



[The Birthday Party](#) at [Oldham Coliseum](#)

Produced by London Classic Theatre

Reviewed by [Matthew Dougall](#) May 2016

If there is one thing that is certain about a Pinter play, then that is uncertainty. Deliberately ambiguous, Pinter always leaves you, the audience, leaving the theatre with more questions than when you started. If you take the information given to you about each character on face value then you are likely to misunderstand and misinterpret everything anyway.

Pinter's plays have been ascribed the rather interesting title, 'Comedy Of Menace' and even that doesn't do them justice. Yes, there is an element of menace in all of Pinter's works; but they are also darker, much darker than simply that.

Somebody famous once quipped, 'It doesn't matter what you say with Pinter as long as you leave enough pauses'. I can't remember who this was - maybe some kind reader might enlighten me and put me out of my misery. But whoever did say it, really didn't understand Pinter at all. Every word has been very carefully considered and his writing is utter genius.

The Birthday Party was Pinter's second produced play, and despite its closing in the West End after only 8 performances, it has gone on to receive 'Classic' status. And rightly so. The six characters in this play are not what they first seem and all have more to them than meets the eye.

The year is 1958, and the setting, the living room of a Boarding House in a seaside town not too far from London. We see husband and wife, Petey and Meg go about their mundane quotidian routine. Meg then wakes up her only guest, a young man in his thirties called Stanley, and from that moment on, it is clear that everything is absolutely not what it first appears. Who is Stanley, and why does he stay at this guesthouse when he is clearly dissatisfied with the treatment he receives? Why does he never venture outside? Is he really a pianist? Why does Meg take such liberties with him, such as ruffling his hair, taking him a morning cup of tea, and waking him up if he is a paying guest?

On top of all of this, more questions are posed with the arrival of Lulu, a young flirt; and further confounded by the dreaded arrival of two mysterious and threatening characters Goldberg and McCann (although they are called and respond to various other names too in the play). Who are

they? What is their mission? What organisation do they belong to? What has Stanley done to wrong them? And still more questions.

To be fair, you could take several weeks of your life dissecting and analysing this play and still not come up with any definitive answers. And that's the whole point. Each audience member takes away from the play whatever they understood from it, and every version is the right version since there is no answer. It is this which makes Pinter so exciting. Whatever your first instinct, it will be disproven and whatever the character tells you about themselves, it is more than probably untrue. Even Goldberg, who, unlike the other characters, has no compunction about sharing details of his life to everyone he meets; the details cannot be verified and so is he simply making these things up?

In this production by London Classic Theatre at Oldham Coliseum, we are treated to some truly thrilling edge-of-your-seat acting. All six actors are absolutely wonderful and bring out their characters and their foibles to perfection. The worrying and slightly over-protective and dotty Meg (**Cheryl Kennedy**); the more grounded and world-weary husband, wary of the two strangers, Petey (**Ged McKenna**); the flirt Lulu (**Imogen Wilde**), who first thinks of running away with Stanley, then allows herself to be seduced by Goldberg and is even perhaps raped by one or the other at the party (maybe Stanley, and maybe she wanted it); and the two dark and menacing men from an unnamed organisation who have come on an unnamed mission and their target Stanley (to kill him? to punish him? to 'threaten' him?)

Goldberg (

Jonathon Ashley

) and McCann (

Declan Rodgers

). However, for me the stand-out performance was Stanley himself, played by

Gareth Bennett-Ryan

adding further layers to his character by his memory losses, his convulsions and fits which were played superbly. The Birthday Party is a very interesting play inasmuch as we see the disintegration of the victim (Stanley) from the victim's own perspective without even knowing what that perspective is or why he is a victim.

The directing (**Michael Cabot**) was moody and slow; dare I say very 'Pinteresque', but I did feel that the second act dragged a little too much - especially the party sequence. Despite it being excellently directed in all other aspects, I did feel that there was too little change of pace throughout the whole play, which never really got out of second gear.

I liked the set too (**Bek Palmer**); very authentic looking and placed on a raised platform squashed in the centre of the stage gave it a lovely claustrophobic feel. I also liked being able to see the characters enter and leave the room and have knowledge of them before those in the room did. A nice touch. I am not certain though about the skulls and bones underneath the platform. A directorial / set design idea which was interesting but also I think perhaps misleading and didn't particularly work for me. It was adding yet another (unwritten) layer to a play already heavy with unanswered questions and metaphor.

Nevertheless a very solid and well-measured piece of theatre and a thought-provoking, challenging one too. Exactly what theatre should be.