangerous as Alan Ayckbourn experimenting with naughty language and even naughtier sex. Why was there exuberant jazz playing between scenes, murdering the tension? Why were the characters made to placate, rather than aggressively accuse? Why, oh why break a butterfly on a wheel?

It wasn't all bad. Suzy Cooper was a provocative, strutting and sexily territorial Ruth and Dawn Allsopp's set design (although somewhat after Peter Hall) was meticulously done. If anything, this production showed *The Homecoming* as the modern wonder that it is by exposing its enigmatical character. The peculiarly pleasing, dissonant rhythms and screaming silences which famously serve to characterise and punctuate its dialogue are as rare as solar eclipses and just as stupefying: the actor taking them on is burdened with a weighty task. However, this writer was painfully aware that Cruden and his cast were wholly unequal to such demands, and left the theatre with a burning desire that justice somehow should be done. How could this have been allowed to happen?

The Homecoming is showing at York Theatre Royal until 20th June.



7 comments

butterfly09

13 Jun '09 at 5:27 pm

One should always treat reviews which have infactual errors in them as being dubious in their entirety; the decision to programme 'The Homecoming' would have actually been made prior to the death of its author, Harold Pinter. [Basic logic indicates that rights would have had to be obtained, budgets made etc, many weeks in advance of the actual announcement and publication of the artistic programme.] Therefore, to accuse York Theatre Royal of 'cash[ing] in on a famous corpse' is evidently both unfair and offensive.

Also, although I have yet to see the production myself, I have read 4* reviews in 'The Guardian' and in the 'Yorkshire Post' which highly praise the performances and production.

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Animated

13 Jun '09 at 11:05 pm

It's a good review, granted, but having just seen the play, I'm led to disagree. I, like the rest of the audience, wholly enjoyed the production. It was both tense and entertaining, and I think everyone generally left having experienced a good performance of Pinter's finest work. Sure, perhaps it was in parts

lacking in energy and finesse, but the result is not as apocalyptic as the author makes out.

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Kate

15 Jun '09 at 12:47 pm

In response to Butterfly09, performance rights to plays can be secured within a matter of days, if communication is via phone and email. It seems as though the season was announced prior to the playwright's death but I only recieved an email from the Theatre Royal advertising the performance late in December. However, this matter is unsequential and certainly does not detract from the review. I have also seen this production of The Homecoming and found it to be, in comparison to other productions, very two-dimensional. The actors were playing characatures, undermining the menace within the piece. The pace was sluggish, mainly due to the jazz music in between scenes which, as this reviewer points out, murdered any tension which the script managed to convey amongst this car-crash of a production. It is ridiculous to refer to other reviews in defence of the production if one hasn't yet seen it oneself. They are, just as this reviewer is, entitled to their own opinion, though it does seem, having read these them, that the stars have been awarded to what is an excellent play rather than an excellent production. My only criticism of this review is its praise of Suzy Cooper's Ruth who was, in my mind, too childish and flirtatious, rather than a strong and independant woman, ignoring the fact that this is a feminist play, one which accords with the developing role of women in Pinter's work.

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The author

18 Jun '09 at 6:29 pm

It could be said that the most serious mistakes are to be made in pursuit of the most serious aims. In the past few months I have begun an honest attempt, within these pages and elsewhere, to learn the fundamentals of writing serious criticism. The majority of these fledgling offerings have concerned the theatre, and in particular the rather clannish world in and around our beloved Drama Barn. In compiling these pieces I have employed a strict, moral code in writing about what is, after all, the work of enthusiastic amateurs: to always perceive and write about the best in everything, as opposed to the worst, whilst offering gentle, well-reasoned criticism where merited. It is all too easy writing for a student newspaper (especially when covering a specialist subject area, where limited circulation is multiplied by limited interest to equal a negligible reading public) to imagine that your published words exist in a vacuum, and bear as much relation to the real world of people and events as the dreams of Walter Mitty. One treats these opportunities as a practice session, rather than the real match-play of the professional writer, with its attendant responsibilities and culpabilities. However, this is plainly not the case. To write a work fit for publishing is something sacrosanct indeed: one must proceed with caution. It is unfortunate, therefore, that in covering the current revival of Harold Pinter's Homecoming at the York Theatre Royal recently, I neglected the above code. Just because the professional theatre is grubbed with money does not make its active participants any less sensitive to heavy words lightly thrown than the average student have-a-go-thespian on campus of a Friday night.

Retractions are, I believe, usually the business of newspapers or editors rather than individual writers, but I offer the following of my own volition and in the spirit of an apology to those subsequently wronged. In the course of my review, I committed two factual errors, of which it is my duty to flag-up. Firstly, I stated that the cast 'improvised whole sections of dialogue'; the truth is that they were performing from a text that Pinter himself heavily cut, and which differs substantially from the canonical one. Secondly, I stated that the 'announcement that The Homecoming was going to be staged at the Theatre Royal' was 'made within days of Pinter's death last Christmas Eve'. Wrong again; the season was announced in early December. The first assumption led me into a personal attack upon the actor playing Lenny (Sam Hazeldine) whom I'd assumed was betraying a comical lack of preparedness. Mr. Hazeldine, all illusory ad-libs apart, is a fine actor, and I had very much enjoyed him in the role of Orsino in Twelfth Night only weeks before. He was every inch 'that sublimely outrageous lover of love' (as Harold Bloom called him)

and must know that below the crass veneer of the words there resides no malice. The second assumption led me to indulge a crude metaphor about 'grave-robbery' that is laughable in retrospect, both for its speciousness of sentiment and baroque construction. As Max admonishes Lenny at the end of Act Two of *The Homecoming* for neglecting the 'human considerations' in favour of the 'economic considerations', I have let myself down by being too much the hard-nosed product of Thatcherite-Blairite social construct. I must eat humble pie and lump it.

Never get too personal and always be thorough in your research: let these be my future guides. If I have been glib, or a purveyor of tabloid trash, may it be forgiven and forgotten. My father, a wiser man than I, has always urged that I learn by other people's mistakes. Only the wisest may do this, but I trust I can learn from my own, and plead the rashness of youthful choler, inexperience and thoughtlessness in my defence. It is the truth that even the wisest may be glib, even the best crucially inaccurate. Before attending the theatre to review this particular production, I re-watched More4's *Working with Pinter* documentary, and delighted in the great man's humility and insight. It was one, particular moment that rang bells as I left the theatre, however:

Interviewer: Is the play influenced by the rehearsal process?

Have you re-written plays while...?'

Pinter: Absolutely not. I never re-write plays. They're on

the page and that's it.

His one, categorical concession was changing the line in *The Homecoming* about the A4 to the M4. Assured of Pinter's indignant response, my indignation boiled at the seeming transformation of a familiar text that had played out under my nose. Perhaps if I'm ever as old and wise as he was, I will be excused glibness if nothing else. As I have written in these pages before, glibly perhaps, *errare humanum est*.

To be critical is necessary, as without criticism there is no debate and without debate theatre ceases to exist. Is not theatre, after all, anything else if not a higher form of debate? Although poorly conceived ideas and shoddy technique in their execution are to be lamented, the perpetrators thereof don't deserve to have their heads shot-off. However, the ability to discern, to evaluate and compare, to know wheat from chaff, is a necessary part of debate. It must also be a necessary part of the modern theatre, if it is to avoid long-worn stereotypes of cosseted, precious and effeminate complacency, and be taken seriously as a professional entity by a greater cross-section of the public. To compete in a world dominated by modern market economics, it must become tougher-skinned. To become more of a genuine dissenting voice, it must become more accepting of dissenting voices, and to not take the shouting in the street too much to heart.

I didn't like this production of *The Homecoming*, and I defy anybody who questions my right to say so. If I am indeed, regrettably, a writer of tabloid trash, then this was a tabloid Pinter, superficial and simplistically sentimental. It is a truth self evident that there is love between the men of this family, and that the play is far more than 'tough cockney banter' and 'fisticuffs', as director Damian Cruden is keen to point out. The fact that they are living together in perpetuity is proof positive on its own that blood, in this case, is ultimately thicker than water. It is inherent in the body of the text, whichever one you happen to be familiar with or subscribe to. It doesn't have to be telegraphed. Love shows itself in many ways, and these men, shackled and emasculated by their blood-bond, need not reveal their weaknesses to one another with lachrymose whining and knockabout insincerity. Love is free to be articulated, in such a fraught and volatile environment, with anger and prickly, exasperated incredulity. For Hazeldine, as Lenny at the end of Act One, to be directed to utter his speech to Max with such a pleading simper is to ignore all of this. Why would Max spit at him, if Lenny's enquiry about his mother was genuine, rather than a barbed, if painful, accusation? (On opening night he didn't, in fact, aiming instead for the floor).

I also must take exception to the treatment of Suzy Cooper's excellent Ruth. For all her strength and independence of spirit, she was cast far too easily in the role as sacrificial lamb in the chummy,

reconciliatory games between father and son. Michael Billington, in his excellent biography of Pinter, quibbles with the view that the play 'is a form of Oedipal wish fulfilment', citing Pinter's disapproval of a French production that had Lenny grasping her shoulders in ownership as the lights finally go down. The dance in mid-Act Two, overly choreographed and with the flourish of a seductive soundtrack, seemingly served in a similar way: what was it, if not Lenny claiming Ruth, rather than her suborning him? As Max moved in for his final kiss, smug and sure of success, it seemed for all the world that she was bound for Greek Street, and a harlot's life on her back. These moments should appear more flexible, leaving the play more open ended. As the American Henry Hewes beautifully put it in 1967:

At the end of the play she's [Ruth's] in possession of a certain kind of freedom. She can do what she wants, and it is not at all certain that she will go off to Greek Street. But even if she did, she would not be a harlot in her own mind.

In this production, she was robbed of this decision making capacity, appearing to be a pawn in masculine love-plays of trial and acceptance. The liberal-feminist heartland of the play, which I believe in absolutely and adore for its courage, went cheaply west with the departing Doctor of Philosophy.

These are but a few of a fistful of serious reservations about this production. The Homecoming should be a pitched battle with the audience. It is meant to be tough, uncompromising. I found this production definitely lacking in this capacity; a very comfy ride indeed, the human insights shallow and built on foundations of sand.

[▲ Report](#)

butterfly09

21 Jun '09 at 5:40 pm

@Kate

Sadly, performance rights in the professional theatre cannot be acquired in a 'matter of days', unlike for amateur productions. [Read Stephen Unwin's 'So You Want To Be a Theatre Director?', Nick Hern Books, if you want to find out more btw. This is also a very informative and interesting book in general]. In fact, permission for performance rights can be blocked for all kinds of reasons. You have to bear in mind that due to the national level of professional theatre, even at regional theatres, performance rights are granted on an exclusive basis for the run of the production, whilst more than one amateur production could be playing in different parts of the country.

Also, Kate, if you re-read my original comment, I do not actually defend the artistic quality of the production, because as you rightly point out, I had not seen the production at that time. (Incidentally, I saw the show a few days ago and I thought it was actually very good). Rather, I was defending the YTR as an organisation by pointing out that the programming choice was not made a few days after the playwright's death. My reason for directing readers to other very good reviews of the production was that I felt that university students who will be naturally isolated from society would appreciate an antithetical view of that presented here. I think Phipps got a bit carried out with his hyperbole in evoking a mass-walkout, "one had to be listening very carefully, (the banging seats of the departed were a distraction)", which painted an inaccurate and unfair picture for the reader. In doing this, I have also initiated a debate on the production, and hopefully persuaded students, who would have potentially been put off seeing this production as a result of the originally damning review, into seeing one of the most interesting and challenging plays of the 20th Century with high production values.

I should also point out that Guardian theatre reviewers, the most respected theatre reviewers of the theatre industry, do not gain their position by simply judging a play by its literary merit, and will have seen numerous other Pinter productions.

Finally, I personally thought Suzy Cooper's portayal was brilliant, and made the play even more relevant to today, in our post-feminism society.

[▲ Report](#)

Kate

22 Jun '09 at 6:55 pm

I find it appalling that you would suggest that students are removed from society and baffled at your choice to say so on a student website. Of course no one should be discouraged from seeing Pinter's work (indeed, usually a bad review inspires interest in a play) but there are better productions than this to demonstrate the playwright's skill. Unfortunately, it is necessary that feminism is just as important today as it was in '65.

[Report](#)

butterfly09

26 Jun '09 at 3:53 pm

@Kate

In my view, many students do become more isolated from society, even if they become more enlightened in their subject by attending university. Clearly this is a generalisation, but it is my view that universities promote more inward-thinking.

Why shouldn't I say this on a student website? This is exactly the arena for arguments of this nature. I'm glad that you're challenged by my comments.

By post-feminism, I meant a 21st Century feminism (such as the prevalence of WAGs, golddiggers and reality stars etc in our popular culture), in which the original ideas of feminism have either been disproven, neglected or perverted. I completely agree that feminism is just as important today as it was when the theories became mainstream.

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