

Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of Alfred University

**Producing, Directing, and Performing Harold Pinter's *Betrayal***

**Bellisant Corcoran-Mathe**

In Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for  
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My senior project and honors thesis entailed a full production of Harold Pinter's play *Betrayal*. I worked with two other seniors and myriad theater-loving peers to produce, direct and perform this play. Even before attending college, I had read, loved and hoped to be involved in a production of *Betrayal* one day. It was a perfect coincidence then when Jamal Welcome and Darren Palmer approached me about being involved in their senior project. They originally asked if I would direct the piece. When I expressed interest in the role of Emma, however, they were happy to have the part cast, and we began the process of producing *Betrayal*.

The plot of the *Betrayal* revolves around Robert and Emma (a married couple) and Jerry (Robert's best friend and Emma's lover). The seven-year extramarital affair between Emma and Jerry affects all three parties in different ways as the years go on. The structure of the play is atypical since it "progresses" in reverse chronology. Thus, the beginning of the play presents the most recent meeting between the lovers, and the end of the play is actually the beginning of the affair. Pinter never revealed why he chose to write *Betrayal* in this way, but the structure puts the audience in a position of power. The audience finds out about some details before the characters even do, but the public is also as much in the dark about certain information. For example, the audience is just as awed as Jerry when Robert reveals Emma did not come clean about the affair a day ago, but in fact four years ago. The audience, however, knows about Emma's second pregnancy before Jerry is informed. *Betrayal* is categorized as one of Pinter's "memory" plays and this classification makes me question the entire truth of the play. Memory is not known for its trustworthy nature, and thus, in the context of a memory, we have to wonder how different the recollection is from the actual event.

*Betrayal* is based on Harold Pinter's own extramarital affair. The character of Jerry mirrors Pinter's personal struggle during his betrayal. It was not revealed that *Betrayal* was an autobiographical work until well after Pinter's death, when his mistress Jane Bakewell and her ex-husband released the information. Knowing this play is based on real events makes some characteristics of the play more understandable. For one, it explains why there is only one

scene where Jerry (Pinter's alter ego) is not present. It also explains why Jerry has the largest role in the play and seems the most well-drawn character.

An intricate part of *Betrayal* is the subtext within every scene. Each character finds multiple ways to hide the truth from both themselves and the other characters. The first scene offers a great example of this. Emma and Jerry continuously ask each other the same questions over and over, trying to get a truthful answer. Robert is also guilty of masking his true desires when he uses the topic of squash as a guise for his aggression toward Emma and his monopoly on Jerry's friendship. The reserved nature of the characters embodies a stereotypically English trait. The play is definitely intended for English actors and this is particularly evidenced by the use of English vocabulary (such as "flat" instead of "apartment"). Although we kept the names of all the English locales, we chose not to use English dialects for fear that we would be distracted by trying to perfect them and end up detracting from our work.

Despite the play's minimalistic script, the set became a bit more involved than we wanted. This proved to be a consideration in the first stage of the process. We had to find a space that could hold enough furniture for multiple scene changes. We contemplated performing it in the small, R. Brown acting studio, but ultimately realized we needed the space that C.D. Smith III Theater could give us. The furniture and the set itself had to be simplified as much as possible. Originally the script describes Emma and Jerry's flat as having a bed. Due to the cumbersome task of moving a bed on and off stage, we decided a couch could be substituted without losing any of the scene's intent. The case was the same for the hotel scene. The only scene in which we felt it vital to have a bed was the final scene. We had to show that Jerry was in Robert and Emma's bedroom and that it was not merely a living room ( a much more public space). The fact that Jerry is drunk enough to venture into such uncharted and private ground as the bedroom is important to the scene.

Finding Emma was a gradual process that occurred from my reading and re-reading the play continuously. Besides this, Darren, Jamal and I discussed our characters and their

relationship history at length so that there were no inconsistencies. Discussing these characters together helped me to understand Emma even more clearly since the way in which Robert and Jerry viewed Emma was an important part of her personality. Rubber-stamping Emma as cold or reserved was a pothole that I consistently had to sidestep throughout the rehearsal process. The way Pinter writes a majority of the scenes regarding Emma made this particularly difficult. Emma's dialogue is so minimal that finding the truth behind her brevity can be challenging and susceptible to misinterpretation.

During the rehearsal process, I found myself falling into the mindset of the character of Emma. Prior to rehearsals, I had discovered a great deal of similarity between Emma and myself. Once embroiled in rehearsals, I saw these similarities even more clearly, and Emma began to meld into my own personality. I felt one particular similarity in rehearsals. As the only female, I felt like an outsider. Darren and Jamal had known each other very well before inviting me to be a part of this project and their camaraderie showed in rehearsals. I, on the other hand, felt left out, a lone female amidst a testosterone-filled environment, quite like the setting in which Emma finds herself. Combining this feeling and our pre-existing similarities, I drew Emma closer to me than I had expected. After rehearsals, I actually found myself behaving like Emma with my friends. I was aware of my emotions, but I detached myself from them. I sympathize with my friends who had to deal with this warped version of Bellisant.

An issue that I knew would be challenging from the beginning involved not letting the production process affect our acting. Although we did have help with some aspects of the play's production, the three of us still had a lot to do, particularly during tech week. In the beginning and middle of the process, we compartmentalized the production duties from the acting. As we neared the production dates, however, we began to feel increasingly cornered by the little details that seemed to hold the show together. Had we had more help, I think we would have been able to polish rough scenes thoroughly and focus more on our characters. Ultimately, the

production demands did handicap what we could accomplish in rehearsal and in the performances.

We found the structure of the play to be a particularly trying aspect of *Betrayal*. The progression of the scenes didn't afford us the ability to build tension the way a traditionally structured play allows. The beginning of the play (the actual chronological end of the affair) demanded the characters be reserved with one another. When we went from the reserved scenes in the beginning of the play to the lust-filled later scenes, character development proved difficult to understand. We worked through these challenges by rehearsing the play in chronological order. This enabled us to see how the progression of the events affected our characters and to connect with our characters' respective mindsets.

The end result of our production definitely differed from what I had first envisioned. I had always seen this play as a dark, subtext-ridden play with few moments of blatant humor. Awkward pauses and some titter-worthy lines of dialogue present themselves, but, overall, the play seems serious in tone. I saw each character as having his or her own brand of grave intensity. This idea guided me when discovering Emma's character prior to and during rehearsals. Although Darren and Jamal agreed with this concept, their personal takes on Robert and Jerry led to a different end product. The ages and particular circumstances of the characters challenged our ability to relate to both of the aforementioned difficulties. I did my best to rein my 20-year-old self in so that 38-year-old Emma could shine through. Darren and Jamal attempted this as well, but they also found more humor and lightheartedness in both of their characters than I. This approach particularly showed itself when they sat in the director's chair. It led to some scenes veering in a direction I had not seen coming. For one, the final scene drifted toward the comedic side, and this was partly due to Jerry's drunkenness. I pictured Jerry controlling his alcohol intake, and not stumbling around drunk. Sometimes these different opinions opened up new facets, and I approved. Other times I had to battle with myself to keep from grabbing the director's chair on my own behalf.

Another way that the production changed from my original concept was the audience's dynamic with the play. On our first night we had a small, quiet, yet appreciative audience. Despite the size, the audience tittered at the right moments and clapped loudly when we had finished. It was our best show. The next two nights were very different. Both nights were packed, and both crowds must have been expecting a comedy. Friday night's audience laughed constantly and at times that didn't seem to make much sense to any of us. At one point during intermission, I heard a crew member remark jokingly to the stage manager, "Did you know this was a comedy?" Although it made Darren, Jamal and me slightly confused, it also seem to relax the two of them. They seemed more at ease in their scenes (almost downplaying the intensity of the subtext), whereas I felt irked by the laughter. This audience's reactions led to a nervous actor and an antsy Emma.

The last night's audience was just as laughter-inclined, but the crowd chose to laugh at more appropriate moments. This caused me to be less nervous and brought about a better show than the previous night's performance. The laughter, however, did continue to affect all of the cast. I felt Emma became a bit colder on the final night (although still within the realm of her character). Jerry seemed goofier and younger than his 40-some-years. Robert became a little bit more bipolar in his mental switches. I didn't feel shaken from my character due to the audience and if anything, felt more connected with her.

After the show was finished, I wondered if I would ever act or be involved in a production of *Betrayal* again. This idea led me to ponder potential changes a director might make to the play. Throughout the rehearsal process I noticed how little the audience gets to know about Emma. She is, arguably, the most reserved and repressed of all the characters. We learn a great deal about Robert and Jerry's past. We know what kind of poetry the two men like and what sports they play. When Emma does speak about herself, it's usually in reference to her gallery. Otherwise, she is a veiled enigma that the two men circle in their conversation. We must remember that a male wrote this play and that it's only natural that he would have the least

insight into the mindset of a woman (even if she was his mistress). He was best friends with the real-life Robert and thus would understand him more clearly.

The awareness of these details surrounding Emma led me to wonder how the play would differ if it was played by a predominantly female cast. If Robert and Jerry became Roberta and Geraldine, the play would have to be rewritten. The scenes between Robert and Jerry contain dialogue that would never be spoken between two long-time female friends, no matter how reserved the women in question might be. Had the original play been written with this female cast, the whole plot would most likely need to be altered. Roberta and Geraldine would probably be more open with each other regarding the affair and, if they were just as reserved as their male counterparts, their conversations would be even more aggressive under that layer of subtext. At some point or another, the women would confront one another to discuss the affair. Overall, I doubt the affair would have lasted a full seven years had this change been made. I imagine that guilt and shame would have played on Geraldine's mind so much that it would have shattered her affair with Roberta's husband. Jerry's ability to compartmentalize his relationship with Robert from his affair with Emma is an ability that I presume a female would struggle with so horribly that it would make the continuance of the affair impossible. These are huge generalizations and presumptions on my part, but I can only assume how a woman might react to this situation. My own stereotyping of females in this situation is a reaction to the male stereotyping that Pinter has within this play.

This project was a trying, yet rewarding one that I will treasure in many regards. Not only was it a bonding experience for those involved, it also taught me a great deal about my theatrical strengths and weaknesses. I approached this project as an actor, and the role of Emma challenged me more than any other previous character. She was mysterious (due to the writing), complex, and a person in difficult circumstances. My other jobs within this project taught me about the need for delegation, about trusting in one's companions, and acknowledging my own organizational expertise and flaws. It was a chance to do something not

normally possible for a young actor; produce, direct and act in a play of note. *Betrayal* showed me how far I have come as well as how far I have left to go.