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Power dynamics from England to Sicily: a comparative study of
Harold Pinter and Rosario Palazzolo's theatre

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Abstract

La presente tesi analizza la poetica del teatro di Harold Pinter, drammaturgo, attore, regista, sceneggiatore e poeta britannico, vincitore del premio Nobel per la letteratura nel 2005, e la poetica di Rosario Palazzolo, drammaturgo, attore e regista contemporaneo siciliano. Questo connubio nasce dall'ammirazione trasmessami da Rosario Palazzolo, insegnante di regia presso l'Accademia del Teatro Biondo Stabile di Palermo, nei confronti di Harold Pinter, il quale rappresenta per lui un maestro e una fonte d'ispirazione per le sue opere. Questo studio esplora le principali opere dei due drammaturghi, focalizzandosi sulle loro scelte tematiche, il loro stile teatrale e il loro linguaggio originale. Nel primo capitolo viene delineato il profilo biografico di Harold Pinter, arricchito da citazioni tratte dalle preziose interviste che lo stesso autore ha rilasciato, nelle quali racconta in prima persona l'esperienza di aver vissuto il periodo della Seconda Guerra Mondiale, che, a causa delle sue origini ebraiche, ha profondamente influenzato la sua vita e le sue opere. Pinter è sempre stato un promotore della pace nel mondo, tanto che non ha mai perso occasione per fare dei proclami contro ogni forma di guerra. In relazione agli elementi autobiografici emersi, vengono analizzate le principali opere di Harold Pinter in ordine cronologico, tra cui *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Hothouse*, *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming* e *Party Time*. Attraverso un'analisi dettagliata di queste opere, emergono riferimenti alle dinamiche di potere e la violenza di cui è succube l'uomo, l'alienazione dell'individuo, la perdita di identità, e l'incombente senso di minaccia che lo opprime, attraverso la figura di un *outsider* che minaccia i personaggi. Il periodo oscuro e minaccioso in cui ha vissuto l'autore viene riflesso nelle sue opere; Pinter, infatti, non separa la sua esperienza personale dall'arte della scrittura, ma la fa emergere sottilmente e in maniera originale nelle sue opere. Nonostante ciò, le sue opere sono universali, non parlano ad una sola nazione ma a tutto il mondo, non si riferiscono ad un solo periodo storico ma si adattano a diversi contesti storico-culturali. Nel teatro di Pinter non esiste una sola verità, ma

tante interpretazioni e chiavi di lettura, data l'ambiguità dei suoi dialoghi e la caratteristica dei suoi finali aperti. Pinter lascia allo spettatore il compito di porsi delle domande. Attraverso un linguaggio realistico, ma allo stesso tempo ricco di simboli, l'autore ingabbia i suoi personaggi all'interno di stanze claustrofobiche, microcosmi che riflettono il loro mondo interiore, le loro angosce e le loro paure. Le pause e i silenzi utilizzati dall'autore, dicono più delle parole stesse, portando lo spettatore a riflettere sul non detto, sulle parole che non ci sono ma che in realtà stanno scorrendo silenziose nel flusso dell'opera.

Il secondo capitolo analizza il teatro di Rosario Palazzolo, delineandone il percorso artistico, arricchito da interviste condotte da chi scrive e rilasciate gentilmente dall'autore. In questo capitolo verrà analizzata la poetica di Palazzolo in relazione alle sue opere principali, tra cui *Ouminicch'*, *Letizia Forever*, e *Portobello never dies*, contenute nella collezione *Iddi-Trittico dell'ironia e della disperazione*, *A Cirimonia*, contenuta nella *Trilogia dell'impossibilità*, e, infine, *Se son fiori moriranno* e *Ti dico una cosa segreta*, contenuti nella collezione *Dittico del Sabotaggio*. Palazzolo sviluppa una visione teatrale che si nutre di ambiguità e immaginazione, rappresentando il declino morale e sociale della società contemporanea con uno stile originale. Le sue opere affrontano temi come l'autosabotaggio, il fallimento individuale, l'ambiguità dell'identità individuale e l'influenza delle dinamiche di potere sull'uomo. Anche in Palazzolo è presente un *outsider* minaccioso che incombe sui suoi personaggi, i quali non sono altro che inetti e falliti. La poetica dell'autore si serve della corruzione della parola per contestare la realtà e il potere. Infatti, la prima forma di ribellione al potere avviene attraverso il linguaggio delle opere di Palazzolo, che si serve dell'idioletto come base per creare una lingua nuova che non appartiene a nessun luogo, ma che è solo parlata dai personaggi di Palazzolo. La sua lingua è dunque caratterizzata da una manipolazione giocosa del ritmo e della fonetica, creando così un'opera importante sia dal punto di vista etico che estetico. Questo capitolo si sofferma sull'analisi dei personaggi e sulle loro dinamiche relazionali, enfatizzando come

l'eredità culturale siciliana si intrecci con una sensibilità che mira a raggiungere l'universale.

Il terzo capitolo propone una un'analisi comparativa tra la visione poetica di Pinter e quella di Palazzolo, evidenziando convergenze e divergenze nelle loro opere. Nonostante i diversi contesti storico-culturali in cui hanno vissuto i due autori, questi condividono un profondo senso di ribellione nei confronti della realtà. L'innovazione dei due autori sta nel parlare al pubblico con un linguaggio unico e autentico, caratterizzato da pause e silenzi significativi. In questo capitolo vengono messe in evidente le similitudini tra le opere di Palazzolo e quelle di Pinter, da cui Palazzolo prende spunto. In particolare, verranno messe in correlazione le opere *Ouminicch'* e *The Dumb Waiter* dalle quali emergono numerosi elementi in comune, tra cui la presenza di un *outsider* che minaccia i personaggi, il linguaggio ricco di pause e silenzi, e il fallimento esistenziale di questi personaggi. Entrambi gli autori esplorano la verità come concetto sfuggente e spesso inafferrabile, sottolineando l'incapacità dei personaggi di comunicare in modo autentico. Il tema dell'identità viene ulteriormente esplorato in *'A Cirimonia*, dove i personaggi *'U Masculu* e *'A Fimmina* non hanno un nome, non si sa chi siano né da dove provengano, ma vengono solo identificati con il loro genere, il maschio e la femmina. Anche i personaggi di Pinter non hanno un'identità, non si sa nulla su di loro e sul loro passato, e molto spesso vivono sotto falso nome. In *Letizia Forever* e *The Homecoming*, protagoniste sono due donne, Letizia e Ruth, che rappresentano due personalità opposte in due diverse società patriarcali e maschiliste, che cercheranno di opprimerle, ma senza riuscita, dato che loro stesse si riveleranno essere promotrici della propria libertà. Infine, verranno evidenziate le similitudini tra *Il dittico del sabotaggio* e *A Kind of Alaska*, dove i rispettivi personaggi, Luisa e Deborah, tornano in vita dopo un sonno profondo durato anni, ma mentre Deborah viene risvegliata da un'iniezione fatta dal dottore, Luisa viene solo risvegliata dall'immaginazione della madre, che, non accettando la morte della figlia, la immagina talmente viva da conversare con lei. Pur operando in

contesti culturali e sociali differenti, entrambi hanno dato un significativo contributo al panorama teatrale contemporaneo, condividendo una visione profondamente critica della condizione umana e utilizzando un linguaggio teatrale unico e inimitabile. La seguente ricerca si è avvalsa di numerose fonti, incluse interviste personali con Palazzolo, osservazioni di rappresentazioni teatrali, articoli critici e testi teatrali originali. Le interviste rilasciate da Harold Pinter, insieme alle sue dichiarazioni pubbliche, sono state fondamentali per comprendere il suo approccio alla scrittura teatrale.

Introduction

The choice of this topic is motivated by a profound passion for the theatre, cultivated since my initial stage experience at MTM Grock's school of dramatic art in Milan, in 2022. My interest for the theatre has steadily increased over the years, culminating in my enrolment at the prestigious Academy of Teatro Biondo in Palermo, where I'm still studying today. During my journey, I had the opportunity to know many personalities, among which Professor Rosario Palazzolo, a renowned Sicilian playwright, stage director, and actor, who teaches stage direction at the Academy of Teatro Biondo. Through his guidance, I have had the privilege to delve deep into his unique poetic vision, and to discover Harold Pinter, a highly esteemed English playwright, director, and actor, whom Professor Palazzolo greatly admires. Although belonging to different social and cultural backgrounds, the two authors share some similarities.

In my thesis, I will explore selected works of both Harold Pinter and Rosario Palazzolo in chronological order. Through the study of their plays and the observation of their theatrical adaptations, I have noticed prevalent themes in the works of both authors, such as the pursuit of truth contrasted to the characters' inability to communicate, the power dynamics concealed in their plays, the looming sense of threat over characters, as well as the theme of alienation. It is important to highlight that each author maintains a distinct and original style which creates a profound emotional impact on the spectator. The few dominant stage elements have the same relevance as the actors, drawing the audience into a microcosm that mirrors a complex inner world, generously revealed by the directors.

My research has been enriched by the didactic materials and theatrical texts provided by Professor Palazzolo himself, as well as critical essays and theatrical texts by Harold Pinter. Above all, the interviews conducted personally with Palazzolo, and the interviews released by Harold Pinter to journalists, available online, were of fundamental importance to delineate their personalities. Moreover, the online projections of Pinter's plays and my personal observations of

Palazzolo's plays staged in theatres in Palermo, provided valuable insights which improved my research.

Chapter One will provide a survey of Harold Pinter's major plays, accompanied by biographical information, essential for understanding the evolution of his style. The most important events of Harold Pinter's life are enriched by quotations from interviews. The unicity of the characters and the distinctive qualities of Pinter's poetics have been sources of inspiration for this study, and they will be examined in detail in this chapter. In particular, the theme of alienation and the loss of individual identity will be explored, as well as the dynamics of power characteristic of his works and the way in which the characters dialogue through pauses and disruptions in communication. The microcosm contained in the rooms of Pinter's plays will be analysed through the relationships between the characters. Chapter Two will examine the major plays of Rosario Palazzolo, which will be reconstructed focusing on the exploration of his characters' behaviours and their failures, a distinctive feature of his oeuvre. Palazzolo explores moral, ethical, and societal decline, as well as the influence of power on individual lives and the inherent impossibility of knowing the truth. Finally, the themes of sabotage or self-sabotage will be investigated in relation to the latest works of Palazzolo.

In the final chapter, a comparative analysis will be conducted to highlight the characteristics common to both authors as well as their distinctive qualities. The distinguishing feature of this chapter is an exploration of the search for truth, the different ways in which the playwrights' characters perceive and experience it, their approaches to human failures, and the relationship between humans and power. The way in which the cultural background influences the works of the two protagonists of this thesis will be discussed. This analysis is focused also on the different way the authors imagine their characters as trapped in a static reality that immobilizes them, and how they deal with the outsider who comes to threaten the apparent stability of their characters.

Chapter I Harold Pinter: the genesis of his artistic vein

Listen,
live in the present,
what are you worrying about?
I mean, don't forget the earth's about five thousand million years old, at least.
Who can afford to live in the past?¹
Harold Pinter
The Homecoming

Harold Pinter was a renowned British playwright, screenwriter, director, actor, and one of the most complex and original figures of the 20th century. Pinter was born on October 10, 1930, in Hackney, East London, into a Jewish family. His father, Jack, was a tailor, whose own family had artistic leanings. He grew up during World War II, consequently, the experience of insecurity during his wartime childhood in Hackney profoundly shaped his worldview and the thematic content of his plays. At the age of nine, he was relocated to Cornwall, where he experienced the cruelty of schoolboys in isolation. He then returned to London during the blitz and absorbed the dramatic nature of wartime life: the palpable fear and the sense that everything could end the following day. In an interview he stated:

On the day I got back to London, in 1944, I saw the first flying bomb. I was in the street, and I saw it come over... there were times when I would open our back door and find our garden in flames. Our house never burned, but we had to evacuate several times. Every time we evacuated, I took my cricket bat with me.²

Therefore, Pinter's plays are pervaded by feelings of solitude, alienation and loss derived by this experience, but also by the sense of menace derived by personal encounters with anti-Semitism which Pinter himself recounts:

Everyone encounters violence in some way or other. I did encounter it in quite an extreme form after the war, in the East End, when the Fascists were coming back to life in England. I got into quite a few fights down there. If you looked remotely like a Jew, you might be in trouble. Also, I went to a Jewish club, by an old railway arch, and there were quite a lot of people often waiting with broken milk bottles in a particular alley we used to walk through. [...] we were often taken for Communists. If you went by, or happened to be passing, a Fascist street meeting and looked in any way antagonistic- this was in Ridley Road market, near Dalston Junction- they'd interpret your very being, especially if you

¹ Pinter, Harold, *The Homecoming*, New York, Grove Press, 1966, p. 50.

² Pinter, interview in *The New Yorker*, 25th February 1967. <https://thedumbwaiter.weebly.com/historical-context.html> Accessed on 15 Oct. 2024.

had books under your arms, as evidence of your being a Communist. There was a good deal of violence there, in those days.³

The author's plays reflect the horror and violence which took place in this context, and he himself confirms it in the interview released for the theatre festival at Lincoln Center, held in his honor:

I know there is a lot of violence in the world, and I think a good deal of this volatility and violence is expressed in my work, I'm aware of that. I don't want to sound disingenuous as if I don't know what I'm writing about. I know what I'm writing about, but I let the words happen, I let the violence express itself in many different ways. In *The Room*, for example, there is an act of physical violence. There is a great deal of violence and conflict in my works.⁴

Pinter never divorces literary art from personal experience. He is acutely aware of emotional wounds derived from isolation, paranoia, and xenophobia, themes that were particularly resonant in the 1950s in England. In 1947 he left Hackney Downs Grammar School, where he met his esteemed teacher, Joe Brearley, passionate about poetry and drama, who fired his imagination. Under Brearley's direction, he played Romeo and Macbeth at Hackney Downs Grammar School and was good enough to get a grant to study at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. In 1948, at the age of eighteen, he was liable for National Service, but he decided to be a conscientious objector, since he was a radical pacifist. Determined not to go into the army, he had to appear twice before a magistrate. While attending courses at RADA, which he detested and soon left, and the Central School of Speech and Drama, he performed as a radio actor in BBC radio dramas and worked as an actor using the stage name *David Baron*, a clearly Jewish name. Pinter toured Ireland and England with various acting companies. After 1956 he began to write for the stage. *The Room*, first produced in 1957, and *The Dumb Waiter*, first produced in 1959, are one-act dramas which established the mood of menace that was to figure largely in his later works. In an interview, Harold Pinter talks about his interests in youth which shaped his personality:

³ Bensusan, M. Lawrence, 'Harold Pinter' in *Writers at Work*, The Paris Review Interviews, Third Series, New York, Viking Press, 1967, p. 363.

⁴ *Harold Pinter interview, 2001*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVchqMXobVO>.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to a lot of plays in your youth?

PINTER: no, very few. The only person I really liked to see was Donald Wolfit, in a Shakespeare company at the time. I admired him tremendously; his *Lear* is still the best I've ever seen. And then I was reading, for years, a great deal of modern literature, mostly novels.

INTERVIEWER: no playwrights- Brecht, Pirandello...?

PINTER: oh, certainly not, not for years. I read Hemingway, Dostoevsky, Joyce, and Henry Miller at a very early age, and Kafka. I'd read Beckett's novels, too, but I'd never heard of Ionesco until after I'd written the first few plays.⁵

Pinter was often associated by critics to the social realism of the Angry Young Men movement as well as to the absurdist playwrights, such as Beckett and Ionesco. In the 1950s the Angry Young Men were known for their outspoken disdain for the established sociopolitical order after the war and their frustration with the perceived failures of postwar reforms which did not bring meaningful changes. They were critical towards the hypocrisy of the upper and middle-class. In 1961, Martin Esslin gave a name to the phenomenon of playwrights who dramatized the absurdity at the core of the human condition, *The Theatre of Absurd*. This term referred to the theatrical production of a group of playwrights who worked in Paris in the 1950s, immediately after the war, which had led to a society made up of alienated individuals, unable to communicate, that had lost the traditional values of the previous society. In the post-war period, people's response to the Second World War was different from the response to the First World War. Eduardo de Filippo claimed that once the soldier came back from the war, everyone wanted to know, but after WWII nobody wanted to know anything. In *Napoli Milionaria* Gennaro would like to tell his tragic experience, but no one listens to him, nobody wants to hear about the war. Many times, he begins a story with: "Mmiez 'a na campagna, annascuosto dint 'a nu fuosso, perchè fuori chiuvevano granate e canunate..."⁶, but he is always interrupted by his interlocutor. There were many tragedies experienced by the community and the desire to forget them was so

⁵ Bensusan, Lawrence, *Harold Pinter' in Writers at Work*, cit., p. 354.

⁶ De Filippo, Eduardo, *Napoli milionaria*, Torino, Einaudi, 2006, p.78.

strong that no one liked to hear stories of trouble, death and suffering. Everyone wanted to forget but this led to anxiety and anguish. This existential absurdity was represented on the scene by these playwrights, such as Samuel Beckett and Ionesco. In their theatre, truth does not exist. Their comedies are absurd because the anguish and impossibility of communication of modern man is lived through dialogues and surreal situations. In the article *The dramatic world of Harold Pinter*, Katherine H. Burkman wrote that according to Martin Esslin:

The absurdist dramatists are no longer telling stories but exploring states of being and revealing patterns. [...] Esslin sees the shift from the well-made play to the absurdist poetic play as a reflection of man's sense of the absurdity existence, his feeling of existential anguish. He defines absurdist technique as existentialist in form as well as in content- a general breaking up of rational order of event, character, and setting to better reflect the world as it is perceived. [...] Rather than focusing on lack of communication, Pinter concerns himself with the way people fail to avoid that communication from which they wish to run.⁷

Pinter read many absurd authors, he admired also Dostoevskij, Joyce, Proust, Beckett, but there is always something that renders him original and different from the others. In *The Peopled Wound*, Martin Esslin explains that:

whereas both Kafka and Beckett are moving in a surreal world of acknowledged phantasy and dream, Pinter, essentially, remains on the firm ground of everyday reality, [...] in [his] plays the starting point is always a very real situation with the most closely observed real, even hyper-naturalistic dialogue, so that the phantasy element when it does make an appearance is clearly identifiable as the outward projection, the concretization, of these very real characters' dreams and anxieties.⁸

His plays seem to be imbued with realism; therefore, a detailed analysis highlights that the fragmented dialogues are nothing but our daily conversations. Pinter himself claimed: "what goes on in my plays is realistic but what I'm doing is not realism".⁹ The characters and the dialogues are real, but the spectator perceives that there is something strange in the atmosphere. Burkman defines the style of Pinter:

a mixture of the real and the surreal, it's a portrayal of life on the surface, and a powerful evocation of life that lies beneath the surface. But if the mysterious emerges and takes

⁷ Burkman, Katherine H., *The dramatic world of Harold Pinter*, Ohio, Ohio State University Press, 1971, pp. 6-7-8.

⁸ Esslin, Martin, *The Peopled Wound*, London, Methuen & Co Ltd, 1970, p. 36.

⁹ Pinter, Harold, 'Writing for Myself' in Harold Pinter, *Plays: Two*, London, 1977, p. 11.

over in Pinter's drama, it is never completely explained. The nameless terror which threatens the Pinter hero is not fully identified.¹⁰

Despite numerous critics attempts to categorize Pinter within specific cultural movements or literary groups, the author maintains a distinct and original identity, as suggested by the coinage of words like 'Pinterish' and 'Pinteresque' to define his distinctive style. In an interview with Mel Gussow, speaking about the critics, Pinter claimed:

Be', li lasci dire... questo terribile vizio di classificare tutto. E comunque non trovo affinità su nessun piano. Penso che i risultati che Beckett ha raggiunto, che è stato capace di raggiungere nella sua vita, siano così lontani dai miei che non riesco a vedere nessuna possibilità di confronto. Sono convinto che è un grande scrittore, mentre io non lo sono di certo nel senso che ha per me questo termine - ed è un senso molto preciso. Per me è chiarissimo. Non ho nessuna difficoltà a dirle quali sono per me i grandi scrittori. Sono così evidenti. Sono così ovvi.¹¹

What is certain is that Pinter is not the writer of absolute truth, instead he is the poet of questions. He himself explains his theory about reality:

There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. The thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false. The assumption that to verify what has happened and what is happening presents few problems I take to be inaccurate.¹²

Pinter's plays are characterized by a lack of coherence in communication, and his characters are people who share an obscure past and live their life in a room. The balance, created within these comfortable and almost safe rooms, is broken by the arrival of an outsider or by obscure forces acting through assassins.

Given a man in a room, he will sooner or later receive a visitor. ... There is no guarantee, however, that he will possess a visiting card, with detailed information as to his last place of residence, last job, next job, number of dependents, etc. Nor, for the comfort of all, an identity card, nor a label on his chest. The desire for verification is understandable but cannot always be satisfied....A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behavior or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things. The more acute the experience the less articulate its expression.

¹⁰ Burkman, Katherine H., *The dramatic world of Harold Pinter*; cit., pp. 6-7-8.

¹¹ Gussow, Mel, *Conversazioni con Pinter*; Milano, Ubulibri, 2005, p. 27.

¹² *In His Own Words*, Mar 1, 2004. <https://americanrepertorytheater.org/media/articles-vol-2-i-3b-in-his-own-words/> Accessed on 15 Oct. 2024.

(Pinter in his program note for *The Caretaker*)¹³

1.1 Early works: *The Room*

Harold Pinter made his debut as a playwright with *The Room*, first represented at the University of Bristol, in 1957. As an experienced actor, he possessed an intimate understanding of theatrical mechanics. This one-act play exemplifies Pinter's unique style: a pervasive sense of threat, a subtle and suggestive dialogue, and an enigmatic and unsettling atmosphere. The entire action unfolds within a single setting, a microcosm of Pinter's dramatic universe, in which Mrs. Rose lives in an almost sepulchral retreat with her husband, Bert. She is only committed to looking after her husband, while he assumes a passive role, reading his paper and receiving his wife's attentions. *The Room* delves into the human psyche, exploring both individual and universal fears and behaviours. Despite its simple structure, the play is rich in symbolism: the room is a comfort zone, a haven of warmth and light in contrast to the menacing, cold, and dark exterior. It represents an artificial paradise for Pinter's characters, while the door symbolizes the boundary between their lives and the external world. Moreover, the door also carries the weight of the past, threatening to intrude upon the characters' lives, and conveys tension and anxiety, which are reflected in the dialogues. Rose speaks to her husband without receiving a response, as if she were delivering a soliloquy. Rose's fears are shown by her constant insistence on the warmth of the room, and she keeps claiming that she is happy where she lives:

ROSE: I's very cold out, I can tell you. It's murder.

[...]

That's right. You eat that. You'll need it. You can feel it in here. Still, the room keeps warm. It's better than the basement, anyway,

[...]

If they ever ask you, Bert, I'm quite happy where I am. We're quiet, we're all right. You're happy up here. It's not far up either, when you come in from outside. And we're not bothered. And nobody bothers us.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays One*, London, Faber and Faber, 1991, p. 85,87.

The warm and familiar atmosphere of the room contrasts sharply with the cold hostility of the external environment, and even more markedly with the penetrating cold of the basement, which seems to evoke the infernal atmospheres, while the small room appears as a refuge of serenity. Nevertheless, for much of the play, Bert remains silent. Pinter himself gives the following explanation for his silences:

Given characters who possess a momentum of their own, my job is not to impose upon them, not to subject them to false articulation, by which I mean forcing a character to speak where he could not speak, of making him speak of what he could never speak. The relationship between author and characters should be a highly respectful one, both ways. [...] It is in the silence that they are most evident to me. There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. [...] The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear.¹⁵

Thus, beneath the surface of Rose's repetitive dialogue and Bert's deliberate silence lies a hidden subtext. Pinter is interested in exploring the complexities of the human psyche and the dynamics of power, thus silences serve as a means to suggest underlying meanings, fears, desires, and internal conflicts of the characters. Only at the very end does Bert speak to Rose, but their exchange lacks genuine interaction, as though his initial silence had been a ploy to avoid communication. Ultimately, he speaks to break the silence rather than to engage in a meaningful conversation. Pinter's characters often employ language as a barrier, shielding their inner selves and creating a sense of profound isolation. Mr. Kidd, who appears to be the landlord, and the young couple, the Sands, who are searching for an apartment, intensify Rose's deepest anxieties, setting the stage for the play's climactic events. Pinter's plays are characterized by the arrival of strange outsiders who menace the stability of the characters. Mr. Kidd seems to be the owner of the house from the way Rose addresses him, but he is the first outsider to intrude into the house.

ROSE. How many floors you got in this house?

MR. RIDD. Floors.

(He laughs.)

Ah, we had a good few of them in the old days.

ROSE. How many have you got now?

¹⁵ Pinter, Harold, "Writing for the theatre" in *Harold Pinter: Plays One*, London, Faber and Faber, 1991, p. xii.

MR. RIDD. Well, to tell you the truth, I don't count them now.

ROSE. Oh.

MR. KIDD. No, not now.

ROSE. It must be a bit of a job.

MR. KIDD. Oh, I used to count them, once. Never got tired of it. I used to keep a tack on everything in this house. I had a lot to keep my eye on, then. I was able for it too. That was when my sister was alive. But I lost track a bit, after she died. She's been dead some time now, my sister. It was a good house then. She was a capable woman. Yes. Fine size of a woman too. I think she took after my mum. Yes, I think she took after my old mum, from what I can recollect. I think my mum was a Jewess. Yes, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that she was a Jewess. She didn't have many babies.¹⁶

Mr. Kidd is an ambiguous figure; he is the owner of the house, but he doesn't know how many floors he owns. This dialogue is clearly absurd, but nothing should be taken for granted in Pinter's plays. Every dialogue always hides a veil of mystery, which is also enriched with subtle biographical echoes. In what is said lies the unsaid. Particularly, in this dialogue between Rose and Mr. Kidd, the reference to the Jewish roots of Pinter is also evident, especially when Mr. Kidd says: "I think my mum was a Jewess. Yes, I wouldn't be surprised to learn that she was a Jewess. She didn't have many babies."

Dario Calimani in *Radici Sepolte*, citing William Baker and S.E. Tabachnick, wrote: "Il fatto che la madre del proprietario possa essere stata ebrea, oltre allo stesso nome 'Rose' con le sue implicazioni di 'zia ebrea' tipiche dell'East End, suggerisce un senso di paura specificamente ebraico".¹⁷ Moreover, Calimani interprets the fact that Mr. Kidd does not remember if his mother was Jewish as a denial of his roots: "Il passaggio porta alla superficie, con il ricordo dell'ebraicità della madre, il dubbio sul contenuto di quel ricordo. Se il ricordo è un passo verso il ricongiungimento con il proprio passato, il dubbio è un passo verso la sua negazione"¹⁸. Maybe Rose is a Jewish woman who is afraid of being caught by the Nazi guards, maybe Mr. Kidd is also a Jew who denies his roots, we don't know. Nevertheless, the young couple, The Sands, are the second intruders of the house.

¹⁶ Pinter, Harold, *cit.*, pp. 92-93.

¹⁷ Baker, William, S.E. Tabachnick, *Harold Pinter*, Edinburgh, Oliver and Boyd, 1973, p. 26, in Dario Calimani, *Radici Sepolte*, Firenze, Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1996, pp. 12-13.

¹⁸ Calimani, Dario, *cit.*, p. 13.

After they have been informed by a sinister stranger of Rose and Bert's vacant room, they come to visit their room. For Rose they embody the threat of dispossession, especially when she learns that room number 7, theirs, is free.

MR. SANDS. The man in the basement said there was one. One room. Number seven he said.

Pause.

ROSE. That's this room.

MR. SANDS. We'd better go and get hold of the landlord.

MRS. SANDS (*rising*). Well, thank you for the warm-up, Mrs. Hudd. I feel better now.

ROSE. This room is occupied.

MR. SANDS. Come on.

MRS. SANDS. Goodnight, Mrs. Hudd. I hope your husband won't be too long. Must be lonely for you, being alone here.¹⁹

However, Mr. Kidd's second intrusion forces Rose to confront a long-suppressed truth, foreshadowing a confrontation with the enigmatic basement tenant who had informed the couple. The entrance of Riley, the blind black man, marks a moment of greatest tension. Riley is the last outsider to enter the room, a black man who looks for Rose. He represents the threat, the stranger, the different. Riley and Rose seem to share a mysterious past, which remains dark and undefined for the viewer. The moment he reveals that he has a message for the woman, the atmosphere becomes more threatening.

RILEY. I have a message for you.

ROSE. You've got what? How could you have a message for me, Mister Riley, when I don't know you and nobody knows I'm here and I don't know anybody anyway. You think I'm an easy touch, don't you? Well, why don't you give it up as a bad job? Get off out of it. I've had enough of this. You're not only a nut, you're a blind nut and you can get out the way you came.

Pause.

What message? Who have you got a message from?

RILEY. Your father wants you to come home.

¹⁹ Pinter, Harold, *cit.*, p.102.

Initially, Rose verbally assaults the intruder who has violated her sanctuary, vehemently denying any familial connection. However, upon rising to touch the man's face, she falls silent. This abrupt shift marks a turning point in the play. This silence is a profound acceptance, a tacit agreement to open herself up to the outside world. Riley addresses Rose as "Sal" and asks her to return home. This seems to be for the viewer a trace that leads to the explanation of his visit.

ROSE. What did you call me?

RILEY. Come home, Sal.

ROSE. Don't call me that.

RILEY. Come, now.

ROSE. Don't call me that.

RILEY. So now you're here.

ROSE. Not Sal.

RILEY. Now I touch you.²⁰

It remains uncertain whether Rose is living under false name, concealing her true origins. Finally, the play concludes with a brutal act of violence. Bert viciously attacks Riley knocking him to the ground and repeatedly kicking his head against the gas stove. The brutal massacre of Riley recalls the violence against foreign communities, against minorities, and against the weak. Riley was once the personification of the threat, of the intruder, but now he becomes a victim, since Bert attacks him and probably kills him. Riley is victim of racial hatred. *The Room* brings us back to the xenophobia present in England in 1950s, according to which to destroy the enemy, the different, is necessary to restore the status quo. Rose's final words are haunting: "Can't see. I can't see. I can't see"²¹. After the demise of Riley, Rose becomes blind just like the black man. Perhaps this shared state of blindness might symbolize a common existential condition, characterized by marginalization and confinement, or maybe Rose's blindness could be the metaphor of denial. Blindness could be another prison which protects the woman from guilt, or instead it is her existential prison. Another explanation is given by Martin Esslin in *The Peopled Wound*:

²⁰ Pinter, Harold, *cit.*, p. 108.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

The blind Negro, on the other hand, who has been lying in the basement for days and who appears to bring Rose a message from her past, is all too manifestly a symbol, an allegory. He has been lying down below and had foreknowledge of the future- that room number seven would be soon vacant- he must therefore be a being from beyond the confines of this world: a dead man or a messenger of death, perhaps Rose's own dead father. [...] the blindness which strikes Rose at the end belongs to the same category of symbolism- it must mean the end of her relationship with Bert, but probably more than that: her own death.²²

Nevertheless, this conclusion leaves the audience bewildered and perplexed. Finally, every possible explanation of the play is not unique, Pinter's work is remarkable for its openness to a multitude of interpretation. Pinter himself offers some insight in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech:

Truth in drama is forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive. The search is clearly what drives the endeavour. The search is your task. More often than not you stumble upon the truth in the dark, colliding with it or just glimpsing an image or a shape which seems to correspond to the truth, often without realizing that you have done so. But the real truth is that there never is any such thing as one truth to be found in dramatic art. There are many. These truths challenge each other, recoil from each other, reflect each other, ignore each other, tease each other, are blind to each other. Sometimes you feel you have the truth of a moment in your hand, then it slips through your fingers and is lost.²³

1.2 From the failure to the first success: *The Birthday Party*

In an interview with Mel Gussow, Pinter stated:

Si dà il caso che anche *Il compleanno* sia stato ispirato da due cose. Innanzitutto un tale che viveva in una pensione in una località di mare dov'ero capitato durante una tournée. Stava in una soffitta, e andava a suonare il piano sul molo. Era assolutamente solo. Non sapevo altro di lui, ma la sua immagine mi è rimasta dentro per anni. Mi chiedevo: che cosa succederebbe se due persone bussassero alla sua porta? Ecco, quell'idea del bussare è il secondo elemento. Mi derivava dalla mia conoscenza della Gestapo. Non lo dimenticherò mai: era il 1953 o il 1954. La guerra era finita da meno di dieci anni. Ne rimasi molto turbato.²⁴

In 1958, Pinter abandoned his studies to join a theater company and wrote the first full-length play *The Birthday Party*, one of his most representative plays. First

²² Esslin, Martin, *The Peopled Wound*, cit., p. 66.

²³ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Art, Truth & Politics*, THE NOBEL FOUNDATION, December 7, 2005. <https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/pinter-lecture-e.pdf>.

²⁴ Gussow, Mel, *Conversazioni con Pinter*, cit., 2005, p. 60.

performed on 28 April 1958, at the Arts Theatre, Cambridge, *The Birthday Party* received negative reviews, thus it lasted only one week. Harold Hobson was the only critic to recognize the talent and the originality of Harold Pinter: “I am willing to risk whatever reputation I have as a judge of plays by saying ... that Mr. Pinter, on the evidence of this work, possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London.”²⁵ Harold Hobson was right; he was the sole contemporary critic to recognize Pinter’s artistic importance, and Pinter himself was grateful for it: “mi sentivo assolutamente scoraggiato prima di Hobson. Quell’uomo ha avuto un’influenza determinante sulla mia vita”²⁶. Nevertheless, the play was later televised and revived successfully on the stage. *The Birthday Party*, together with *The Caretaker* and *The Homecoming*, were labelled *Comedies of menace* by the critic Irving Wardle, who borrowed the term from the subtitle of one of David Campton’s plays, *The Lunatic View: A Comedy of Menace*. Wardle claimed that:

comedy enables the committed agents and victims of destruction to come on and off duty; to joke about the situation while oiling a revolver; to display absurd or endearing features behind their masks of implacable resolution...

and that “menace” in Pinter’s plays

stands for something more substantial: destiny, [which is] handled in this way—not as an austere exercise in classicism, but as an incurable disease which one forgets about most of the time and whose lethal reminders may take the form of a joke—is an apt dramatic motif for an age of conditioned behaviour in which orthodox man is a willing collaborator in his own destruction.²⁷

Humour and menace are intertwined in order to highlight the absurdity and destructive nature of human beings, thus producing an emotional response from the audience. Francesca Coppa in her article *The sacred joke: comedy and politics in Pinter’s early plays* claimed:

²⁵ Billington, Michael, “Fighting talk”, *The Guardian*, 3 May 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/may/03/theatre.stage> Accessed on 22 Oct. 2024.

²⁶ Gussow, Mel, *Conversazioni con Pinter*, cit., p.119.

²⁷ Wardle, Irving, “Comedy of Menace”, rpt. in *The Encore Reader* 91, Sept-Oct. 1958. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comedy_of_menace Accessed on 22 Oct. 2024.

Comedy thus functions as a sort of litmus test for the audience. Will they laugh or not laugh? With whom will they side? [...] But Pinter's skillful use of comedy is not incidental or merely pleasurable but rather crucial: the comedy routines in the early plays are maps to the themes and meanings of the plays as a whole. [...] Pinter uses the tendentious joke structure on the micro level as well as the macro. We may not, in the final event, find the larger work *funny*, but that does not mean that the play is not constructed like a joke. Rather, our failure to laugh may be an indication that we, the audience, have come to side with the victim over the victimiser.²⁸

Pinter's comedy has a very precise aim, which is underlined also by the looming menace that pervades his early works. *The Birthday Party* is divided into three acts and the action takes place in 24 hours. It begins with a seemingly innocuous situation that gradually descends into the absurd. It is set in a seaside guest house run by a married couple: Meg, a dissatisfied housewife perpetually preparing breakfast for her husband, and Mr. Bowles, who resigns himself to his wife's behaviour. The only guest of this boarding house is a mysterious man called Stanley. Just as Rose in *The Room*, who is focused on taking care of her indifferent husband Bert, so does Meg here, who is devoted to her husband's care, while he remains indifferent to her efforts. Pinter's characters seem locked in a cycle of repetition across his plays, highlighting the complex and often dysfunctional nature of human relationships. Pinter explores domestic relationships, characterized by a sense of underlying tension and unspoken truths. He portrays characters as isolated islands, each existing in solitary confinement. Even when surrounded by others, these characters inhabit a claustrophobic isolation, speaking without truly listening. Their silences are pregnant with menace and symbolize distance and emptiness. At the beginning of the play, there seems to be a strange equilibrium at home and the dialogue between the couple is banal, repetitive and sometimes funny. The incipit of *The Birthday Party* is crucial:

MEG. Is that you, Petey?

Pause.

Petey, is that you?

²⁸ Coppa, Francesca, "The sacred joke: comedy and politics in Pinter's early plays", *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 43-45.

Pause.

Petey?

PETEY. What?

MEG. Is that you?

PETEY. Yes, it's me.

MEG. What? [...] Are you back?

PETEY. Yes.

MEG. I've got your cornflakes ready. [...] Here's your cornflakes. [...] Are they nice?

PETEY. Very nice.

MEG. I thought they'd be nice.²⁹

The emotional distance between the characters is filled with silences or fragments of conversation like this. Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson in the book *Harold Pinter* claimed:

These conversations, so depressingly banal, so heart-rendingly trivial, are at the core of daily life in every household. If a character in a play says 'Mother, give me the sun!', this utterance can be frightening because it is indicative of a deranged mind. Pinter has succeeded in transferring the frightening effect from the extravagance of madness to the banality of normality. [...] Meg's conversation is the paradigm of existential chat, whereby you talk about nothing (or about the weather) in order to make sure that you exist, and that other people are aware of it.³⁰

The theme of relationships is very dear to Pinter, who dissects the characters, their ambiguity and isolation. Petey and Meg remain isolated even if they form a couple. Meg wants to be noticed by others, especially by Petey. She aspires to embody the ideal wife, being engaged in preparing the endless breakfast for her husband, but her behaviour often appears grotesque. On the other hand, Petey is evasive and superficial, he listlessly listens to his wife and almost tries not to notice anything, even when he hears and sees her flirting with the young tenant. Meg has an ambiguous attitude towards Stanley: she is sometimes motherly affectionate, sometimes sensual. This reveals the need to be loved and accepted. Stanley is an enigmatic character; in fact, little is known about him. He is a mysterious man in his thirties, but it is not clear where he comes from, what he did before he got to the pension. He seems to be running away from something, but it is not explained

²⁹ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays One*, cit., p. 3.

³⁰ Almansi, Guido, & Simon Henderson, *Harold Pinter*, London, Methuen & Co, 1983, pp. 39,43.

from what, as often happens with Pinter's characters. Maybe Stanley has sought refuge in this remote location to escape an organization. For about a year now, he has been in that place, and apart from his work as a pianist and his concerts, as he himself will tell Meg, nothing else is known. At the beginning of the play, Meg pampers Stanley with maternal care, she tries to cuddle him as a child, thus the audience is inclined to assume that Stanley is her son; but Pinter once again subverts our expectations, as the woman's attitude transforms into sexual provocations. Stanley displays anger towards the woman, he criticizes and offends her. The house is sometimes frequented by Lulu, Meg's young friend; she apparently seems to be the only one capable of stirring a bit of vitality into Stanley's torpor and alienation. The theme of threat is evident as Stanley becomes immediately uncomfortable and suspicious upon hearing about the arrival of Goldberg and McCann, respectively a Jew and an Irishman, who interrupt this strange, stale, and grotesque equilibrium. The two men seem to be part of the same organization; they are both elegant, but while McCann is a young man of thirty, Goldberg is fifty. The latter appears to be the chief, while McCann is not only a subordinate but at times a submissive figure, though he is also capable of sudden outbursts. When Stanley gets to know about their coming to the boarding house, his reaction is: "*A pause. STANLEY slowly raises his head, he speaks without turning. What two gentlemen?*"³¹. Stanley questions Meg repeatedly in order to understand who they are and why they have chosen such a desolate and unfrequented place, but her naive attitude sees nothing strange in their coming. Although he asks Meg many questions about them, he is ultimately aware that the two assassins are coming to the boarding house to get him, in fact he says: "They are looking for someone. A certain person."³² His anxiety is later explained: Goldberg and McCann know him and are there for him. The three men share a past which remains shrouded in mystery. Whether they are hitmen for a mysterious organization or nurses returning him to an asylum, remains a mystery;

³¹ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays One*, cit., p.14.

³² *Ibid.*, p.18.

thus, both Stanley's and their origins are shrouded in enigma. When they arrive, Meg organizes the celebration of Stanley's birthday with great enthusiasm, enlisting the help of the two new guests, while Stanley alone experiences a deep sense of anxiety throughout the preparations, claiming "this isn't my birthday"³³. Therefore, it remains uncertain whether it is Stanley's birthday or not. At the beginning of act II McCann rips five equal strips from a newspaper page, foreshadowing Stanley's spiritual tearing apart at the party. Goldberg asserts "But a birthday, I always feel, is a great occasion, taken too much for granted these days. What a thing to celebrate-birth!"³⁴. During the birthday celebration, the birth in question might be that of Stanley, who, after the celebration, will emerge as a "new man", thus it might symbolize Stanley's spiritual rebirth. The birthday party is attended by the two strange visitors, Meg and her friend Lulu, but it is celebrated with indifference to Stanley's state of mind. Petey, who has prior commitments, does not attend the party, but this seems to concern almost no one. Stanley is the guest of honor at his own birthday, but he feels as though he is trapped in a prison from which he cannot escape. The party is characterized by toasts, laughter, and improbable games which Stanley suffers as tortures. During the party McCann breaks Stanley's glasses, and the lights go out. When McCann illuminates the scene with a torch, Stanley is found bending over Lulu on the table. He had tried to strangle Meg first and to rape Lulu later. As Martin Esslin wrote in his book *The Peopled Wound: the plays of Harold Pinter*: "[Stanley] seems to have gone out of his mind as the avenging representatives of the organization finally lay hands on him."³⁵ The women in the party flaunt their femininity, appearing elegant and seductive. During the party, Lulu is seduced by Goldberg who acts like a friendly man. As soon as the alcohol starts flowing, Goldberg begins to recount a bit of his past and various names of Goldberg are revealed: from "Net" to "Simey". Perhaps he adopts different names for different roles. It is important to notice that when

³³ Ibid., p.35.

³⁴ Ibid., p.39.

³⁵ Esslin, Martin, *The Peopled Wound: the plays of Harold Pinter*, cit., p. 79.

McCann calls Goldberg “Simey” he starts becoming nervous, shouting “don’t call me like that”, this is a clue that he lives under a false name, hiding something. Thus, the party gradually shifts from an atmosphere of seemingly strange normalcy to an agonizing and incomprehensible unease. The visitors then interrogate Stanley with seemingly absurd questions and push him beyond the limits of human endurance, leading him to lose his ability to speak. The day after, Stanley descends, but this time he is reduced to a catatonic state, mentally and physically broken.

GOLDBERG. What’s your opinion of such a prospect? Eh, Stanley?

Stanley concentrates, his mouth opens, he attempts to speak, fails and emits sounds from his throat.

STANLEY. Uh-gug...uh-gug...eeehhh-gag... (*On the breath.*) Caahh...caaah.

GOLDBERG. Well, Stanny boy, what do you say, eh?

They watch. He concentrates. His head lowers, his chin draws into his chest, he crouches.

STANLEY. Ug-gughh...uh-gughhh...

MCCANN. What’s your opinion sir?

STANLEY. Caaahhh...caaahhh...

MCCANN. Mr. Webber! What is your opinion?

GOLDBERG. What do you say, Stan? What do you think of the prospect?

MCCANN. What do you think of the prospect?

Stanley’s body shudders, relaxes, his head drops, he becomes still again, stooped. PETEY enters from door, down-stage, left.

GOLDBERG. Still the same old Stan. Come with us. Come on, boy.³⁶

Mary Luckhurst explains accurately this crucial moment:

Stanley, then, in his fog of self-fakery and flight, has not lost freedom of expression since he never had any understanding of what authentic self-expression might be, but there is an argument, and Pinter pursues it, that in these last moments of traumatic utterance before he is removed from his day-to-day world to an infinitely worse place, he gains momentary self-knowledge. The blood curdling sounds are the last noises he will make in public, perhaps the last sounds he will ever make: the belated recognition of the loss of himself provides him with the only moments of self-perception he has ever had. [...] Stanley, then, stands on the brink of self-recognition but comes to it only momentarily and only through losing the very vocal power through which he might express himself.

³⁶ Pinter, Pinter, *Harold Pinter: Plays One*, cit., pp.78-79.

Political freedom of expression requires a bravery, and a certainty of self which Stanley has never possessed.³⁷

Stanley may have been a rebel, a political dissenter, or a Jew seeking a refuge. However, what is certain is that he is wanted by two mysterious men who intend to deliver him to the enigmatic Dr. Monty, a figure that never appears on stage. Thus, he is carried away by Goldberg and McCann to Dr. Monty, who is, according to them, the only specialist capable of providing the specialized treatment he requires. Finally, Petey's last words to Stanley are: "Stan, don't let them say what to do!"³⁸ The latter sentence is a principle that has forged Pinter's own identity during his life. The interviewer Mel Gussow recounts:

Durante la nostra conversazione nel dicembre '88, Pinter mi ha dichiarato di aver seguito quel principio per tutta la vita. L'individualismo più radicale è stato infatti il principale motore delle sue scelte, dal rifiuto, in gioventù, di prestare il servizio militare sino ad arrivare, più avanti negli anni, alla reazione aperta contro i censori, i critici sputasentenze o le nazioni in cui vengono lesi i diritti umani. In senso lato, Pinter è stato sempre un obiettore di coscienza, specialmente quando qualcuno ha cercato di dirgli quel che doveva fare.³⁹

Unlike Pinter, Stanley has become unable to make his own choices, thus he is led to an unknown destiny. The peculiar aspect of this play is that in the final scene of Act Three, Meg and Petey act the same ritual of the first act: Meg prepares an endless breakfast, repeating the same questions to her husband while he reads the newspaper. In his speech for the Nobel Prize Award, the author claimed:

"In my play *The Birthday Party* I think I allow a whole range of options to operate in a dense forest of possibility before finally focusing on an act of subjugation."⁴⁰

The Birthday Party is also a play which contains explicit references to Judaism.

Through the dialogues, Goldberg's Jewish origins are intercepted:

GOLDBERG: [...] when I was an apprentice yet, McCann, every second Friday of the month my Uncle Barney used to take me to the seaside, regular as clockwork. Brighton, Canvey Island, Rottingdean- Uncle Barney wasn't particular. After lunch on *Shabbuss* we'd go and sit in a couple of deck chairs- you know, the ones with canopies- we'd have

³⁷ Luckhurst, Mary, "Speaking out: Harold Pinter and freedom of expression", *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 108-110.

³⁸ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays One*, cit., p. 80.

³⁹ Gussow, Mel, *Conversazioni con Pinter*, cit., p. 9.

⁴⁰ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Art, Truth & Politics*, cit.

a little paddle, we'd watch the tide coming in, going out, the sun coming down- golden days, believe me, McCann. [...]

GOLDBERG: Agreed. But tonight, Lulu, McCann, we've known a great fortune. We've heard a lady extend the sum total of her devotion, in all its pride, plume and peacock, to a member of her own living race. Stanley, my heartfelt congratulations. I wish you, on behalf of us all, a happy birthday. I'm sure you've never been a prouder man than you are today. *Mazoltov!* And may we only meet at *Simchahs!* (*LULU and MEG applaud.*) Turn out the light, McCann, while we drink the toast.⁴¹

It is important to notice that Goldberg's functional language reveals a consistent use of words related to the world of Judaism, such as *Shabbat*, *Mazoltov* and *Simchahs*, but also biblical phraseology and quotations, such as "Honour thy father and thy mother."⁴² A particularly interesting autobiographical moment occurs when Goldberg responds to Meg's question about how her dress fits: "It's out on its own. Turn yourself round a minute. I used to be on the business."⁴³ According to biographical information, Pinter's father was a tailor, and it is not a coincidence that, in the film version of this play directed by William Friedkin in 1968, Pinter himself interprets Goldberg. Baker and Tabachnick observed that:

Stanley is the victim of a kind of scapegoat persecution, and Goldberg's relationship to him is that of a Jewish 'kapo' in a concentration camp to a Jewish prisoner. Stanley, who is all too ready to believe it, is taught that he should never have been born.⁴⁴

A 'kapo' was a prisoner in a concentration camp who was assigned supervisory duties often in exchange for preferential treatment or leniency from the Nazi guards. Pinter himself in an interview claimed: "Non penso che sia tanto surrealistico e strano, poiché questo fatto, di gente che arriva alla porta, è accaduto in Europa per gli ultimi vent'anni. Non solo gli ultimi vent'anni, gli ultimi due o trecento anni?"⁴⁵ Stanley could have been the victim of that kapo or simply a political dissenter, so his betrayal led him to find a hiding place in the pension of

⁴¹ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays One*, cit., pp. 21,50.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.71.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴⁴ Baker, William, and Stephen Ely Tabachnick, *Harold Pinter*, Edinburgh, Oliver & Boyd, 1973, p. 60.

⁴⁵ Interview with J. Sherwood, B.B.C. European Service, 3 March 1960, in Calimani, Dario, *Radici Sepolte. Il teatro di Harold Pinter*, Firenze, Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1996, p. 13.

Meg and Petey. The authorities, Goldberg and McCann, came to the pension to seek him and strip him of his identity and voice. Bernard Dukore wrote that:

“Goldberg and McCann, representatives and symbols of tradition and conformity, demonstrate the use that society makes of the forces of religion to ensure the conformity of its members”⁴⁶. Thus, tortured and constantly questioned, Stanley’s individual identity is reshaped and aligned to the organization he had once betrayed. In conclusion, Harold Pinter’s plays have a lot of possible readings and interpretations, they are universal works that go beyond time and space, so each different spectator, with their own cultural background and different sensibility, can give a different explanation.

1.3 Politics and menace: *The Dumb Waiter*

I knew perfectly well that *The Birthday party* and *The Dumb Waiter*, in my understanding then, were to do with states of affairs which could certainly be termed political, without any questions. ... And Goldberg and McCann, I knew who they were and what they were up to. (Interview with Mel Gussow in 1993.)⁴⁷

The Dumb Waiter is a play in one act written in 1957 and first performed at the Hampstead Theatre on 21 January 1960. It is set in a desolate basement room, in Birmingham. The play centres around a peculiar elevator, or dumb waiter, symbol of an unknown, controlling entity. This entity, acting as an offstage third character, communicates orders, through the dumb waiter, to the two main characters, Ben and Gus, who are two assassins working for a mysterious organization. They are indefinitely waiting for instructions for the victim to kill. This stagnant situation and the awareness that someone will pass the door to be killed cause a growing anguish and suspense in the spectator. At the beginning of the play, Ben and Gus are in this room and they are looking at the door waiting for their victim. The characters’ dialogue is bizarre, at times comical, but ultimately absurd.

⁴⁶ Dukore, Bernard, “The Theatre of Harold Pinter”, *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1962, p. 52.

⁴⁷ *In His Own Words*, cit., visited on 15 Oct. 2024.

BEN. Kaw!

He picks up the paper.

What about this? Listen to this! *He refers to the paper.*

A man of eighty-seven wanted to cross the road. But there was a lot of traffic, see? He couldn't see how he was going to squeeze through. So he crawled under a lorry.

GUS. He what?

BEN. He crawled under a lorry. A stationary lorry.

GUS. No?

BEN. The lorry started and ran over him.

GUS. Go on!

BEN. That's what it says here.

GUS. Get away.

BEN. It's enough to make you want to puke, isn't it?

GUS. Who advised him to do a thing like that?

BEN. A man of eighty-seven crawling under a lorry!

GUS. It's unbelievable.

BEN. It's down here in black and white.

GUS. Incredible.

[...]

BEN. *(slamming his paper down)*. Kaw!

GUS. What's that?

BEN. A child of eight killed a cat.

GUS. Get away.

BEN. It's a fact. What about that, eh? A child of eight killing a cat.⁴⁸

An interesting aspect of this dialogue is that Ben chooses the stories on the newspaper to tell Gus, who supposedly should have a reaction. Surely, this comic and bizarre dialogue evokes a reaction in the viewer. According to Francesca Coppa, who wrote *Comedy and politics in Pinter's early plays*:

Ben picks out stories which illustrates the stupidity and cruelty of his fellow human beings. [...] Ben, the joke-maker, tells the joke at the expense of the old man, for the purpose of bonding with Gus, whose role is to laugh. Their shared laughter over the story is also a confirmation of their shared ideology. After all, the subtext of the story is 'Stupid people deserve what they get!': this is presumably a comforting ideology for the hitman. You might need to believe that if you are going to kill effectively: yours is not to question why. Someone else has selected your victim, and presumably for good reason. People are stupid and cruel: they deserve whatever comes to them.⁴⁹

This dialogue is absurd and almost funny since the murderers are stunned by the world's cruelty and stupidity while they are waiting for a victim to kill. Ben and

⁴⁸ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays One*, cit., pp. 113-116.

⁴⁹ Coppa, Francesca, "The sacred joke: comedy and politics in Pinter's early plays", *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, cit., p. 45.

Gus are armed, hinting at their roles as hitmen, but they have different attitudes. Although Ben appears to be the leader, when the dumb waiter gives them orders, he is the first to obey this unidentified entity. He doesn't answer Gus' constant questions, which are often prefaced with the recurring line, "I want to ask you something."⁵⁰ Gus is tormented by doubts and guilt feelings. The lack of responses and the repetitive dialogue almost stun and disorient the viewer. Gus continues to ask questions to Ben, also banal questions, such as: "Have you noticed the time that tank takes to fill?"⁵¹, but his words hide something else. He is attentive to what happens around him, so the questions he would like to ask are different. In fact, these trivial questions will gradually transform into more attentive and precise ones, like "Who is it upstairs?"⁵². When Ben gets suspicious about all the questions asked by Gus, he says: "You never used to ask me so damn questions. What's come over you?", but Gus diminishes himself by saying, "No, I was just wondering"⁵³. Gus is suspicious about what is happening around them, and he begins to perceive the dynamics of power hidden behind that dumb waiter. Ben, with an authoritative demeanour, reads a newspaper but he lacks real authority. Their different attitude and power relationship is also highlighted in the dialogues. The struggle between different visions of language is translated into a struggle between power-grabs.

BEN. Go and light it.

GUS. Light what?

BEN. The kettle.

GUS. You mean the gas.

BEN. Who does?

GUS. You do.

BEN. (*his eyes narrowing*). What do you mean, I mean the gas?

GUS. Well, that's what you mean, don't you? The gas.

BEN. (*powerfully*). If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.

GUS. How can you light a kettle?

BEN. It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It's a figure of speech!

GUS. I've never heard it.

BEN. Light the kettle! It's common usage!

GUS. I think you've got it wrong.

BEN. (*menacing*): What do you mean?

⁵⁰ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays One*, cit., p. 114.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

GUS. They say put on the kettle.

BEN. (*taut*): Who says?

They stare at each other, breathing hard.

(*Deliberately.*) I've never in all my life heard anyone say put on the kettle.⁵⁴

The debate over the preferred expression between “I’ll light the gas” or “I’ll light the kettle” highlights the characters’ contrasting communicative styles. Ben favours rhetorical figures, employing metaphorical language to convey hidden meanings and create an enigmatic person. Conversely, Gus prioritizes the literal meaning, opting for transparency and honesty in his linguistic choice. This linguistic divergence shows the distinct relationship each character cultivates with language and, by extension, with reality. But their apparent division of powers is thus undermined by an unseen force which has confined them to a basement room, devoid of food. The two protagonists are uncertain of their objective; they do not know who their victim will be, nor do they have any clear understanding of their task. When the characters find the dumb waiter, the tray comes down and the two killers find scraps of paper with food and drink orders. Maybe that room once was the kitchen of a café or restaurant. They wait for these orders, assuming they are in a bar, feeling unease and anxiety as they anticipate instructions from the mysterious dumb waiter who ascends from an unknown location. These orders at first are simple dishes like soup of the day, but later become progressively more impossible dishes, such as Macaroni Pastitsio. The assassins try to fulfil these orders as well as they can. Every detail heightens their alertness; at any moment, they expect to receive their instructions. This anticipation fills them with anxiety. These orders may also arrive via a certain Wilson, whom Ben describes as an extremely busy man, but who ultimately never appears, as it happens in *The Birthday Party* with Dr. Monty. Gus poses numerous questions but seems to recognize that he will not receive answers and must simply await orders. Finally, they discover a speaking tube next to the dumb waiter where they hear a voice complaining about the dishes received by them. The conclusion of this play, too,

⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 125-126.

leaves us surprised and disoriented. Pinter deliberately destabilizes us. Ben complies with the orders, but then Gus, unarmed and stripped, stumbles in through the door. Having exited through the opposite door to get a glass of water, Gus finds himself face-to-face with Ben, who points a gun at him. The victim was Gus. Thus, the curtain falls and leaves the audience with unanswered questions. In a tragic paradox, Gus, the potential victim, emerges as the only figure to comprehend the corrupting nature of the system, while Ben, the designated executioner, remains trapped in the role of enforcer. Ben and Gus, prisoners of an oppressive hierarchy, exhaust their resources as the higher authority continues to make exorbitant demands. Their subordinate status renders them incapable of meeting the escalating requests, highlighting the system's inequity. Gus, initially submissive, develops a growing awareness of the power dynamics, resisting Ben's passive acceptance. Gus is destroyed because he has not been content to be a "dumb waiter". The fate of the rebel is death. According to Bernard Dukore, in Pinter's plays,

It is the artist, however, who by the very nature of his profession seeks for individual self-expression and who is therefore a threat to the society around him. [...] Pinter paints a frightening picture of the individual pressured by the forces of society to the point wherein he loses his individuality and becomes a drugged member of the social machine. [...] as the hired killer of *The Dumb Waiter* was killed by his fellow killer, so does the artist of *The Birthday Party* receive a similarly appropriate fate: he loses his powers of expression.⁵⁵

Pinter was involved as a playwright and an activist with the politics of the time, and this is evident in his works. According to Austin Quigley, "what he has effectively done is to transfer to the realm of political situation the exploration of complex social interaction that is characteristic of his plays as a whole"⁵⁶.

⁵⁵ Dukore, Bernard, "The Theatre of Harold Pinter", *cit.*, p. 51.

⁵⁶ Quigley, Austin, "Pinter, politics and postmodernism", *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 10.

1.4 *The Hothouse*: an overt political play

Harold Pinter wrote *The Hothouse* in 1958, just before commencing work on *The Caretaker*. The author wrote in a note:

I wrote *The Hothouse* in the winter of 1958. I put it aside for further deliberation and made no attempt to have it produced at the time. I then went on to write *The Caretaker*. In 1979 I re-read *The Hothouse* and decided it was worth presenting on the stage. I made a few changes during rehearsal, mainly cuts.⁵⁷

The play is divided into two acts, and it was first performed at Hampstead Theatre, in London, on 24 April 1980, in a production directed by Harold Pinter. The lights that shape the stage, rising and falling to guide the scenes, demonstrate Pinter's cinematic skills. The absurd and cruel plot unfolds over Christmas Day and the following day, with no specific location indicated. The settings are limited to offices and a button room. This location will be defined by one of the protagonists, Lush, the assistant to the director Roote, as a "rest home". In this institution, sent by an unspecified ministry, the inmates/patients have been deprived of their names and they are referred to by numbers. They never appear on stage and their voice is reduced to a limited repertoire of vocalizations, including sighs, screams, and keening sounds, which echo throughout the building. The plot begins with two pivotal events: the childbirth of patient 6459, who is believed to have been raped, and the death of patient 6457, who is believed to have died of heart failure. Life and death serve as catalysts for the drama. An investigation is launched by the director Roote, but its purpose is not to uncover the truth, rather, it is a mere demonstration of the institution's power and its ability to maintain order. Control over events must be asserted. The beginning of the play is a delirious and grotesque dialogue between Roote, an ex-army officer who is also the director of the institution, and Gibbs, another of his pedantic assistants.

Roote's office. Morning.

Roote is standing at the window. Looking out.

Gibbs is at the filing cabinet, examining some papers.

ROOTE. Gibbs.

GIBBS. Yes, sir?

⁵⁷ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays One*, cit., p. 186.

ROOTE. Tell me...

GIBBS. Yes, sir?

ROOTE. How's 6457 getting on?

GIBBS. 6457, sir?

ROOTE. Yes.

GIBBS. He's dead, sir.

ROOTE. Dead?

GIBBS. He died on Thursday, sir.

ROOTE. Thursday? What are you talking about? What's today?

GIBBS. Saturday, sir.

ROOTE. Saturday... Well, for goodness sake, I had a talk with him, when was it? (*Open his desk diary.*) Recently. Only the other day. Yesterday, I think. Just a minute.

GIBBS. I hardly think yesterday, sir.

ROOTE. Why not?

GIBBS. I supervised the burial arrangements myself, sir.

ROOTE. This is ridiculous. What did he die of?

GIBBS. I beg your pardon, sir?

ROOTE. If he's dead, what did he die of?

GIBBS. Heart failure, sir.⁵⁸

The play begins with the announcement of the death of patient 6457, whom Roote doesn't remember, or perhaps he does not want to remember. Roote is a man in his fifties who bases his role on the control of power. He is terrified of change, thus, he's a prisoner of rules, although he is aware of that: "The system's wrong. (*He walks across the room.*) We shouldn't use these stupid numbers at all. Only confuses things. Why don't we use their names, for God's sake? They've got names, haven't they?"⁵⁹. He knows perfectly well that he can't change the system, even if he doesn't like it: "You know damn well we can't. That was one of the rules of procedure laid down in the original constitution. The patients are to be given numbers and called by those numbers. And that's how it's got to remain. You understand?"⁶⁰ Thus, the system is inviolable; no one has the privilege to alter the rules of the original constitution. Like the character of Goldberg in *The Birthday Party*, medical staff here often adopt different names according to the role they play. For instance, Gibbs is referred to as "Charlie" by Lush and Mrs. Cutts, while Roote calls Lush "Hogg", and Mrs. Cutts addresses Roote as "Archie". All these

⁵⁸ Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays One*, cit., p. 189-191.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

are indications that the characters live under false names, thus having a dual identity. This “rest home” is a prison for both the inmates and the staff, Lush in fact claims: “we’re all in the game together”⁶¹. But while patients are physically deprived of their freedom, being locked up, the staff is instead slave to a corrupt system. Patients are oppressed and imprisoned, moreover, they do not have visibility on stage. Particularly, when patient number 6457 dies, Roote asks: “Who said the last words over him?”, and Gibbs answers: “There were no last words, sir.”⁶² They have no voice, thus they live their existence like ghosts. Indeed, the unclaimed Christmas lottery prizes, announced over the interphone, further emphasises their marginalized status.

VOICE. Number 84. A duck. Who’s got ticket number 84? A duck ready for the oven. No-one? Unclaimed, Fred. Next one coming up. Ten beautiful Portuguese cigars. No-one? Unclaimed, Fred. Number 38. Two tickets to the circus. Two tickets to the circus. Unclaimed, Fred. Number 44. A lovely crockery, cutlery, china and cookery set. A lovely crockery, china and cookery set. Number 44. Unclaimed, Fred.⁶³

Patients do not collect their prizes. Moreover, when Tubb solicits Roote to give a Christmas speech on the intercom, Roote asks: “And patients... they haven’t expressed any desire... themselves... have they?”, Tubb replies: “well, not exactly expressed one, sir, as far as I know, but I’ve fitted up the loudspeaker system to their rooms and I’m sure they’d be deeply moved”⁶⁴. The central motif of this play is the deprivation of liberty, in fact patients have no freedom of expression. Indeed, after the announcement of the lottery prizes, Lush clarifies that the duck is “as dead as patient 6457. If not deader”⁶⁵, and it is not a coincidence that the lottery ticket for the dead duck is owned by Lamb, a junior employee in his twenties, whose name is also indicative of his fate. The only woman to appear on stage is the nurse Cutts, a ruthless and alluring woman of around thirty. She is a complex figure, simultaneously cruel, submissive, and unscrupulous. Alongside Gibbs, Cutts

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 228.

⁶² Ibid., p. 202.

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 276-277.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 288-289.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 278.

tortures the subordinate Lamb: “no, Lamb, what I’d like is for you to help us with some little tests. Will you do that?”, thus, the innocent Lamb replies: “Tests? I’d be delighted. That’s what I hoped I’d be doing when I first came down here.”⁶⁶ Finally, electrodes are placed in Lamb’s wrists to do “experiments”. Lamb is being interrogated/tortured by Mrs. Cutts and Gibbs, just like Goldberg and McCann do in *The Birthday Party* with Stanley, but unlike the latter, Lamb does not recognize them as enemies, instead he enjoys those tortures: “I’m quite ready for another question. I’m quite ready. I’m rather enjoying this, you know”⁶⁷. Nurse Cutts, in collusion with Gibbs, becomes the executioner of Lamb’s unjustified torture. Lamb, yearning to be part of the institute’s powerful elite, becomes the necessary scapegoat, allowing the institution to pin the blame of raping patient 6459 on him, while medical staff are permitted to abuse the female “inmates”. Indeed, Roote clarifies it in this ruthless and misogynistic monologue:

[...] I don’t mind the men dipping their wicks on occasion. It can’t be avoided. It’s got to go somewhere. Besides that, it’s in the interests of science. If a member of the staff decides that for the good of a female patient some degree of copulation is necessary then two birds are killed with one stone!⁶⁸

The play also foregrounds the opposition between the feminine and the masculine. According to John Stokes, who wrote the essay *Pinter and the 1950s*,

The Hothouse, in particular, presents the sexual life as one in which style counts for everything, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are fashion accessories, aspects of the personality to be over- or underplayed according to the needs of the moment and the demands of other people. Social uncertainty replaces shame and guilt.⁶⁹

Miss Cutts uses her charm to please her lover, Roote. She is eager to fulfil his every desire in order to be recognized and loved. Particularly, she insists on the feminine matter: “Do you think I’m feminine enough, darling? Or do you think I should be more feminine?”⁷⁰. Miss Cutts, just like Meg in *The Birthday Party*, is looking for attention, in fact she says: “Charlie, what is it? Don’t I please you any more? Tell

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 238.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 253.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 219.

⁶⁹ Stokes, John, “Pinter and the 1950s”, *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 108-110.

⁷⁰ Pinter, Harold, *cit.*, p.225.

me. Be honest. Am I no longer the pleasure I was? Be frank with me. Am I failing you?"⁷¹. A sexually suggestive moment occurs when Miss Cutts repeatedly interrogates Lamb:

CUTTS. Are you virgo intacta?

LAMB. Oh, I say, that's rather embarrassing. I mean, in front of a lady-

CUTTS. Are you virgo intacta?

LAMB. Yes, I am, actually. I'll make no secret of it⁷².

Miss Cutts asks specific questions to Lamb in order to find out if he has been the rapist of the patient 6459. After this interrogation, Miss Cutts is fully aware that Lamb did not engage in sexual intercourse with the patient 6459, nevertheless he is falsely accused of rape. At the beginning of the play, Miss Cutts emerges as an authoritative figure in the oppressive system of the institution. The patient who gave birth, on the other hand, appears as a passive victim of this system. However, as the narrative unfolds, an unexpected bond develops between the two women. Despite her position of power, Miss Cutts exhibits a degree of empathy towards the patient, particularly after her childbirth. Symbol of this bond is the nightgown donated by the patient to Miss Cutts:

[...] she just gave it to me. I had a tea with her today. She's a nursing mother. She doesn't need it. She insisted I should have it. She's so sweet, and she's got such a bonny baby. I said to her, now we're friends, I can't go on calling you 6459, can I? What's your name? [...].⁷³

The patient's act of donating her nightgown suggests that, beneath appearances and social roles, both women share a similar condition. Both Miss Cutts and the patient are submissive to male authority, embodied by the male figures within the institution. The nightgown becomes a symbol of this shared subjugation. Harold Pinter masterfully portrays the intricate dynamics of relationships that can deteriorate into cruel and manipulative power struggles. The author highlights the absurdity of the mechanisms driving certain relationships founded on suspicion and mistrust. Pinter's play, with its tragic and violent themes, has surreal

⁷¹ Ibid., p.293.

⁷² Ibid., p.249.

⁷³ Ibid., p.314.

undertones, yet the institute serves as a metaphor for the human condition and its tragic inability to escape the clutches of power. The tragedy and violence reach a climax at the end, which reveals a massacre of the entire medical staff. They are killed in various gruesome ways: some hanged, others strangled. Roote and Nurse Cutts are found stabbed to death in their bed. Gibbs is the sole survivor who refers to Lobb that the entire medical staff was massacred by the patients that left their rooms to kill them, and the responsible for their escape was Lamb, who was the locksmith. Lobb, the minister, appoints Gibbs as new leader of the institute. At the end of the play, when Lobb asks Mr. Roote why the patients rebelled, Gibbs replies: "... Two things especially had made him rather unpopular. He had seduced patient 6459 and been the cause of her pregnancy, and he had murdered patient 6457. That had not gone down too well with the rest of the patients."⁷⁴

Did the patients stage a revolt and kill the medical staff or was it just Gibbs who wanted to get rid of everyone to take over? Pinter surprises us with a tragic and emblematic ending. According to Gibbs, the massacre was carried out in revenge by the patients, though he also claims that a patient was killed. Finally, the author leaves the audience with this upsetting image: "*Lamb in chair. He sits still, staring, as in a catatonic trance.*"⁷⁵ In an interview with Lawrence Binsky, Pinter severely criticized *The Hothouse*:

I have occasionally out of irritation thought about writing a play with a satirical point. I once did, actually, a play that no one knows about. A full-length play written after *The Caretaker*. Wrote the whole damn thing in three drafts. It was called *The Hothouse* and was about an institution in which patients were kept: all that was presented was the hierarchy, the people who ran the institution; one never knew what happened to the patients or what they were there for or who they were. It was heavily satirical, and it was quite useless. I never began to like any of the characters; they really didn't live at all. So I discarded the play at once. The characters were so purely cardboard. I was intentionally—for the only time, I think—trying to make a point, an explicit point, that these were nasty people and I disapproved of them. And therefore they didn't begin to live. Whereas in other plays of mine every single character, even a bastard like Goldberg in *The Birthday Party*, I care for.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays One*, cit., p. 238.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

⁷⁶ Interview with Lawrence Binsky in Ronald Knowles, and Lawrence Binsky, "*The Hothouse* and the Epiphany of Harold Pinter." *Journal of Beckett Studies*, no. 10, 1985, p.134 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44782855> Accessed on 10 Nov. 2024.

The Hothouse serves as a metaphor for the relationship between master and servant, order and chaos. The inept and foolish bureaucrats, driven by fear of losing power, are revealed as ineffectual. Mary Luckhurst wrote:

The Hothouse is a black comedy depicting the banal bureaucratisation of flagrant human rights abuses. [...] The play recalls the medical experiments practised by Nazi doctors in the death camps, and the terrifyingly meticulous bureaucracies deployed by both fascist and communist dictatorships in the twentieth century.⁷⁷

The insistence on heat in the structure may be a clue which enriches this thesis:

ROOTE: [...] God, the heat of this place. It's damn hot, isn't it? It's like a crematorium in here. Why is it suddenly so hot?

LUSH: The snow has turned to slush, sir.

ROOTE: Has it?

LUSH: Very dangerous.⁷⁸

Lush, through a repeated claim that the snow has melted, could suggest a possible correlation between the atmospheric phenomenon of melting snow and the presence of crematoria. In fact, Roote claims: “[...] It's overheated! Always has been.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, Pinter in *The Hothouse*, as well as in *The Caretaker*, reflects his concern over the use of electroconvulsive therapy on political prisoners. Another significant theme that emerges from this work is the violence experienced by women imprisoned in concentration camps, which is evident in the violence suffered by the woman giving birth to a child within the “rest home”. The patient herself confirmed this to Gibbs, who referred this to Mr. Roote: “she was...noncommittal, sir. She said she couldn't be entirely sure since most of the staff have had relations with her in this last year.”⁸⁰ The woman's subjection to multiple sexual encounters recalls the violence experienced by Jewish women at the hands of Nazi guards. The oppressive, seemingly crematorium-like environment of the rest home, in conjunction with the medical staff's violent acts,

⁷⁷ Luckhurst, Mary, “Speaking out: Harold Pinter and freedom of expression”, cit., pp.110-111.

⁷⁸ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays One*, cit., p. 264.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 271.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 216.

including the rape of the woman and the murder of a man, reinforces the interpretation of the rest home as a concentration camp.

1.5 *The Caretaker*

In an interview Harold Pinter offers an insight about the inspiration which led him to write the play:

I'd met a few, quite a few, tramps—you know, just in the normal course of events, and I think there was one particular one ... I didn't know him very well; he did most of the talking when I saw him. I bumped into him a few times, and about a year or so afterward he sparked this thing off.⁸¹

Two years after the success of *The Caretaker*, Pinter's reputation was firmly established. *The Caretaker* is a three-act play first presented by Arts Theatre Club in association with Michael Codron and David Hall at the Arts Theatre, London, on 27 April 1960. The play is set in a dilapidated house in West London. The squalid room, filled with discarded objects, is the microcosm of the characters' chaotic lives. Indeed, the play's physical setting, the leaky roof and the overflowing bucket, mirrors the characters' psychological states. This claustrophobic environment, intended as a refuge, paradoxically becomes a stage for the same power struggles and violence observed in the outside world, suggesting the inherent nature of human conflict. The protagonists, Aston, Mick, and Davies, represent the marginalized and downtrodden. The brothers Aston and Mick are the owners of this messy house. Aston is a man in his early thirties, while Mick is in his late twenties. Davies, an old man, is a tramp whom Aston encounters in a bar and saves from a fight. Aston offers Davies a bed to sleep in his home while Mick, who is smart and clever, understands almost immediately that the tramp will only bring problems. Davies claims that he worked in a bar where his job was "cleaning the floor, cleaning up the tables, doing a bit of washing-up, [but]

⁸¹ Bensky, Larry, "Harold Pinter, The Art of Theater", *The Paris Review*, no. 3, issue 39, 1966. <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4351/the-art-of-theater-no-3-harold-pinter> Accessed on 15 Nov. 2024.

nothing to do with taking out buckets!”⁸². A Scotch told Davies to take out buckets, but, according to him, this was not his job, thus the fight developed. There is race hatred in the words of Davies:

All them Greeks had it, Poles, Greeks, Blacks, the lot of them, all them aliens had it. And they had me working there... they had me working... *ASTON sits on the bed, takes out a tobacco tin and papers, and begins to roll himself a cigarette. DAVIES watches him.* All them Black had it, Blacks, Greeks, Poles, the lot of them, that’s what, doing me out of a seat, treating me like dirt. When he come at me tonight I told him.⁸³

When Davies moves to Aston’s home, he realizes that he will have to share the bathroom with black people: “I mean you don’t share the toilet with them Blacks, do you?”⁸⁴. Davies is an enigmatic character: when questioned by Aston about his birthplace, he does not remember it, maybe he denies his origins: “I was... uh...oh, it’s a bit hard, like, to set your mind back...see what I mean... going back... a good way... lose a bit of track, like... you know... .”⁸⁵ He always insists that he should go to retrieve his papers at Sidcup because a man he knows has got them and can prove who he really is. Indeed, Aston has a false name since the period of the war, which is “Bernard Jenkins”. This false name allows him to possess an insurance card. Nevertheless, adverse weather conditions or a lack of suitable footwear consistently thwart his attempts to recover his papers. Davies recounts the anecdote of his visit to a monastery, where he went looking for a pair of shoes and food. The monk’s refusal to provide Davies with shoes and his cruel act of feeding Davies a small bird highlights the institution’s failure to fulfil its purported role as a provider of spiritual guidance and material support. This episode can be interpreted as a bitter critique of religion’s tendency to offer false promises and illusory comforts, rather than satisfying the fundamental needs of the marginalized and the suffering. The monastery, in this context, becomes a microcosm of a society that is both spiritually and morally corrupted. On the other hand, Aston always insists on the will to build a shed outside the house; nevertheless, this

⁸² Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays Two*, London, Faber and Faber, 1991, p. 7.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

project will never be accomplished since he is unable to work. Aston asserts that Davies makes noises when sleeping in the night, but he denies this by claiming that he does not dream and never did, instead he blames their neighbours, the Black people: “Maybe it were them Blacks making noises, coming up through the walls”⁸⁶. Aston decides to go out to purchase a “jig saw”, a seemingly superfluous item, which could contribute to the growing clutter within the room, and thus within their lives. Davies is perplexed by Aston’s decision to leave him alone in the room, and even more so by the provision of a second key. Thus, when Aston leaves, Davies begins to inspect the house until he is caught by Mick, Aston’s brother, who enters the house without warning. Mick initially assaults Davies, then he becomes polite, and he begins to denote similarities between him and his uncle and then with a guy he met in Shoreditch, then another guy he ran into in Guilford. Successively, Mick claims that he is the landlord, and that Davies is just a liar who has snuck into his house and slept in his bed. His attitude is ambivalent: sometimes aggressive, sometimes cosy. When Aston returns, a drip sounds in the bucket. Aston has brought a bag to Davies, but Mick rips it from his hands and says that he knows that bag. Mick, Davies and Aston fight for this bag until Davies take it and realizes that’s not his bag. Inside he finds a shirt with stripes and a smoking jacket. Aston proposes to Davies to be the caretaker of his house, but his acceptance is filled with anxiety:

DAVIES. Well, I mean, I don’t know who might come up them front steps, do you? I got to be a bit careful.

ASTON. Why, someone after you?

DAVIES. After me? Well, I could have that Scotch git coming looking after me, couldn’t I? All I’d do, I’d hear the bell, I’d go down there, open the door, who might be there, any Harry might be there. I could be bugged as easy as that, man. They might be there after my card, I mean look at it, here I am, I only got four stamps, on this card, here it is look, four stamps, that’s all I got, I ain’t got any more, that’s all I got, they ring the bell called The Caretaker, they’d have me in, that’s what they’d do, I wouldn’t stand a chance. Of course I got plenty of other cards lying about, but they don’t know that, and I can’t tell them, can I, because then they’d find out I was going about under an assumed name. My real name’s not the one I’m using, you see. It’s different. You see, the name I go under now ain’t my real one. It’s assumed.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays Two*, cit., p.21.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.41-42.

Thus, Davies lives under a false identity and is afraid of being discovered by someone. His fear adds a layer of suspense to the play, as the audience is left wondering about his past and the reasons for his secrecy. Successively, Mick interrupts the scene by turning off the lights and vacuuming the room. The sudden noise causes Davies to react defensively, brandishing a knife. This incident marks a turning point in Mick's treatment of Davies, as he adopts a more polite tone with him. In a moment of vulnerability, Mick reveals his brother's aversion to work and suggests that Davies might be suitable for the position of caretaker, alluding to his earlier defensive action with his knife. Recognizing Mick as superior to his brother, Davies starts speaking ill of Aston with him. Aston, a fragile and solitary man scarred by psychiatric treatment, offers a monologue about his experience with electroshock therapy, which is among the most emotionally engaging and shocking writing of the British playwright. Aston tells that, when he was a minor, he was victim of heavy psychiatric treatments and electroshock, only because "he talked too much". The emotion and pain of a boy who will always carry those atrocious moments with him are delivered to the viewer with mastery. This character highlights the damaging effects of psychiatric practices, a theme that would become increasingly relevant in the 1970s anti-psychiatry movement. While in *The Birthday Party* and in the *The Hothouse* allusions are made to treatments in psychiatric clinics, in this play the situations faced by people subjected to these treatments are described in detail with cynical and raw realism. In act Three, Davies feels he has found a friend in Mick, who is actually testing him. Mick expresses his desire to change their home, which must have furniture of very particular and luxurious tastes, but this house does not have space for Davies. Actually, the latter is just a deluded character who wants to take advantage of the weakness of Aston, who still suffers the effects of electroshock therapy, to throw him out and take his place in his house. At the end of the play, also Mick, who was "Davies' friend", will decide that he is only an impostor and, in agreement with his

brother, they decide to evict him from their home. The play ends with Davies following reaction:

But... but... look... listen... listen here...

I mean....

ASTON turns back to the window

What am I going to do?

Pause.

What shall I do?

Pause.

Where am I going to go?

Pause.

If you want me to go... I'll go. You just say the word.

Pause.

I'll tell you what though... them shoes... them shoes you give me... they're working out all right... they're all right. Maybe I could... get down...

ASTON remains still, his back to him, at the window.

Listen... if I ... got down... if I was to... get my papers... would you... would you let... would you... if I got down... and got my...

Long silence.

*Curtain.*⁸⁸

Davies finds himself abandoned to the cruelty of the world and condemned to a life of solitude and despair; he tries to tell the brothers to let him stay but he understands that he will no longer have their support and will remain alone for the rest of his life. Mick, the younger brother, is manipulative and cunning, while Davies, the elderly tramp, is revealed to be deceitful and cruel. Through the characters' interactions and the claustrophobic setting, Pinter delves into themes of power, isolation, and the human condition. The play's exploration of human relationships has contributed to Pinter's reputation as a major figure in modern theatre. Pinter's style, characterized by open-ended narratives and ambiguous characters, is evident in *The Caretaker*. The play's conclusion about the destiny of Davies is left to the imagination of the spectator, thus avoiding a definitive resolution. Martin Esslin in *The Peopled Wound* compares the expulsion of Davies from the house to that of Adam from heaven:

⁸⁸ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays Two*, cit., pp. 75-76.

It is Mick who plays the role of the snake in this re-enactment of Adam's expulsion from paradise: by apparently accepting Davies's inane boasts, his complaints about Aston, he has deliberately provoked him into revealing the worst side of his nature.⁸⁹

Davies represents the inferiority of human beings, the unmotivated hatred of man towards the weakest, he is not sorry for the story of Aston, and instead he is racist against black people, Indians and Greeks.

Moreover, according to Esslin:

this makes Davies a highly significant and symptomatic character in an age in which an inability by large numbers of human beings to transcend such primitive emotions of racial hatred (which is merely the reverse side of their own deep feelings of inadequacy, their lack of insight and empathy into the plight of other human beings) has become one of the most dangerous threats to peace.⁹⁰

Pinter always leaves the ending open; thus, the viewer leaves the theatre with many questions. There is never a character who wins over the other, but there is always an overpowering play. In the Nobel acceptance speech, Pinter claimed:

When we look into a mirror we think the image that confronts us is accurate. But move a millimetre and the image changes. We are actually looking at a never-ending range of reflections. But sometimes a writer has to smash the mirror – for it is on the other side of that mirror that the truth stares at us.⁹¹

1.6 *The Homecoming*

In an interview Pinter stated:

Quando ho scritto *Il Ritorno a casa*, scrissi la prima pagina. Io comincio così, sempre dall'inizio. Non avevo idea di cosa sarebbe successo dopo, c'era un rapporto, un padre e un figlio, avevo una vaga idea che sarebbe arrivato qualcuno in questa casa, magari un altro figlio diverso da loro, uno scrittore, tutto qui. Sapevo che sarebbe successo qualcosa.⁹²

⁸⁹ Esslin, Martin, *The Peopled Wound*, cit., p. 105.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Art, Truth & Politics*, THE NOBEL FOUNDATION, December 7, 2005. <https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/pinter-lecture-e.pdf> Accessed on 3 Dec. 2024.

⁹² D'Amico, Masolino, "Il mestiere del drammaturgo: Intervista con Harold Pinter e *Voci di famiglia*", *I teatri alla radio*, Radio 3, 1981, <https://www.raiplaysound.it/audio/2018/12/Il-mestiere-del-drammaturgo-Intervista-con-Harold-Pinter-e-Voci-di-famiglia--b06c1477-770c-457c-9a1e-f995b9b1704e.html> Accessed on 23 Nov. 2024.

The Homecoming was first presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre on 3 June 1965. It is considered Pinter's darkest, most insidious, and threatening play. Although this play has not had much approval by critics, the talent of Pinter begins to be recognized. The story takes place in an old house in North London. The protagonists are Max, an elderly widower, his three sons Teddy, Lenny, and Joey, his brother Sam, and Teddy's wife, Ruth. Teddy is a philosophy professor who lives in America with his three sons and his wife Ruth, whom he married without informing his family. After a nine-year absence, Teddy decides to return to London to introduce Ruth to his father Max, his uncle Sam, and his brothers Joey and Lenny. Max is a former butcher, Lenny is involved in untrustworthy business dealings, Joey is working in a demolition company and dreams of becoming a boxer, and his uncle Sam is employed as a driver. This is a male-only community, where the arrival of the woman is the disruptive element. The family is not a protective nest, but a den inhabited by cruel beasts, where there is a complete absence of love. Max sometimes talks about his dead wife, Jessie, and his friend MacGregor, also now dead. The female figure of the deceased mother is kept alive in his memories, through grotesque and irreverent tales. She is remembered both as tender and unworthy. The absence of the only feminine figure has rendered those men savage individuals. Thus, the audience feels the void left by the mother and the need to fill that lack. At first, the dialogues between parent and sons are illogical and aggressive, lacking care and affection, but they seem almost normal, as if it were their usual way of communicating with each other, thus giving the audience information about their relation to one another. The deep dangers inherent in the development of human relationships in this drama are also accompanied by a typically Pinterian humour. On the other hand, Teddy, having emigrated to America, is now a philosophy professor at an American college. He represents the son who has broken away from the family unit, a cultured man who has established his own family with Ruth and their three children. Through education and culture, he has evolved, becoming the successful member of the family who has escaped from a vulgar and ignorant environment.

He has also emancipated himself as a man and has formed a seemingly healthy relationship with Ruth. Teddy and Ruth arrive home at night, when everybody is sleeping. Teddy expresses excitement for his return home, recognizing that nothing has changed, while Ruth is reluctant, seeking an excuse to leave: “I think... the children... might be missing us.”⁹³ Thus, she goes out for a breath of air, taking the key to the house with her. William J. Free, in his article *Treatment of Character in Harold Pinter’s The Homecoming*, asserts: “Ruth is the central character in the play. It is she, in reality, who is returning home.”⁹⁴ When Ruth comes back home, she finds Lenny awoken. The first encounter of Ruth with Lenny is absurd and strange. After he has ascertained that she is his brother’s wife, the two start a conversation; Lenny recounts an anecdote about his encounter with a woman who made him certain proposals and that perhaps he wanted to kill her, and with an old lady who asked him help with her iron mangle and that he insulted for not helping him in this operation. We don’t know if these anecdotes are true or lies, but they still have hidden messages that Lenny wants to send Ruth, provoking a reaction from her. William J. Free explains this behaviour as follows:

We sense [the characters’] destructive hostility toward one another but never understand the motives for their actions and words. The dialogue is a game the characters play to avoid admitting their motivation to each other or to the audience.⁹⁵

Lenny concludes his monologue breaking the atmosphere by asking: “Excuse me, shall I take this ashtray out of your way?”, while Ruth’s answer is: “It’s not in my way.”⁹⁶ Thus, a verbal battle starts between the two. Finally, Ruth threatens Lenny by referring to the glass of water he has intended to take: “If you take the glass... I’ll take you.”⁹⁷ This shift is a prefiguration of her coming to power at the end of the play. She manipulates and tricks him, commanding:

Have a sip. Go on. Have a sip from my glass.
He is still

⁹³ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays Three*, London, Faber and Faber, 1991, p. 30.

⁹⁴ Free, William J., “Treatment of Character in Harold Pinter’s *The Homecoming*”, *South Atlantic Bulletin*, 34, no. 4, 1969, p. 2.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays Three*, cit., p.41.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

Sit on my lap. Take a long cool sip.
She pats her lap. Pause.
She stands, moves to him with the glass.
Put your head back and open your mouth.⁹⁸

This verbal battle concludes with her winning when she drains the glass and merely says: “Oh, I was thirsty.”⁹⁹ The woman is a surprising and destabilizing character, she begins her perverse “play” through her sensuality, which, in the second act, drags the viewer into a grotesque and absurd drama. Nevertheless, when Teddy’s family wakes up, the couple is not welcomed warmly as expected. The men of the house are irreverent and cruel. They behave like real predators towards Ruth. In Teddy’s family there is no sign of affection at his arrival, even if he has been away for about 6 years. The men of the house do not hesitate to circumvent their sister-in-law, who will play the game perfectly with a natural coldness. At the beginning of the play, in fact, it seems that Ruth is the victim of old Max and her brother-in-law’s aggressiveness, in fact she is silent, passively listening to the men of the house. Ruth’s presence as the only woman in a house of orcs and selfish characters provokes a misogynistic reaction at the beginning. Indeed, Max, without even knowing her, immediately judges her as a whore:

MAX. I’ve never had a whore under this roof before. Ever since your mother died. My word of honour. *(to JOEY)* Have you ever had a whore here? Has Lenny ever had a whore here? They come back from America, they bring the slopbucket with them. They bring the bedpan with them. *(to TEDDY)* Take that disease away from me. Get her away from me.¹⁰⁰

If in the first act we laugh at a bitter humour with absurd moments, the second act leads us to an unexpected evolution, in which Ruth claims:

RUTH. You’ve forgotten something. Look at me. I... move my leg. That’s all it is. But I wear... underwear... which moves with me... it ... captures your attention. Perhaps you misinterpret. The action is simple. It’s just a leg... moving. My lips move. Why don’t you restrict ... your observations to that? Perhaps the fact that they move is more significant ... than the words which come through them. You must bear that... possibility... in mind.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 60-61.

William J. Free asserts:

Throughout the play, what we vaguely sense to be happening beneath the words is dislocated from what overtly happens on the surface. The underwear is more aggressive than the leg, but it is hidden from sight. Our attention is drawn back and forth between surface actions the meaning of which is never explained and a sub-text which is suggested but never communicated.¹⁰²

Ruth starts behaving in an unexpected way becoming the executioner of the plans that her husband's family have for her with a cold and ruthless determination. During the visit, Ruth will make sexual offers to Lenny, she'll have a sexual intercourse with Joey, and by the end of the drama the woman will decide to stay in London to satisfy the sexual desires of her husband's family and perhaps work as a prostitute to support the family financially. The request to stay in that house seems absurd but Ruth will respond positively by advancing clear conditions. She will be a sort of queen bee that devours her subjects. As William J. Free claims "She redefines the family relationships and establishes a new order with herself at the centre."¹⁰³ Pinter justifies the attitudes of his strange and bizarre characters as follows:

Io non sono un manipolatore di personaggi, osservo, li lascio svilupparsi come vogliono, lascio che tutto succeda naturalmente, non sono un autore che interferisce. Una volta che il personaggio si è presentato lascio che vada dove vuole, che faccio quello che gli pare. Lo osservo.¹⁰⁴

Ruth seems to be able to fill the void left by the missing female figure: the wife/mother embodies the woman in an ancestral sense. She embodies femininity: once a reassuring mother, once a confidant friend, daughter and prostitute, all in herself. Ruth, in a grotesque hymn to her feminine freedom, decides to abandon her children overseas and create a new "family", where she will dictate her conditions of prostitute and free woman who will dominate those human beings reduced to beasts. Yet the author leaves us with multiple interpretive possibilities.

¹⁰² Free, William J., "Treatment of Character in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*", cit., p. 2.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ D'Amico, Masolino, "Il mestiere del drammaturgo: Intervista con Harold Pinter e 'Voci di famiglia'", cit.

In *Conversazioni con Pinter*, the author claimed: “Anche a Ruth, in *Ritorno a casa*, nessuno può dire quello che deve fare. È la figura di donna più libera che io abbia mai descritto: uno spirito libero, indipendente.”¹⁰⁵ She is a free woman, sensual and cold at the same time. Pinter portrays the immorality, cynicism, the son’s derision of the elderly Max and the betrayal of Teddy’s wife under the gaze of her annihilated husband, who is unable to react. She will have to prostitute herself, but this does not seem to be an alien behaviour, even for her husband. In this whole scenario, Teddy does not seem to be able to resist and does not know how to assert his role. He is unable even to protect his three children, who remain alone in the US, thus, they are deprived of their mother. He is also unable to understand why Ruth doesn’t seem to care about them. The room transforms into a jungle, with the vulgarity of Joey, who dreams of becoming a boxer, and the unscrupulousness of Lenny clashing against the cultured Teddy. In this play culture is contrasted to ignorance and oppression. The elder brother, the most “successful”, becomes a symbol of defeat, of annihilation. But the drama lies not only in his inability to act but also in the last emblematic phrase his wife says to him: “Don’t become a stranger.”¹⁰⁶ In this chorus devoid of sentiment, Harold Pinter makes us witness not only the defeat of the family nucleus, which is the first social nucleus, but also a continuous struggle between woman and man. Here, the only female character transforms from the threatened into the threatener. Many critics and directors have defined *The Homecoming* as a dark work, and many stage it almost with courage; in fact, it is one of the most difficult to represent. Indeed, when asked about the meaning of *The Homecoming*, Pinter replied:

It’s about love and lack of love... There’s no question that the family does behave very calculatingly and pretty horribly to each other and to the returning son. But they do it out of the texture of their lives and for other reasons which are not evil but slightly desperate.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Gussow, Mel, *Conversazioni con Pinter*, cit., p. 61.

¹⁰⁶ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays Three*, cit., p. 88.

¹⁰⁷ Hewes, Henry, “Probing Pinter’s Play”, *Saturday Review*, 56, 8 April 1967, quoted in Austin Quigley, “Pinter, politics and postmodernism”, cit., p.17.

1.7 Overtly political plays: *Party Time*

From the early 1980s onwards, Pinter's work increasingly foregrounded the suppression of freedom of expression. This shift towards a more overtly political theatre is evident in plays such as *One for the Road*, first performed in 1984, *Mountain Language*, first performed in 1988, and *Party Time*, first performed in 1991, which are the product of a trip Pinter made in Turkey with Arthur Miller "to investigate allegations of the torture and persecution of Turkish writers".¹⁰⁸ During a dinner party at the US Embassy in Ankara, held in honour of Miller, the latter was invited to give a speech in which he courageously declared: "In Turkey, hundreds of people are in prison for their thoughts. This persecution is supported and subsidised by the United States. Where does that leave our understanding of democratic values?"¹⁰⁹ Pinter recounts this event with great pride, highlighting the shared experience of being thrown out of the embassy together with Miller. In a tribute to Arthur Miller on the occasion of his 80th birthday, Pinter stated: "Being thrown out of the US embassy in Ankara with Arthur Miller - a voluntary exile - was one of the proudest moments in my life."¹¹⁰ Thus, Pinter's later plays exhibit a shift towards a more concise and focused style, making the political themes more readily apparent to the reader. In this regard, Martin Esslin wrote:

Whereas all his previous work was enigmatic, multilayered, relying on pauses, silences, and a subtext of far greater importance than what was actually being said, these later pieces operate unambiguously on the surface, even relying on voice-overs to make characters' thoughts crystal clear and proclaiming a message of blinding simplicity, a message which is a call to political action.¹¹¹

In these plays Pinter does neither explicitly refer to the politics of a specific country nor criticize the government of a particular nation. Instead, his works possess a universal quality by depicting the superficiality and malice inherent in human

¹⁰⁸ http://www.haroldpinter.org/politics/politics_torture.shtml Accessed on 02 Dec. 2024.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Esslin, Martin, "Harold Pinter's Theatre of Cruelty", in Burkman and Kundert-Gibbs, *Pinter at Sixty*, Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 257.

nature, qualities that transcend national boundaries and political systems. Indeed, Austin Quigley, in his article *Pinter, politics and postmodernism*, claimed:

The source of appeal against the behaviour of brutal government agents in plays like *One for the Road*, *Mountain Language* and *Party Time* is not to one ideology or another, to one brand of political conviction or another, but to the local relationships that individuals contract with each other, particularly in small social and family contexts, and to the rights and responsibilities thereby invoked.¹¹²

Party Time was first performed by the Almeida Theatre Company on 31 October 1991 at the Almeida Theatre, London, directed by Harold Pinter.

In 2005, in an interview, Pinter told the following story:

Una sera mi trovavo ad una festa. Mi avvicino a due signore turche che stavano chiacchierando tra loro:

– Cose ne dite delle torture che avvengono tutti i giorni nel vostro paese?

– Torture? Quali torture?

– Ma come? Non sapete che ogni giorno vengono torturati decine e decine di uomini nel vostro paese?

– Ma no vi sbagliate, solo i comunisti vengono torturati.

Invece di strangolare le due signore lì per lì me ne tornai a casa e cominciai a scrivere *Party Time!*¹¹³

The tortures that concerned Turkey led Pinter to write *Party Time* but he does not make explicit references to the position of the Turkish government at the time. Instead, *Party Time* is a universal play concerned not only with human rights abuses but, more generally, the management of political power by the ruling classes, who are only interested in maintaining their privileges at the expense of the weaker classes. The play is set in Gavin's flat where a party is going on with spasmodic music. The guests, members of the English bourgeoisie, engage in amiable conversation about exclusive clubs, vacations on desert islands and expensive restaurants. The topics discussed are of a disconcerting banality, yet they are presented with an excess of details regarding luxury life and wellness, while chaos reigns outside their apartment. In the first scene, Terry is talking with Gavin about the advantages of being a member of the new club, while they are

¹¹² Quigley, Austin, "Pinter, politics and postmodernism", *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, cit., p.17.

¹¹³ Serra, Alessandra, "Nota del curatore", *Harold Pinter Teatro I*, Einaudi, 2005, p. XI.

interrupted by Dusty, who, throughout the play, asks about her brother Jimmy. Every time Dusty asks about her brother, Terry gets angry and drifts the speech without ever giving her an answer.

DUSTY. Does anyone know what's happened to my brother Jimmy?

TERRY. I don't know what it is. Perhaps she's deaf or perhaps my voice isn't strong enough. What do you think, folks? Perhaps there's something faulty with my diction. I'm forced to float all these possibilities because I thought I had said that we don't discuss this question of what has happened to Jimmy, that it's not up for discussion, that it's not on anyone's agenda. I thought I had already made that point quite clearly. But perhaps my voice isn't strong enough or perhaps my articulation isn't good enough or perhaps she's deaf.¹¹⁴

Mary Luckhurst, in her article *Speaking out: Harold Pinter and Freedom of expression*, claimed:

Dusty refuses to pretend that her brother never existed and to accept the political rhetoric that the country will be run 'on normal, secure and legitimate paths'. Her defiance, her conscience and her sense of moral responsibility make her, in Pinter's terms, the ideal citizen.¹¹⁵

Meanwhile, between one glass and the other, the reality of the outside world is in turmoil. A raid is taking place in the street, which the party guests observe distantly. Indeed, no one seems particularly concerned, nor does anyone care that the city outside looks strangely empty and dark.

MELISSA. What on earth's going on out there? It's like Black Death.

TERRY. What is?

MELISSA. The town's dead. There's nobody on the streets, there's not a soul in sight, apart from some... soldiers. My driver had to stop at a... you know... what do you call it?... a roadblock. We had to say who we were... it really was a trifle...

GAVIN. Oh, there's just been a little... you know...

TERRY. Nothing in it. Can I introduce you? Gavin White - our host. Dame Melissa.¹¹⁶

Pinter portrays the hypocrisy of the upper class who does not care what's going on outside their luxurious apartment, because they're fine where they are. Drew Milne, referring to Pinter's last political plays, claims:

These plays seem designed to make admirers of Pinter's work uncomfortable by confronting audiences and readers with the politics of complacency and cynicism that coexist with the global realities of torture and oppression. Scenes of explicit violence in

¹¹⁴ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays Four*, London, Faber and Faber, 1993, p. 296.

¹¹⁵ Luckhurst, Mary, "Speaking out: Harold Pinter and freedom of expression", *cit.*, p. 116.

¹¹⁶ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays Four*, *cit.*, p. 286.

these plays seem designed, moreover, to show how the political abuse of power is not abstract or metaphorical but part of the micro-politics of everyday life.¹¹⁷

Moreover, the characters apparently seem liberal in costumes, while actually they are repressive towards freedom of expression. Indeed, Terry tells Dusty to shut up, perhaps because she is the only one at the party asking questions, and the only one who understands what is happening outside their apartment:

TERRY. You don't have to believe anything. You just have to shut up and mind your own business, how many times do I have to tell you? You come to a lovely party like this, all you have to do is shut up and enjoy the hospitality and mind your own fucking business. How many more times do I have to tell you? You keep hearing all these things. You keep hearing all these things spread by pricks about pricks. What's it got to do with you?¹¹⁸

Sitting on a sofa, Liz tells Charlotte that she's seen the man she is in love with another guest, a "nymphomaniac slut" she wants to kill.

In this regard, Drew Milne claims:

in *Party Time* [...] misogyny is also projected through two female characters who engage in obscene character assassinations of a 'nymphomaniac slut' also described as 'bigtitted tart'. The dominant currency of violence in these plays is misogynist abuse and connections between rape, prostitution and female submission.¹¹⁹

On the other hand, Fred and Douglas profess to be able to save the world but demonstrate a distorted view of peace and politics.

DOUGLAS. We want peace and we're going to get it. But we want that peace to be cast iron. No leaks. No draughts. Cast iron. Tight as a drum. That's the kind of peace we want and that's the kind of peace we're going to get. A cast-iron peace.¹²⁰

Melissa explains to Terry and Gavin how she spends her life moving from one exclusive club to another, revealing that the friends she met in these clubs have died. In a dialogue with her husband, Dusty has condemned herself to a tragic future:

DUSTY. Perhaps you'll kill me when we get home? Do you think you will? Do you think you'll put an end to it? What do you think? Do you think that if you put an end to me that would be the end of everything for everyone? Will everything and everyone die with me?

¹¹⁷ Milne, Drew, "Pinter's sexual politics", *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 238.

¹¹⁸ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays Four*, cit., pp. 287-288.

¹¹⁹ Milne, Drew, *cit.*, p. 239.

¹²⁰ Pinter, Harold, *cit.*, p. 293.

TERRY. Yes, you're all going to die together, you and all your lot.¹²¹

Fred discovers that Charlotte's husband has died, and comments on the news with a cordial detachment; Terry, annoyed by Dusty's insistence, threatens to harm her in cruel ways if she continues to ask about Jimmy; Charlotte tries to seduce Douglas, who turns out to be Liz's husband. The characters are superficial and unhappy, not only in their conversations but also in their romantic relationships. However, Douglas stays with his wife, not for love but for convenience, because when he comes back from his travelling he would find "the flat immaculate, the twins bathed and in bed, tucked up in bed, fast asleep, [his] wife looking beautiful and [his] dinner in the oven. [...] And that's why [they]'re still together."¹²² The theme of the objectification of women is here masterfully delivered by Pinter. Finally, it is revealed that the raid in the street, which has become increasingly violent, was requested by some guests so that the party would not be disturbed by members of the lower social classes living around the apartment. Everyone agrees that the party was a success, and they say their goodbyes happily. At that point, a young man thinly dressed, in contrast to the elegance of the guests, appears. Jimmy, Dusty's brother, pronounces a claustrophobic monologue from which it becomes clear that he was killed during the raid.

JIMMY. Sometimes I hear things. Then it's quiet.

I had a name. It was Jimmy. People called me Jimmy. That was my name.

Sometimes I hear things. Then everything is quiet. When everything is quiet I hear my heart. When the terrible noises come I don't hear anything. Don't hear don't breathe am blind.

Then everything is quiet. I hear a heartbeat. It is probably not my heartbeat. It is probably someone else's heartbeat.

What am I?

Sometimes a door bangs, I hear voices, then it stops. Everything stops. It all stops. It all closes. It closes down. It shuts. It all shuts. It shuts down. It shuts. I see nothing at any time any more. I sit sucking the dark.

¹²¹ Pinter, Harold, *cit.*, pp. 301-302.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 309.

It's what I have. The dark is in my mouth and I suck it. It's the only thing I have. It's mine. It's my own. I suck it.¹²³

Mary Luckhurst explains this monologue as following:

Jimmy's unearthly appearance at the close of the party is the final exposure of this sickeningly sadistic regime. His monologue seems to come from a parallel universe of the tortured and dispossessed. Alienated from himself, unable to connect with a past self or even his name, all his senses have shut down and he does nothing more than exist from moment to moment in a world that condemns him to a living death: 'The dark is in my mouth and I suck it. It is all I have.' 'What am I?' he asks, indicating his complete depersonalisation.¹²⁴

¹²³ Ibid., pp. 313-314.

¹²⁴ Luckhurst, Mary, "Speaking out: Harold Pinter and freedom of expression", *cit.*, p.116.

Chapter II

The theatre of Rosario Palazzolo

“La realtà, pi mia, è una cosa troppo incuarbugliata
ca può essere sottasopra e sottasopra...
E come la giriati la giriati,
è comunque una cosa.
Ca magari a voialtri vi pare ‘l’unica cosa’,
e invece è solo ‘n’avotra cosa”¹²⁵
Rosario Palazzolo

Rosario Palazzolo is a renowned Sicilian playwright, actor, and stage director, who first encountered the theatre of the British playwright Harold Pinter during his university years.

Quando frequentavo la facoltà di lettere a Palermo, storia del teatro era insegnata da Beno Mazzone, direttore artistico del Teatro Libero, che per gli esami richiedeva ai ragazzi di presentare due relazioni su degli spettacoli visti durante il periodo delle lezioni. Nonostante la scelta fosse libera, tutti andavamo a vedere gli spettacoli al Teatro Libero. Vidi allora uno spettacolo di Harold Pinter, *Party Time*, che mi sconvolse e mi diede tutta una serie di elementi di riflessione. *Party Time* è un testo che non sembra per nulla, e in effetti non lo è, un testo classico, eppure poi converge in un’unica storia che parla di disastri umani. Il personaggio che più mi ha affascinato è Jimmy, il personaggio che entra per ultimo, perché si discosta da quelle umanità, le contesta, ma chi le contesta in realtà non esiste già più. Nel tempo Pinter diventò uno degli autori che preferivo e a partire dal quale mi sono avvicinato al surrealismo, al post-surrealismo e alle correnti tardo-novecentesche.¹²⁶

In an interview, regarding *Party Time*, Pinter stated:

vi racconto un episodio. A Città del Messico sei mesi fa hanno allestito *Party Time*. Ho incontrato il regista, che è un tipo in gamba, e anche il traduttore, Carlos Fuentes. Tutti e due mi hanno detto che durante le prove gli attori si sono messi a piangere. Dicevano che quello era il Messico. *Party Time* è così: si applica a molte situazioni.¹²⁷

Pinter’s plays do not speak to a single country, instead they speak to a worldwide audience. *Party Time*, for instance, is a demonstration that the degradation depicted in the play is not related to any particular country, instead it is a shared condition that unites individuals from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, a plight shared by

¹²⁵ Palazzolo, Rosario, “Letizia Forever”, *Iddi-Trittico dell’ironia e della disperazione*, Editoria & Spettacolo, Spoleto, 2016, pp. 136-137.

¹²⁶ Interview with Rosario Palazzolo on 15 Oct. 2024.

¹²⁷ Canziani, Roberto, and Gianfranco Capitta, *Harold Pinter: Scena e potere*, Milano, Garzanti Libri, 2005, p. 187.

human beings, from Mexico all the way to Sicily. In 1980 Pinter received *Premio Pirandello* in Palermo and he was surprised as he felt that his plays were “at the other end of the telescope” from those of Pirandello himself.¹²⁸ However, in this extract from the interview conducted by Masolino d'Amico, Pinter talks about his relationship with Italy, and particularly with the playwright Luigi Pirandello:

Interviewer: Che cosa pensa di Pirandello? Ha mai sentito una forma di affinità con lui?

Pinter: Lo ammiro, però veramente quando cominciai a scrivere per il teatro non lo avevo letto molto, non avevo letto molto teatro in genere, leggevo quasi solo poesie. Comunque ammiro Pirandello, lo trovo notevole, non ho molto da dire su di lui.

Interviewer: Però qualcosa in comune fra di voi si può trovare. Pirandello è l'autore dell'ambiguità, della verità che non si sa mai dov'è, che viene sempre ribaltata. Un po' anche lei, non trova? Nel senso che i suoi personaggi non si rivelano mai completamente, noi non sappiamo mai bene chi sono i personaggi.

Pinter: Il mio messaggio non è la verità. Sì, lascio che i miei personaggi si contraddicano, non è quello che la gente fa nella vita tutto il tempo? Ma c'è sempre una certa logica, non succede mai niente di capriccioso, se non fosse ne *Il compleanno*, e quello l'ho scritto molto tempo fa.¹²⁹

Pinter had not drawn from Italian culture to write his plays, nevertheless, he has remained a significant touchstone for many Italian playwrights. Pinter was a master in creating dramatic tension through suspense, pauses, and silences. These elements have inspired numerous Italian authors to experiment with new forms of theatrical communication. Moreover, his ability to explore the subtle mechanics of power and control has made his plays particularly relevant to a social and political context like Italy. Pinter's universal themes, such as alienation, the search for identity, and the dynamics of power, resonate deeply with Italian audiences and have encouraged many playwrights to reflect on the human condition. If Pinter were alive today, he would probably be surprised to learn that his plays have not only traversed geographical boundaries, reaching Sicily, but also, they continue to

¹²⁸ *The Independent*, 26 November 1993, p. 14, cited in Ronald Knowles, “Pinter and twentieth-century drama”, *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 75.

¹²⁹ D'Amico, Masolino, “Il mestiere del drammaturgo: Intervista con Harold Pinter e *Voci di famiglia*”, cit.

be read and appreciated, maintaining the same relevance and influence on contemporary playwrights, such as Rosario Palazzolo. Indeed, the British author is for Palazzolo a source of inspiration, especially for his early plays, which share Pinter's poetics, style, and concern for the reality surrounding him.

Gli stilemi del mio teatro iniziale erano legati più al contesto di autori particolari come Beckett, e lo stesso Pinter. Inizialmente, le mie opere propendevano verso la ricerca della realtà nell'assurdo, proprio come faceva il teatro dell'assurdo che metteva i personaggi in una situazione assurda, a partire dalla quale si riscontrano alcuni parametri che avevano a che fare con la realtà. Successivamente invece ho tentato di ricercare l'assurdo nella realtà, inserendo quindi elementi di assurdo, cose che non sono realizzabili, in una situazione realistica. *Letizia Forever* è uno spettacolo di ponte fra una ricerca della realtà nell'assurdo e una ricerca dell'assurdo nella realtà.¹³⁰

Palazzolo's plays have always had a distinctive mark; however, in his early plays the influence of Pinter's poetics is more evident. Nevertheless, he has developed a unique poetic vision, which stages marginalized characters who speak with an authentic language that, through a subtle but witty irony, makes us reflect about the world around us. These characters are immersed in a realistic setting that is imbued with elements of the absurd.

2.1 A Sicilian playwright's life

Rosario Palazzolo was born on June 5, 1972, in Palermo, and grew up in a popular neighbourhood, characterized by the historical markets, where popular folklore seems to live in the language of the characters of the author's narrative and theatrical works. Palazzolo experienced a happy childhood within a serene and loving family, but his unconventional behaviour, which set him apart from his peers, marked him from a young age as an extraordinary individual. An anecdote related to his childhood is experienced by Ernesto Scossa, the protagonist of *La vita Schifa*, a novel written by Palazzolo in 2020:

[...] mia nonna c'aveva questo cavalluccio a dondolo colorato che noi nipoti non ci dovevamo salire perché era stato di mio padre e la nonna ci era affezionata e se lo teneva nella camera da pranzo, che era una camera piena di segreti per noi piccoli, una camera come se c'era scritto vietato entrare sulla porta della camera, e io invece ci entravo, di

¹³⁰ Interview with Rosario Palazzolo on 15 Oct. 2024.

nascosto, ogni domenica, e c’aveva una faccia proprio antipatica, ‘sto cavallo, spiccicata a mia nonna [...] durante il pranzo, io, m’infilavo la cotoletta in bocca e la masticavo per bene e me la lasciavo lì, di lato, dentro le guance, e appena finivo mi alzavo finta che andavo in bagno e invece entravo nella stanza segreta e c’avevo fatto un buchino dove c’era la bocca, al cavallo, e piano piano ci ficcavo la carne, ogni domenica una cotoletta, e “Questo cavallo puzza di morte” disse un giorno mia nonna a mio padre, e mio padre girò il cavallo e lo alzò e vide il buco e insomma si scoprì che il cavallo finto era tutto un ripieno di carne vera, e subito vennero a pigliare me, e del resto “è una schifezza da scemi”, gridava mia nonna, e in quella casa l’unico scemo ero io.¹³¹

Palazzolo’s peculiar behaviour was interpreted by his relatives as a consequence of the difficult birth he experienced, thus he was submitted to specific neurological examinations which, fortunately, revealed no abnormalities. The consciousness of possessing something unusual would become apparent in his narratives. During his childhood, Palazzolo attended the ecclesiastical environment, initially serving as an altar boy, later as a catechist, and ultimately becoming the regional youth director for the Augustinian order. This community would afford him the opportunity to travel and gain experiences, but he would soon distance himself from it. Some of the playwright’s works depict this experience, and they are populated by slimy, depraved, or manipulative priests, characters who cultivate a bigoted faith.

TRENTAQUATTRO. Ti cuntù chista: io, un giorno, a mia madre, c’ammazzavo tutti i santi, c’ammazzavo a maliparole, dopo mi ricordo ca idda svinni, prima io ci rissi:

Santommaso è accussì,

E idda buttò voci,

Sangiuseppe è accussì,

e idda buttò voci,

Padrepio è accussì...

E qua, idda, scuppò lunga lunga n’terra.

¹³¹ Palazzolo, Rosario, *La vita schifa*, Spoleto, Arkadia, 2020, pp. 48-49.

*Silenzio.*¹³²

Within the context of the oratory, at the age of 15, Palazzolo participated in an amateur theatrical production directed by the actor Roberto Spicuzza, brother of Pippo Spicuzza, who was an important figure in the Palermo theatre scene that, together with Franco Scaldati, Umberto Cantone and Pietro Carriglio, contributed to promote the Teatro Biondo as a stable theatre of the city of Palermo, where today Palazzolo is teaching stage direction. In 1991, he did military service, mandatory at the time.

Quando ho fatto il servizio militare la mia mansione era quella di cuoco. In generale da giovane ho fatto il cuoco fino a 24 anni, e sicuramente questa esperienza mi ha dato la possibilità di sperimentare sui concetti di ingrediente ed equilibrio: due parole che hanno a che fare sia con la cucina che con la scrittura. Saper maneggiare gli ingredienti, saper scegliere con cura, non buttare nulla ma recuperarlo, e fare in modo che tutto stia in equilibrio, sono degli insegnamenti che ho portato all'interno della scrittura.¹³³

After a gap year, in 1993, he enrolled in the faculty of Arts at the University of Palermo. However, a dispute with his Latin professor and bureaucratic issues with the university led him to move to Florence. Nevertheless, the same year he came back to Palermo, where he eventually completed his university studies in 2003 at the faculty of Philosophy, graduating with a thesis in the history of drama titled *Eduardo: dalla Commedia dell'arte all'arte della commedia*. Although Palazzolo's poetic style differs from that of Eduardo de Filippo, Palazzolo deeply admires him and shares with him a sharp, cutting humour that is characteristic of his works. In 1995, the author attended a two-year film directing course conducted by the teachers of the Teatro Biondo, through which he discovered and fell in love with the directorial practice. In 2001, he attended a playwriting course with the Sicilian playwright Beatrice Mornoy, while in 2003, he deepened his work on writing with Luigi Bernardi, editor, writer, essayist, screenwriter from Bologna, who has been fundamental for the author's formation.

¹³² Palazzolo, Rosario, "Ouminicch", *Iddi-Trittico dell'ironia e della disperazione*, Spoleto, Editoria & Spettacolo, 2016, p. 55.

¹³³ Interview with Rosario Palazzolo on 18 Dec. 2024.

Luigi Bernardi è purtroppo mancato nel 2013. Lui era un autore di narrativa, ma anche un prodigioso talent scout. Ha scoperto una serie di autori e scrittori per la narrativa, che oggi sono molto riconosciuti. Io lo conobbi in occasione di un laboratorio di scrittura che feci con lui, nel quale mi aprì il cervello, proprio come se fosse una chiave. Mi ha educato a uno sguardo intelligente sulle cose e ha fatto in modo che io scovassi la mia lateralità, cioè cos'è che dovevo guardare e dov'è che volevo guardare. Non è stato un maestro sulla pratica, ma è stato un maestro di immaginazione. Mi ha consentito di indagare e scoprire quelle che fossero le mie caratteristiche immaginative, lo sguardo che davo alle cose, come lo davo, e su cosa dovevo ancora insistere per capire meglio il tipo di poetica che volevo esplorare.¹³⁴

Indeed, in 2007, Bernardi founded the publishing imprint *Perdisa Pop*, where he published authors destined for success, including Rosario Palazzolo. Before being a mentor for Palazzolo, Bernardi was a dear friend to him, in fact, Palazzolo was near to Bernardi during the years of illness, moving for short periods to Bologna.

2.2 The discovery of writing

The discovery of writing coincided also with the need for the *Compagnia del Tratto*, founded by Palazzolo together with Roberto Spicuzza and the actor Anton Giulio Pandolfo in 2002, to find texts to work on. Initially, the company focused on children's theatre, thus, Palazzolo's first theatrical works were revisitations of existing works for children. The children's matinees allowed the company to self-finance the experimental work, which helped Palazzolo to elaborate his poetics, which is reflected in his novels and plays. Palazzolo's first published narrative, curated by Bernardi in 2003, is *È tutto chiaro*, included in the collection *Altre scomparse di Patò*. His first theatrical work, *Uomor*, written in 2005, is his first step towards new dramaturgies, created by combining texts by various twentieth-century authors, such as Giorgio Gaber, Campanile, Valentine, and Walter Chiari, within the same dramatic context. *Uomor* is the show that inaugurates the company's first tour. In 2006 he wrote the play *Ciò che accadde all'improvviso*. In the same year, *Racconto a N.* won the prestigious *Lama e Trama* award. In 2007,

¹³⁴ Interview with Rosario Palazzolo on 11 Dec. 2024.

Palazzolo, in collaboration with Luigi Bernardi, wrote *I tempi stanno per cambiare*, which won the *Oltreparola* playwriting award. This period also saw the creation of the short story *L'ammazzatore*, and the play *Ouminicch'*, which won the Prize at the Lugano International Festival in 2010. In 2009, he wrote the play *'A Cirimonia*, while the following year he wrote the novel *Concetto al buio*. In 2011, he wrote the play *Manichini*, while *La Compagnia del Tratto* ceased its activity. Despite being an emerging company, it had already obtained significant national and international recognition. After this closure, Palazzolo experienced a period of discouragement, which preceded a pivotal phase in his theatrical career. This phase coincided with the founding of the *Teatrino Controverso*, a company formally established in 2012, constituted by Palazzolo and his wife Delia Calò as its core members, together with the actor Salvatore Nocera and the help director Angelo Grasso. This marked a period of significant openness to experimentation, characterized by seminal workshops conducted by Palazzolo, such as *Del Disincanto*, *Tauromachia*, *Catechesi sulla sofferenza*, *Poetica del fallimento*, *Teorema dell'otto a tre pance*, and *Tre ossi*. In 2013 he wrote the play *Letizia Forever* and the novel *Cattiveria*. In 2015, *Portobello never dies* won the Napoli Teatro Festival Award, and, in 2016, the playwright was honoured with the National Theatre Critics' Award for his dramatic work. The play *'Ouminicch* was included in 2016, alongside *Letizia Forever* and *Portobello never dies*, in the collection *Iddi-Trittico dell'ironia e della disperazione*. In 2019, the collection *Santa Samantha Vs. – Sciagura in tre mosse* contained the plays *Lo zompo*, *Mari/age*, and *La Veglia*. In 2020, he wrote the novel *La vita schifa*, which was proposed by Chiara Ciarapica for the prestigious Strega Prize with the following words:

La vita schifa di Rosario Palazzolo è quello che, a tutti gli effetti, può definirsi un romanzo vorticoso, in cui la complessità della trama, la profonda introspezione psicologica del protagonista – Ernesto Scossa, di professione “ammazzatore” – e la serrata costruzione degli eventi che si inseriscono in un’atmosfera di umoristica cupezza, si sposano alla perfezione con la tematica principale. Il fil rouge, come si intuisce fin dalle prime pagine e che regge le redini della faccenda, è il tema della colpa e la conseguente inutilità delle attenuanti, ovvero l’impossibilità di redenzione. Il protagonista, che racconta – da morto – il suo ultimo anno di vita, ripercorrendo tutte le fasi di un’esistenza altalenante, priva

di prospettive prima e poi improvvisamente rampante, riflette a tutto tondo sul suo ruolo di killer, che è come riflettere, pagina dopo pagina, sul senso della morte e sul valore della vita, propria e altrui. Ciò che contraddistingue l'andamento ritmico della storia e che ne fa un'opera altamente originale, è la lingua. Palazzolo si muove con disinvoltura tra neologismi, giochi (musicali) di parole e lunghi periodi che assomigliano a flussi di coscienza e che, proprio per questo, rimandano chiaramente alla complessità psicologica del personaggio in questione: i pensieri di Ernesto Scossa si snodano, pagina dopo pagina, di fronte ad un lettore già fortemente rapito dal tortuoso sviluppo della narrazione.¹³⁵

It is important to highlight that literary critics recognize a strong theatricality in the author's novels. In 2023, Palazzolo wrote the plays *Se son fiori moriranno* and *Ti dico una cosa segreta*, which were first staged at Teatro Biondo in Palermo, and wrote the collection *Il dittico del sabotaggio*. In 2021, the novel *Con tutto il mio cuore rimasto* was also proposed by Alberto Galla for the Strega Prize with the following review:

Con tutto il mio cuore rimasto, di Rosario Palazzolo, ci consegna la nuova prova di un autore particolare, abile e originale nell'uso della lingua. La storia è il lungo monologo di un ragazzino chiuso in una stanza buia da due donne per evitare la diffusione di un peccato inconfessabile, non suo, sia chiaro. Il monologo con un gesù (volutamente minuscolo) che raccoglie la testimonianza, il diario letto da *Concetto al buio*, vergato su un quaderno a quadretti, a tratti spassoso, amaro, diretto e crudele che ci porta a conoscere una Palermo con tutte le sue figure rese potenti da un parlato che ben definisce ogni tratto caratteriale, psicologico e soprattutto racchiude in sé l'impossibilità della verità. Potente, deflagrante, un pugno diretto alla nostra coscienza, una scrittura innovativa e comunque coinvolgente, che lo rende a tutti gli effetti un monologo teatrale di grande intensità, un libro non certo convenzionale, e per questa ragione meritevole di attenzione.¹³⁶

The latest work by Palazzolo is *Tiger dad*, written in 2024 and first staged on October 19th at Officine Solimano, Savona.

2.3 The poetics of corruption

Rosario's writing does not establish a relationship with the reader but rather he contests the shared reality they both experience. Palazzolo's dramatic work explore the depths of the human soul through his characters, who often are marginalized figures that convey their interior tragedies through an innovative language. Indeed,

¹³⁵ <https://premiostrega.it/PS/la-vita-schifa/> Accessed on 15 Dec. 2024.

¹³⁶ <https://premiostrega.it/PS/con-tutto-il-mio-cuore-rimasto/> Accessed on 15 Dec. 2024.

Palazzolo's texts employ a highly innovative idiolect that the author has meticulously created. By corrupting the language, he aims to reclaim an expressivity which is deliberately stifled by the bourgeois society's imposition of a standardized, "correct" language.

La lingua che utilizzo è un accidente che una cultura che non ho chiesto a nessuno mi ha imposto, ma la tensione che cerco di portare avanti nella mia scrittura è quella di un'universalità del pensiero [...] La ricerca di riappropriarsi del significato effettivo delle parole è il motore che fa deflagrare le mie parole che poi sono volutamente e in maniera autoritaria usurpate.¹³⁷

The language he uses in his works is not pure dialect but rather he uses the dialect's sounds as a basis to create a new language, whose aim is to convey a desire to break free from linguistic norms. Rich in neologisms, solecisms, and grammatical irregularities, Palazzolo's language is characterized by a playful manipulation of rhythm and phonetics, thus creating a work that is both ethically and aesthetically significant. Palazzolo's linguistic experimentation, characterized by his creation of a unique slang, challenges the constraints of conventional language and offers a more authentic expression of human experience.

Linguisticamente l'affare è molto complesso: si parte da un suono che in qualche maniera ricorda il sud del mondo, per creare un legame ancestrale con il territorio da cui proviene e per poi aspirare a una neoformazione linguistica dove la ritmica, i suoni, e la costruzione della sintassi sono sovversive, non si basano essenzialmente su ciò che il lettore/il pubblico riconosce nella normativa linguistica. Se lo spettacolo viene messo in scena al nord Italia, è chiaro che chi lo ascolta, per semplicità e per ignoranza, lo avvicina a un linguaggio del sud, ma anche quelli del sud lo sentono come estraneo, per cui è un fraintendimento. Non è un linguaggio che parte dal dialetto, ma è un linguaggio che parte da dei suoni che sono vicini a quelli del sud ma per poi tradirli e trasgredirli.¹³⁸

Thus, by corrupting the language, he aims to give voice to those who have been silenced.

¹³⁷ Francabandera, R., *Autorappresentazione di un drammaturgo: videointervista a Rosario Palazzolo*, in Paneacquaculture, 2018, <https://www.paneacquaculture.net/2018/05/29/autorappresentazione-di-un-drammaturgo-di-microcosmi-videointervista-a-rosario-palazzolo/>.

¹³⁸ Interview with Rosario Palazzolo on 9 Dec. 2024.

2.4 Iddi-Trittico dell'ironia e della disperazione: *Ouminicch'*

A distinctive feature of Palazzolo's dramatic work is the "diptych" and "triptych" structure, through which the narrative of a single story unfolds over different plays. Unlike the traditional play, divided into acts within a single work, Palazzolo's originality lies in connecting narratives across multiple plays, thereby tracing the evolution of a single story, as if plays were episodes of a TV series. In *Trittico dell'ironia e della disperazione*, the *file rouge* of the story is represented by *Iddi*, a Sicilian word for the third-person plural pronoun "they". *Iddi* represents an unspecified entity which never appears on stage. However, Palazzolo explains very well who *Iddi* are:

Iddi è un pronome plurale che sta a indicare l'altro da sé. Il problema è che questo altro da sé è inesistente, è piuttosto l'attenuante che ci creiamo per i nostri fallimenti. Quando noi falliamo, la colpa non è mai nostra, ma degli altri, di questi fantomatici *Iddi*, che è come se determinassero le nostre realtà, ma, a mio parere, noi stessi li abbiamo generati. *Iddi* sono dunque una nostra costruzione immaginifica.¹³⁹

Thus, *Iddi* can be, depending on the context, society, family, scientists, who think they can control the psyche of a character, and even the public. The collection *Trittico dell'ironia e della disperazione* is composed by the plays *Ouminicch'*, *Letizia Forever* and *Portobello never dies*.

The play *Ouminicch'* was written by Palazzolo in 2007 and was first staged by the same playwright on November 24, 2007, at the Teatro Nuovo Montevergini in Palermo. The two protagonists of this play are Trentaquattro, a man of thirty-four, and Trentasetti, a man of thirty-seven. The playwright calls the characters with numbers for this specific reason: "la società in cui vivono Trentasetti e Trentaquattro ha smesso di dare valore alle individualità e per tale ragione ha generato soltanto numeri. Siamo tutti numeri."¹⁴⁰ In the play *Ouminicch'*, the characters Trentaquattro and Trentasetti, interpreted by the same Palazzolo and the actor Salvatore Nocera, are confined to a room, passively participating in some

¹³⁹ Interview with Rosario Palazzolo on 9 Dec. 2024.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Palazzolo on 11 Dec. 2024.

rituals imposed upon them by *Iddi*, who never appear on stage. Nothing is known about them, except the fact that they attempt to manipulate the characters through the rituals they have to fulfil, and the orders *Iddi* issue with their telephone calls. The characters Trentasetti and Trentaquattro attempt to predict *Iddi*'s actions, reflecting on what these individuals could be doing from their secret location where they are hidden and exercise their power.

TRENTAQUATTRU. E invece non è la tua strada, ti stanno fottendo, è una strada fasana, ca fa solo un senso, Trentasè, *iddi* lo sanno ca è fasana, lo sanno, e si mettono chiusi... anzi, ti calano la testa come pi fàriti capire ca quella strada è chidda giusta... e nel frattanto si nascondono pi vidiri si tu la stai percorrendo, si per caso non ti perdi dintra a qualche traversa sconosciuta... ¹⁴¹

Trentaquattro and Trentasetti are two unlucky men who find themselves locked in this room attempting to fulfil the rituals imposed by *Iddi*, which are the *Pisatura*, the *Vistitura*, the *Signatura*, and finally the *Sparatura*, but above all they have to deal with their anxieties and fears. Through these rituals, the two must weigh the qualities of each other's souls; the one who prevails will be saved by killing the other. However, in the end, these rituals will turn out to be a farce, since there is no rule to follow:

TRENTASETTI. Non c'è niente, Trentaquà, niente, nessuna regola, non c'è stata mai! È proprio chistu il bello: io e tu parramu senza ca esiste nessuna verità, ci sono solo parole, è una *Pisatura* senza peso effettivo... c'è solo la valanza: tu spingi d'un lato, io dall'ávutro... comu ti pozzu spiegari... [...] ¹⁴²

When Trentaquattro surrenders to the game, asking Trentasetti to kill him, the choice will be impossible, demonstrating that the characters are trapped by circumstances beyond their control.

TRENTAQUATTRU. Fallo, allora. Spara. (*Dopo un attimo*) Ti dissi spara!

Silenzio.

TRENTASETTI. (*incerto*) Spara spara? O spara senza sparare?

Silenzio.

¹⁴¹ Palazzolo, Rosario, "Ouminicch'", *Iddi-Trittico dell'ironia e della disperazione*, cit., p.68.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 78-79.

TRENTAQUATTRU. Spara spara.

Silenzio. Trentasetti prende la mira, ma si ferma, ci ripensa.

TRENTASETTI. Spara p'ammazzare o spara tanto pi sparare?

Silenzio.

TRENTAQUATTRU. P'ammazzari

Silenzio.

TRENTASETTI. Sei sicuro?

TRENTAQUATTRU. Sì

Silenzio.

TRENTASETTI. Non facciamo ca poi ti lamenti se ti piglio?

Trentaquattro si volta verso Trentasetti. Uno sguardo bieco.

TRENTAQUATTRU. Cioè, tu mi pigli e io non posso manco lamintarimi?

TRENTASETTI. Per il dolore ti puoi lamentare, per il dolore sì.

Trentaquattro si volta. Trentasetti prende la mira, sta per sparare. Qualcosa lo frena.

TRENTASETTI. No, Trentaquà, io accussì non me la fido...¹⁴³

Trentaquattro is the most subversive character and the only one to understand *Iddi's* game. He tries to resist conformity to *Iddi's* imposed rules attempting to reveal their plan to Trentasetti:

TRENTAQUATTRU. (*forte, stratonandolo*) Non t'ha abbuttato ancora, Trentasè? Tutta 'sta schifiaria... 'sta pigliata p'u culu ca fanno... la Pisatura, la Vistituta, la Signatura, la Sparatura... il cacciaviti ca non serve a niente... 'stu fatto ca appattano sempre pi fare 'sta minchia di Sacramento... pi fari in modo ca non si perda l'abitudine, la consuetudini... Iddi se ne fottono, Trentasè... se ne fottono di chi entra, di chi nesci, di chi campa, di chi muore... pi iddi non fa nessuna differenza... a iddi interessa solo ca il Sacramento c'è, ca si fa, d'affirraci per le palle e strinciri, ma no forti, a leggio a leggio, e quando qualcuno non fa chiddu che dicinu iddi, è finita... come successi con Trentacincu: non fu capace di ammazzare quel picciriddo e l'hanno mandato qua, con te.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Palazzolo, Rosario, *cit.*, pp. 83-84-85.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

After a long reasoning, where Trentaquattro has tried to convince Trentasetti to do something brave, they determine that they have nothing to lose, thus they decide to force the door of the room in which they are locked and, when they are about to leave, the phone rings. The door symbolizes the choice of freedom, which, however, can never be achieved by the characters. Trentasetti and Trentaquattro are subjugated by *Iddi* who have ordered them to come back, put the door in place and adjust it with the screwdriver present in the kit of the two characters, suggesting that their rebellion was already foreseen and controlled by the system. The play concludes with the two men resuming their ritualistic game, returning to their monotony, to their submission to *Iddi*'s power, and awaiting death to find them, passively accepting their fate. Palazzolo's works reveal his philosophical imprint, as he masterfully analyses philosophical questions, blending elements of reality with elements of absurdity. *Ouminicch'* represents the impossibility of choice, the impossibility for man to free himself from the imperfect mechanism built by fate, society, others, oneself, by *Iddi*. Moreover, conformity to the power is shown also in the language of the characters. Indeed, Palazzolo's text reveals also how the Italian language is undergoing Anglicization, thus losing its identity. Characters often struggle with language, pronouncing, without their will, English words like *ok*.

TRENTASETTI. [...] E mentre era coricato, mi taliava, stetti un bello pezzo a taliarimi... Poi mi schiacciò l'occhio e io capivi ca si era fatta l'ora. Ho detto:
Ok...

Silenzio.

(*ci riflette incredulo*) ... e mi nisciu 'stu
Ok...

Silenzio.

... va trova come minchia mi nisciu 'stu
Ok...

*Silenzio.*¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Palazzolo, Rosario, *cit.*, p.60.

2.5 *Letizia Forever*

The second work of the triptych is *Letizia Forever*, which was first staged on 11 October 2013, at Officine Solimano, in Savona. This play, one of the most represented by Palazzolo, is a monologue pronounced by Letizia, an adorable lady played by actor Salvatore Nocera. The expedient of *cross-casting*, frequently used by Palazzolo, according to which the author assigns female roles to male interpreters, reveals the ambiguity of the character, who is a big, bearded man with the features of a dressed and made-up woman. Salvatore Nocera, with a delicate elegance, embodies a woman with a floral dress, and, with equal naturalness, he carries his beard and masculine features, thus posing a compelling question: why tell a story in this way? And, above all: who is Letizia, and what does she conceal? Under a stroboscopic ball, as in a disco of the 80's, Letizia undergoes the therapy of the song where, between an Italian song, "love genre", and the other, she retraces the story of her own life and marriage ended in tragedy, using a language that is ungrammatical, thus also revealing the ignorance of the character. In this scenario, which oscillates between interrogation, confession, and psychotherapy, each song played by a cassette tape is linked to a personal memory. Passionate about singers such as Pupo, Gianni Togni, Nada, Viola Valentino, and Alberto Camerini, Letizia also has a deep knowledge of their biographies, which she studied in the magazine *Sorrisi e Canzoni*:

Viola Valentina nata a Canzo il primo luglio del millenovecentoquarantanove, ha raggiunto il successo nel millenovecentosettantanove con la canzone "Comprami", ha partecipato all'edizione del festival di Sanremo del millenovecentottantadue ed è arrivata sedici, in quella del millenovecentottantatre è arrivata ventiquattro... Viola Valentina, oh, sempre ferma e con quelle mani ca faceva accussì e accussì e accussì, troppo forte, e il sorriso? Vogliamo parlare del sorriso di Viola Valentina? Bellissimo. Viola Valentina! Ma qual è il vero nome Viola o Valentina? Non s'ha capito mai...¹⁴⁶

This intimate connection between music and personal experience creates an emotionally engaging story. Letizia narrates the story of her life since she was born,

¹⁴⁶ Palazzolo, Rosario, "Letizia Forever", *Iddi-Trittico dell'ironia e della disperazione*, cit., p. 75.

the good relationship with her father and hostility towards her mother. She also tells about the “fuitina”, the elopement with Salvatore La Mattina, a young boy she met one Sunday morning after Mass:

La Mattina Salvatore l'ho conosciuto una mattina di domenica mattina ca io uscivo solo la domenica mattina della messa con mia cugina Di Bartolo Giovanna oppositamente per conoscere i mariti del futuro, ca in quelli tempi si usava 'sta maniera barbara ca arrivati a sedici anni tu uscivi la domenica della messa per trovariti il marito del futuro, e fuori dalla messa, scendendo le scale della messa - ca per l'appunto tutto il rione la diceva «la scalinata dell'amuri» - tu ti parevi un apparecchiamento come la madonna del carmino per i mariti del futuro tutti appostati agli angoli dei scali che ti quadravano avanti dietro come la vacca della fiera, e tu sempre zitta, senza mai guardare lunga, ca se guardavi lunga eri la vacca svaccata e significava ca ti sarebbe piaciuto calariti le mutande l'un per l'altro e i mariti ti sarebbero fuggiti tutti e saresti rimasta la zitella del rione... epperò un poco si doveva taliare, pi forza, ca vasinnò il marito del futuro come lo capiva che volevi fartelo marito del futuro? gli dovevi dare la spinta, insomma, e la spinta era la «taliata corta», corta, no lunga, ca con la «taliata corta» la mutanda non si calava, con quella lunga sì, [...] La domenica mattina che ho visto La Mattina Salvatore l'ho capito subito ca era il marito giusto per me, un tipo alto, corpo snello, corto capello... una botta di fulmine, fu, ma lui non taliava mai, niente, gli occhi in terra, tutto timidito, come se là ce l'avevano buttato pi forza, e perciò, al passaggio, ci feci una «taliata corta vicina» con due cala e aisa, due, pi sicurezza, mi parevo un pupo di molla... e lui, ca io non me lo sarei mai creduta - ca se pure mi avissiro detto credici non ci avrei creduta manco morta - lui, all'indomani, venne con tutta la famiglia sua a casa mia per farmi la promessa di sposo, con suo padre ca addirittura ci disse a mia madre ca La Mattina Salvatore mi voleva tutta intera per lui, [...]¹⁴⁷

Finally, Salvatore and Letizia got married and moved to Milan, where Salvatore found employment in a tram company. They subsequently had two children, Michelino and Graziella. Their life proceeded quietly until Letizia decided to surprise her husband on his birthday by going to his workplace.

Quest'anno ci faccio la sorpresa...

E la sorpresa fu per me, ca sopra il tram, vicino La Mattina Salvatore, c'era una bella milanese, tutta vestita alla milanese, ca invece ci parlava al conducente, ci parlava fitta fitta, e ci rideva al conducente, e ci toccava la mano al conducente, e ce la carezzava al conducente, e il conducente guardava solo lei ca la strada davanti non ci interessava più, e qua mi sono detta

*È tutto finito, Leti, tutto è scomparso... ora che fai?*¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Palazzolo, *cit.*, pp. 117, 119-120.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

When she realized that her husband was cheating on her, Letizia's first reaction was to kill him:

Mi, che bella idea!

ca era l'unica idea, pi mia, l'unica: ca mi sarei presa un lungo coltello, glielo sarei puntato sopra di lui e ci avrei gridato

Se non mi ridai la vita mia, gran pezzo di cornuto, io t'ammazzo! e vediamo c'avesse fatto, iddu, qua... e alle ore ventiquattro e zeroquattro del nove di marzo millenovecentonovanta La Mattina Salvatore spegne machina, sale ascensore, apre porta, posa cappello, chiude porta e io ci grido...

In preda al panico, fa stop, veloce

Iddi già lo sanno ca arrivati qua un poco mi devo fermare.

Ca tutta la storia mia, sanno, iddi, ma ci piace sempre assai di ascoltarla, ca può darsi, pensano, ca io ci faccio l'aggiunzione, ca macari ce la faccio un poco oggi, un poco domani, un poco doppodomani...

È ca sono troppo scienziati, iddi, e ci vogliono trovare tutti i motivi, nella storia mia.

Tutti i motivi.

Vi piacciono i motivi, ah?

Ma motivi, la storia mia, non ne ha.

È immotivata.¹⁴⁹

The author does not explicitly reveal whether Letizia actually murdered her husband or not, leaving the ending unresolved.

Mi dispiace, la realtà ve la racconto domani, forse. Ca domani sicuro ca mi si scioglie la lingua, forse.¹⁵⁰

Moreover, the suspended finale does not make it possible to determine if the identity of the narrator coincides with that of Letizia or her husband Salvatore, as the ambiguity of the character, whose gender is left indeterminate, does not allow the spectator to understand it. Also, in this play there is an explicit reference to *Iddi*, of which it is not clear whether they are medical staff, or only a mental projection of Letizia:

Iddi dicono che sicuro m'aiuta, la musicassetta, giorno per giorno, ca un poco mi aiuta oggi, un poco domani, un poco doppodomani...

Perché dicono che parlando nel mentre che suona la musicassetta nuova può essere ca capisco le cose che ho fatto.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Palazzolo, *cit*, pp. 132-133.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

The ambiguity in this play is not limited to the character's physical appearance, where it is unclear whether she is male or female, but also it is extended to language and gestures of the character, particularly in the passage concerning her son, Michelino, who does not know if to call Letizia mom or dad:

Ca, io, pure a mio figlio Michelino, ce lo spiego, queste cose qua, ogni volta che viene. E difatti, iddu, un poco mi chiama mamma, un poco mi chiama papà... È confuso... Proprio come avi a essere la realtà.¹⁵²

Furthermore, when she recounts about her encounter with her future husband, Salvatore La Mattina, she also reflects about the gesture he made with his hand, thus revealing the ambiguity of the character's actions.

Me lo immaginai subito chi era stato a tirarmi la pietra piccolina: La Mattina Salvatore, il mio amore, la mia vita futura, la mia libertà, ca era venuto a parlare con me, ma siccome non poteva gridare ca sennò mia madre lo avrebbe sentito, e allora mi disse tutto col gesto: e prima fece il gesto accussi, e qua sicura ca mi voleva dire "domani", nel rione mio, ca se uno vuole dire domani fa sicuramente accussi [...] però subito pensai *Aspè, aspè Letizia... siamo sicuri ca significa quello che pensi tu? Ragiona, non ti fissare ca poi ci rimani delusa: se accussi significa sicuro "domani", accussi potrebbe significare pure "prendi di qua" e quindi domani prendi di qua! No, ma che vuol dire? Di qua, dove? ah, ci sono: La Mattina Salvatore fece il verso della pendola dell'orologio del campanile della chiesa: "Domani ci vediamo sotto la pendola dell'orologio del campanile della chiesa!", "Domani fatti trovare sotto la pendola dell'orologio del campanile della chiesa!" sì sì, può essere... no, no... non può essere, ca la pendola dell'orologio del campanile della chiesa si trova propria al centro dell'ingresso della porta della chiesa, troppa gente... ah! Ecco, sì: è un cristiano che abballa, un sacco smosso, è un'elica ca gira, una paletta ca pala, un ventaglio ca soffia, un fazzoletto alla stazione, o è solo una mano ca fa accussi e significa solo una mano ca fa accussi e basta! Io stavo impazzendo...*¹⁵³

The register of the character varies from a stream-of-consciousness narrative delivered amidst disco music and strobe lighting, and an intimate, dreamlike pause for direct addressing to the audience in static lighting. Moreover, if a character, with both masculine and feminine traits, narrates a domestic homicide between a husband and wife, it is impossible to determine which of the two is the narrator. In this play, the theme of hyper-representation is particularly explicit, also because the protagonist narrates her story by interpreting the role of a stage actress. Finally,

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 137.

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 123.

Palazzolo, through the ambiguity that pervades the play and the unresolved ending, leaves the spectator freedom to interpret it, giving space to the subjectivity of the spectator, who might, or might not, find the truth.

2.6 *Portobello never dies*

Occorre uccidere sul nascere qualsiasi speranza,
prima che diventi l'ultima a morire.¹⁵⁴

Portobello never dies is a play written by Palazzolo in 2015. It was first staged at Napoli Teatro Festival on June 27, 2015, also winning the Prize Napoli Teatro Festival. The title of the play was inspired by the parrot from the 1980s television show *Portobello*.

LETTO DUI. Io m'arricordo l'acello Portobello...

Silenzio.

LETTO DUI. Voi v'o ricordate l'acello Portobello? Era una trasmissione... una cosa televisiva.

[...]

LETTO DUI. Era simpatico, oh, l'acello Portobello.

Silenzio.

LETTO DUI. Mi arricordo io piccolo ca me lo guardavo nella televisione... seduto attipo sopra una sedia dondola... c'ho propria l'immagine...

[...]

LETTO DUI. E c'era stile uno presentatore ca invitava la gente... e la gente doveva fare parrare l'acello Portobello... Voi vi ricordate?

[...]

LETTO DUI. Ma iddu niente, non rispondeva mai, sempre assettato, zitto ca faceva il pappagallo di cera... muto... mai un discorso.

[...]

LETTO DUI. Chissà perché non rispondeva mai...¹⁵⁵

The protagonists of this play are Letto Unu, Letto Dui and Letto Tri, three characters which have no name, or better they have the name of three beds. On

¹⁵⁴ Palazzolo, Rosario, "Portobello never dies", *Iddi-Trittico dell'ironia e della disperazione*, Spoleto, Editoria & Spettacolo, 2016, p. 142.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 159-160.

stage there is a bed, three lampshades, a bedside table and a chair. They are trapped in a hospital room, in a dimension suspended between life and death, waiting for something to happen, anything that can drag them away from that aseptic and unnatural place. The main theme of this play is the impossibility of hope for these three men, who are locked in a metaphysical place. They are barricaded on a line, because the border is the only chance for them. The characters struggle to piece together their fragmented memories, trying to remember what happened to them before finishing in this hospital. At the beginning of the drama, the playwright describes the behaviour of the characters. Letto Unu makes a moral of doubt centred on the impossibility of any hope. He is a provocative and threatening character, who often submits to the opinion of others but never admitting it. Letto Tri is kind and gentle but constantly questions everything. He is an advocate of hope, he always asks questions but is constantly on the edge between uncertainty and criticism. Letto Dui, instead, is a man who never asks questions, a strict observer of the rules more out of submission than conscious acceptance. The characters' behaviours seem to depict the complex, multifaceted and contradictory nature of human behaviour. The play begins with the mock marriage of Letto Unu and Letto Tri, where the audience is led to believe that they are the guests of this wedding. Letto Unu remembers nothing of this wedding; thus, Letto Tri advises Letto Unu to rely on his imagination to facilitate the remembrance:

LETTO UNU. Se non mi ricordo un parente un motivo ci sarà, se non mi ricordo Cara un motivo ci sarà, se non mi ricordo il matrimonio un motivo ci sarà...

LETTO TRI. Ca te l'hai dimenticato, ecco il motivo. Tante volte capita ca uno si dimentica le cose. Senti a me: per ricordarsi le cose, l'immaginazione è importante, tu comincia con l'immaginazione, così quando poi ci giriamo...

[...]

LETTO TRI. Letto U, io ti prego, amunì... Qua dobbiamo immaginare, ci dobbiamo sforzare, capisci? Si comincia che uno immagina una cosa e poi magari quella cosa arriva, poi ne arriva un'altra, un'altra ancora... Ca addirittura certe volte a mia mi pare propria di vederle, le invitate, di sentirle... Mi pare ca comincia a funzionare, la cosa, ca diventa un poco vera...¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ Palazzolo, Rosario, "Portobello never dies", *Iddi-Trittico dell'ironia e della disperazione*, cit., pp. 156-157.

Imagination serves as an indispensable catalyst for the recovery of memory. Nevertheless, as the memories come to the surface, what initially appeared as the staging of a wedding banquet transforms later into a funeral ceremony. This reversal of perspectives will reveal how the three protagonists are fragmented parts of a single person: that of a man who, in recovering his memory, loses hope of continuing to live. Palazzolo, in an interview, claimed:

Letto Unu, Letto Dui e Letto Tri sono un unico personaggio, sono la triade di una singolarità: la parte più nevrotica è Letto Unu, la parte più credulona è Letto Tri, la parte più stupida, quella che non si pone domande, è Letto Dui, per cui in realtà è un unico letto con un unico paziente il cui nome non ci è noto.¹⁵⁷

The narrative delves into the question of whether there is any hope for these three men, which seem different people, but who are later unified as aspects of a single being. But the real question is: is there hope for humanity after death? Finally, the hope of an eternal life meets the reality of death, where nothing reigns.

LETTO TRI. ...mi dispiace...

LETTO UNU. ... c'è scuro...

LETTO TRI. ... tutto scuro, talè...

LETTO UNU. ... guarda che belle braccia chiuse che c'havi Maria...

LETTO TRI. Mamà...

LETTO UNU. C'è il niente, arrivò il niente, mi sento niente.

LETTO TRI. È proprio una sensazione di niente...

LETTO UNU. Bellissima...¹⁵⁸

Throughout the play, the characters highlight the fact that the parrot of the TV show, *Portobello*, does not speak. Nevertheless, in a surprising twist, the parrot at the conclusion of the play will speak, and the sounds that pervade the scene turn into the sound of a flat electrocardiogram:

LETTO DUI. [...] Oh, Portobello! C'è Portobello! Sta parranno Portobello! Talè chi bella vuci chi avi Portobello! Staio arrivanno, Portobello! Ci facciamo una bella chiacchierata... Talè come ridono i nani, Cati...¹⁵⁹

Just as in classic *cross-casting*, where an actor embodies a female role not as a mere disguise, but as a profound exploration of the character's soul, thus suddenly

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Palazzolo on 27 Dec. 2024.

¹⁵⁸ Palazzolo, Rosario, *cit.*, p. 196.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.197.

impacting on the spectator and highlighting the ambiguity of human beings, here the characters are distinguished as if they were three distinct individuals, instead it will be revealed they are one, highlighting the different aspects of a single being. Through *Letto Unu*, *Letto Dui* and *Letto Tri*, Palazzolo makes three different facets of a single soul dialogue. The three different characters want to tell the public that the human soul cannot be explained and interpreted through a single “voice”, instead it takes more voices. The three characters, in fact, talk as if they were three musical instruments of an ensemble. Through dialogue, they come to know each other, ultimately engaging in an introspective journey that is revealed to be the work of a single individual, listening to his own multifaceted nature, composed of both light and darkness. The dilemma of the characters is also about who should embody the role of the bride, and thus the woman, or the groom, and thus the man, thereby confronting their own gender identity. It’s as if the character’s inner self must negotiate which aspects to present outwardly.

LETTO TRI. (in sordina) Sei femmina, dàì, è matrimonio, devi essere per forza femmina, sei femmina, fai femmina...

LETTU UNU. Falla tu!

LETTO TRI. Ce l’ho io, il giaccocravatto, l’hai visto mai una sposa col giaccocravatto?

LETTO UNU. Ora mi sconsu, ah, non faccio nessuna femmina...

LETTO TRI. Amunì, dàì! Fai femmina...

LETTO UNU. Mi fa ‘mprissione ‘sta cosa...

LETTO TRI. E vabbè, niè, tranquillo, fai ibrido, futtitinni, ibrido, ibrido... Saluta, saluta gli invitate... ma senza esagerazione [...] ¹⁶⁰

The author challenges the character’s sexual identity, prompting the character to engage in an internal dialogue and question: “E io?... Chi sono io?”¹⁶¹. Palazzolo scares all the certainties of the human being.

2.7 *A Cirimonia*

Esiste una sola verità,
ma nessun modo per esprimerla.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 146.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 177.

¹⁶² Typescript.

A central theme in Palazzolo's poetics is the pursuit of truth, which remains perpetually out of reach. His plays, such as *'A Cirimonia*, written by Palazzolo in 2009, explore the limitations of language and performance in representing this elusive concept. The impossibility of truth explored in *'A Cirimonia*, depicts a couple struggling to reconstruct a memory that would allow them to establish an absolute truth, which ultimately remains elusive. *'A Cirimonia*, together with *Manichini*, written in 2011, is part of the collection *Trilogia dell'impossibilità*, which directly confronts and delves deep into the theme of impossibility, a fundamental aspect of the author's work. At the beginning of this play, the two characters exhibit a clear understanding of their roles, preparing for a seemingly significant recurrence. On the stage, there is a pile of clothes, a small piece of furniture, several broken trinkets, a piece of furniture with an old record player, and a cake with a lit candle. The actors embody their characters and their respective functions with distinction. They are explicitly designated as "A Fimmina" and "U Masculu" – two Sicilian dialect forms for respectively the female and the male. Rather than through individual names, they are identified solely by their gender. The play begins with 'U Masculu and 'A Fimmina dressing. 'U Masculu is initially blind, he navigates in the space with his hands, and is dressed in a black tuxedo jacket, a coloured bow tie, and, beneath, a dirty tank top and pants. 'A Fimmina, on the other hand, is a man wearing a wedding dress, a colourful wig, and a curious bandage around his neck. Their diversity is represented by their outward appearance; 'A Fimmina and 'U Masculu are distinguished by their hairstyles, clothing, and seem to convey a revealing message to the spectator through their external form. Every year, the two perform this ritual: they must dress, recall the "ceremony", and then, after that, they undress. This ritual begins as follows:

'U MASCULU. Oggi è la festa nostra e mi sento troppo contento. Festivo e contento (*ridacchiando sghembo*) Ah ah ah.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ Typescript.

‘A Fimmina must also state that he feels festive and happy like ‘U Masculu; otherwise, the ceremony cannot begin. He must do what he has done every year.

‘A FIMMINA. Per la cerimonia! Ora sì... ora sì che mi sento troppo cuntento.

Silenzio.

‘U MASCULU. Nta

‘A FIMMINA. Eh?

‘U MASCULU. Contenta, ci va la A.

‘A FIMMINA. E perché?

‘U MASCULU. Perché sei fimmina e ci va la A.

‘A FIMMINA. (*ci pensa un attimo, è indeciso*) Sono fimmina?

‘U MASCULU. Eh.¹⁶⁴

‘U Masculu tells ‘A Fimmina that he must fulfil the role of a woman, based on the clothes he is wearing and the wig. However, the underlying truth is that it is not clothing that makes a man a woman. The two must engage in a game called *Mi ricordu*, that is I remember, which requires them to recall true events from the past.

‘U MASCULU. È attipo un gioco, il Mi ricordu, un gioco serio, un gioco ca serve per ricordàrisi fatti veri del passato, e del resto a questo servono le cerimonie.

‘A FIMMINA. A che?

‘U MASCULU. A ricordàrisi la verità.¹⁶⁵

The two protagonists struggle to recall this truth, and music will be their companion. At a certain point, they begin rummaging through a tangle of clothes and find two plates, a cake knife, and a box that they cannot open. ‘A Fimmina, however, still cannot remember anything. During the performance, there will be two off-stage voices: that of a man reading from a newspaper about accidents and deaths, and that of a child singing a song. However, these voices are not heard by both characters; the voice of the man reading the newspaper is heard only by ‘A Fimmina, while the voice of the child singing is heard only by ‘U Masculu. In every *Mi ricordu* ritual, a music is played. A memory can be considered authentic if it is recalled by both the characters. However, a memory resurfaces in ‘A

¹⁶⁴ Typescript.

¹⁶⁵ Typescript.

Fimmina: “Siamo sposati! Tu sei il marito e io sono la moglie e siamo sposati!”, but ‘U Masculu replies: “No, niente... è un ricordo fasullo”.¹⁶⁶ Therefore, as it is a fake memory, it is not true that the two are husband and wife, but then the spectator is led to ask: who are ‘U Masculu and ‘A Fimmina?

At a certain point, the two begin to recall a house filled with furniture with clothes and wigs inside, a box containing hammers, nails, and screwdrivers, and a doll named Bobi. Shortly after, ‘A Fimmina finds this box of tools and begins to construct the doll. However, ‘U Masculu suddenly regains sight and the truth is revealed: ‘A Fimmina is actually an eight-year-old boy named Gaetano, and ‘U Masculu is his father. The wedding dress ‘A Fimmina was wearing belonged to their deceased mother. The boy then asks his father to play the game *Mi ricordu* and recollect their deceased mother, but the father becomes angry and attempts to remove the boy’s clothing. According to Palazzolo’s words:

Si fa fatica a rievocare questo ricordo che viene fuori a frammenti. Appena la verità impatta con la soggettività dell’essere umano, viene in qualche modo sempre manipolata. Che ci sia la voglia di raccoglierla e possederla è molto difficile, però il tentativo di provarci non è una cosa negativa.¹⁶⁷

When the father realizes the dangerous implications of the *Mi ricordu* game, it is already too late.

‘U MASCULU. (*indomito*) La colpa è stata mia, solo mia, mia ca ti ho ammorbato il sangue con il gioco del Mi ricordu! Solo mia, ca di un masculu ho fatto una fimmina! ‘Sti minchia di vesti... (*inizia ad ammoniticchiarli*) Forse è meglio ca ci do fuoco, sì, li abbrùcio, accusi può essere ca guarisci, accusi ti levi dalla testa tutta sta fitinzia...

However, when the two fight and are about to kill each other, the scene is abruptly reset, and everything goes back to the way it was before. The two do not remember what they were doing, no longer remember who they are. They return to their usual ritual of ceremony, but now they have exchanged their roles and clothes. An author’s note indicates: “Queste differenze intendono indicare una verità malconcia, labile, che si differenzia a seconda di chi la racconta”¹⁶⁸. In this play,

¹⁶⁶ Typescript.

¹⁶⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2LT-ZuObxQ> Accessed on 26 Dec. 2024.

¹⁶⁸ Typescript.

the theme of memory is deeply cherished by the author. The characters are constantly distracting themselves from a life of sadness and solitude, where the death of the mother, a repressed but then unconsciously resurfacing memory, seems to never truly die. The protagonists' traumas are hidden, until the innocence of an eight-year-old child prompts the resurgence of the memory of the deceased mother. The author would highlight that past shapes the individual and cannot always be forgotten, even if one finds ways to distract oneself; the past exists and can always resurface. Another characteristic is the ritualistic remembrance of a past event that must be celebrated for its how, when, and why. The arduous dialogue between the two protagonists calls into question their very being and identity. The initial distinction between the characters' genders seemingly demonstrates that an individual's exterior form is the primary indicator of their essence. However, the spectator soon realizes that appearances can be deceiving. According to the playwright, a wedding dress and a wig are not sufficient to define a woman, in the same way a few uttering words in American does not identify a person as American. Nevertheless, at a certain point the characters would transform into other characters, the bride becomes a son, and the groom a father. This transformation shows the complexity and elusiveness of truth. This metamorphosis occurs when 'U Masculu, who was blind, begins to see. Everything appears to be a game, a pretext for recalling who they are or who they have been. The characters question their existence, and while they initially seem certain of their gender identity, their subsequent transformations disorient the spectator. The ceremony should bring them joy, at least superficially, but instead it leads the characters into a drama that almost seems to end in a dramatic act that does not happen. Music plays a pivotal role in this work, punctuating the different moments experienced by the two actors and shifting as if to accompany their changing moods. The off stage-voices in this play do not reveal the truth but rather provide clues and tools for understanding it, nevertheless the audience must handle them with care. Finally, memory is a clue but no proof of truth.

2.8 Il dittico del sabotaggio: *Se son fiori moriranno*

Il dittico del sabotaggio is composed by two plays: *Se son Fiori moriranno*, written in 2022, and *Ti dico una cosa segreta*, written in 2023. The common thread that binds the two works within the same diptych is sabotage, a concept which is clearly explained by Palazzolo in an interview:

Sabotare la realtà è l'unica strada che rimane ai miei personaggi per sopravvivere alla vita. Quando la vita diventa invivibile, ingestibile, l'unica formula che i personaggi ravvedono per superare questa vita così complessa è sabotare la realtà con l'immaginazione, che è un fatto vivifico e salvifico. È impossibile sconfiggere la propria infelicità, ma loro ci riescono con l'immaginazione.¹⁶⁹

The novel *Concetto al buio* introduces the notion that there is only one truth but no adequate means of expressing it, a theme that is further developed through characters like Letizia, who claims that:

La realtà, pi mia, è una cosa troppo incarbugliata ca può essere sottasopra e sottasopra e sottasopra... E come la giriati, la giriati, è comunque una cosa. Ca magari a voialtri vi pare "l'unica cosa", e invece è solo "n'avotra cosa.

It is in 2022 that Palazzolo's artistic evolution culminates in the character of Adele, whose intertwined story is further developed in the works *Se son fiori moriranno* and *Ti dico una cosa segreta*.

In *Se son fiori moriranno*, Adele seeks refuge from an unacceptable reality: the condition of her daughter Luisa. Adele is a mother torn by guilt, forced to observe, helpless, the agony of her daughter, who is in a vegetative state since 15 years. The playroom of little Luisa becomes the only place to live during all the narration, where Adele builds her eternal present. At the beginning of the play, Adele explains how the only way to get closer to reality is through imagination:

La realtà.

La realtà è sottosviluppata, per me, come la dicono loro.

Perché è un posto che se lo immaginano scontato, dove può capitare solo la realtà.

Pure finta, pure intravestita, basta che esiste.

E invece... invece la realtà che dico io è fantasiosa, perché me la figuro esistibile.

Non come quello che esiste, ma come quello che manca.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Palazzolo on 11 Dec. 2024.

¹⁷⁰ Typescript.

In the play, the daughter comes to life, but the moments of play and shared affection between mother and daughter are the product of a distorted imagination of the mother. Indeed, the daughter is now so alive in Adele's mind that she says:

LA FIGLIA. Mamma...io... esisto?

Un tempo e

LA FIGLIA. Esisto?

ADELE. Sì e no,

LA FIGLIA. Sì e no?

Un tempo e

ADELE. Come tutti

Un tempo e

LA FIGLIA. Sto dormendo, è vero?

ADELE. Da dieci anni,

LA FIGLIA. E allora... perché mi parli?

ADELE. Perché mi senti.¹⁷¹

Actually, Adele does not want to accept the death of her daughter, she continues to survive and make this imagination survive, which then becomes reality.

E insomma, dice il de Agostino, a parole sue, che dentro la testa noi ci abbiamo tutto un meccanismo di collegamenti supertonici che manco questo Agostino riesce a spiegarlo matematico. Un meccanismo che addirittura pure se tante volte, nella vita, le cose non sono come le vuoi tu, puoi diventarle nel modo che vuoi tu, proprio le puoi tramutare!¹⁷²

But the belief that imagination can become reality is not only a mental projection that Adele discusses with herself, but it is a work that also involves everything around her, especially the public:

Io pure ogni tanto mi arrendo, la verità, mi faccio vinta.

Mi dico che forse la gente c'ha ragione, mi dico che magari siete solo un'immaginazione mia, una veduta stramba con l'occhio bacato, uno schiribizzo che mi fa il pensiero...

Ma dura poco, per fortuna, e subito mi dico che siete la cosa più vera che c'è.

Ha un piccolo dubbio, è un po' turbata, si avvicina al pubblico, avanza in proscenio, superando il cerchio.

¹⁷¹ Typescript.

¹⁷² Typescript.

Perché voi... vi sentite veri, giusto?

Un breve silenzio, in cui attende la reazione del pubblico

Sorridete, menomale.

È una cosa buona, chi sorride è veribile.¹⁷³

A mysterious and soothing voice, interpreted by Palazzolo's wife Delia Calò, talks to Adele from the public, providing a kind of psychic support that guides the mother towards the acceptance of her tragedy.

2.9 *Ti dico una cosa segreta*

The story of Adele and her daughter is further developed in *Ti dico una cosa segreta*, which is the second play of the diptych, written in 2023, and first staged at Teatro Biondo, in Palermo. Here, the characters exchange their roles. The stage opens with the presence of an elderly woman in a wheelchair that seems suffering from dementia, she is interpreted by the actress who played the role of Adele, the mother, in *Se son Fiori moriranno*. Here, she seems an elderly woman but actually she is a child, dressed in the old clothes of The Daughter of *Se son fiori moriranno*. The mother is played by the actress who interpreted the off-stage voice of *Se son fiori moriranno*. Here too, the off-stage voice will be present in the form of a ghost, who assumes the role of the psychologist that was also present in *Se son fiori moriranno*: “Adele, accetta la realtà!”, “Stacca la spina, Adele!”¹⁷⁴. The ghost is here played by the actress who interpreted the daughter in *Se son fiori moriranno*. The audience that has seen *Se son fiori moriranno* will be surprised here to witness the director's play with the actors, once again demonstrating the ambiguity of his characters, who appear to be one thing, while they are in fact another. The ghost torments Adele, who actually is dead:

Io, pure se la morte mi ha acchiappata sbagliata, non ci divento un'anima spersa, no no.

Io non mi arrendo, il lenzuolo non me lo infilo.

Io voglio inventarmi Gersomina.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Typescript.

¹⁷⁴ Typescript.

¹⁷⁵ Typescript.

Both in this play and in *Se son fiori moriranno*, the game enacted by the mother and the daughter represents the only moment when the women demonstrate affection and are truly alive. At a certain point, the characters of Adele and Luisa converge, creating an ambiguity about who is the daughter. Everything is questioned. The ghost appears, completely shrouded in a long sheet:

IL FANTASMA. Posso farti una domanda?

Un tempo e

ADELE. (*titubante*) Sì.

Un tempo e

IL FANTASMA. Perché sei qui?

ADELE. Per continuare,

IL FANTASMA. A...?

ADELE. A esistere.

Adele/Luisa is simultaneously deceased and alive and expresses a desire to go on living. In her dialogue with the ghost, she asserts that through a diligent effort and the application of imagination, Palazzolo's secret ingredient, she will be able to sustain their lives. The play of imagination becomes a means of survival, a way to savour the raw and unacceptable reality in order to transform it into something beautiful and tolerable. Here, the act of deliberately sabotaging reality through imagination is evident, as a means of overcoming the atrocity confronting the mother. In the same way, the daughter character also attempts to sabotage reality and refuses to accept her identity as a ghost, so of a dead person.

ADELE. Però però però, se m'impegno giganta...

IL FANTASMA. Non funziona così,

ADELE. Se ci metto tutta l'immaginazione...

IL FANTASMA. Adele...

ADELE. Se m'aggiusto la fantasia...

IL FANTASMA. Non dipende da te,

ADELE. Io ci riesco!

IL FANTASMA. In che modo?

ADELE. Con l'amore.

Un tempo e

IL FANTASMA. L'amore non basta, credimi.

There is a constant interplay between depersonalization and personalization, whereby women's identities are continually questioned and exchanged. As in reality, the truth will never be fully revealed. Through these shifts of identities, Palazzolo does not provide us with the tools to reach truth, but rather to challenge, doubt, and perpetually seek it.

LA MADRE. (*al Fantasma*) La bambina s'impaura,

IL FANTASMA. Non c'è nessuna bambina,

LA MADRE. (*forte*) c'è!

IL FANTASMA. (*più forte*) Non c'è!

To be or not to be, this is the dilemma of Palazzolo, or of the mother who cannot accept the death of her daughter, thus she imagines her alive, in flesh and blood, in a mental projection which becomes for herself reality, and which perhaps will become so for the public, Palazzolo himself included. The audience is also unaware if it is made up of humans or ghosts.

ADELE. (*giocosa*) Chi siete? Ma che volete?

Silenzio.

ADELE. E non rispondono...

Forse... forse niente.

Un tempo e

ADELE. Vi piace guardarmi e basta.

Un tempo e

ADELE. Ché magari esistono fantasmi guardanti così, può essere: slenzuolati e senza raggia. Fantasmi che non gli è mai venuto in testa di fare.

Un tempo e

ADELE. (*divertita*) forse... forse perché hanno campato una vita bacata, chi lo sa, inutile e barbogianna, e perciò ripeterla non ne vale la pena, figuriamoci inventarsene una nuova. Meglio guardarsi quella degli altri.¹⁷⁶

Imagination is the common thread that binds the entire work together, thus Adele explains why she relies on it:

ADELE. Perché con l'immaginazione i brutti ricordi non spuntano più, e tutto torna come uguale al prima,

LA MADRE. Magari pure meglio,

ADELE. Ci vuole un sacco di immaginazione, però,

LA MADRE. (*con un lieve tono di rimprovero*) piano piano...

Un tempo e

ADELE. (*sornina, al pubblico, piano*) Vi dico una cosa segreta...

Un tempo e

ADELE. (*quasi un sospiro*) Senza l'immaginazione non esiste la realtà,¹⁷⁷

The ghost, which had previously appeared and was seen only by the mother, is now also seen by the daughter. The mother tells her daughter, “Non lo guardare!”¹⁷⁸ as if to deny a reality that is vastly different from what she imagines. The ghost then sits among the audience, while Adele remains playing at the centre of the stage, in another time and place, now becoming truly the young Luisa. The ghost acts as a psychologist, interrogating the mother and asking her to recall what happened, the accident that led to her daughter’s death. As the mother recounts the event, the same scene is replayed, with identical lighting, music, gestures, and intentions as seen in *Se son fiori moriranno*. The mother feels a sense of guilt for the death of her daughter: “Dovevo alzarmi, dovevo giocare con lei!”. But the ghost says: “Il dolore è un sentimento necessario, sano. Il senso di colpa è ciò che stiamo provando a curare.”¹⁷⁹ Through this narrative, which might seem fantastical, Palazzolo essentially dramatizes the underlying vulnerabilities of human beings.

¹⁷⁶ Typescript.

¹⁷⁷ Typescript.

¹⁷⁸ Typescript.

¹⁷⁹ Typescript.

These weaknesses are often concealed or repressed, forcing individuals to inhabit a parallel reality confined to their own mental theatres, constructed through the power of imagination. The mother only realized her daughter's tragic demise upon ceasing her sewing, discovering that the child had tripped and fatally struck her head on a toy kitchen while running through the house. In a director's note, it is written:

Da adesso in poi Adele torna a essere Adele, e ha il medesimo temperamento de La madre, la quale nel dialogo che segue rimane ferma, seduta sulla piccola sedia, lo sguardo perso.
ADELE. Aspetta.

Il fantasma si rimette seduto.
ADELE. Perché mi fai questo?

Silenzio.
IL FANTASMA. Luisa?
ADELE. No!

Un tempo e
IL FANTASMA. Adele, sei tornata?
ADELE. Sono sempre stata qua,
IL FANTASMA. Hai visto?

Un tempo e

IL FANTASMA. Non puoi cancellare i ricordi, non puoi farlo da sola.¹⁸⁰

Adele recounts how she unplugged the life support system that kept her daughter suspended between life and death, thus dragging herself into the abyss of death along with her daughter.

ADELE. ... perché era così ingiusto che io potevo ancora sentire qualcosa e mia figlia invece no.

Un tempo e

ADELE. (con un filo di voce) E perciò prendo il cavo elettrico.
Me lo passo intorno al collo.
E stringo più stretto che c'è.

Un tempo e

¹⁸⁰ Typescript.

ADELE. E così sono morta.

Un tempo e

ADELE. Epperò non sono morta.

Un tempo e

ADELE. Mi avete voluto salvare per forza.
E mi avete portata qua.
Per guarirmi.¹⁸¹

Palazzolo is the poet of ambiguity, when the spectator thinks he has understood the story, everything is turned upside down and questioned. Adele can no longer imagine the body of her daughter and then she herself became the daughter.

ADELE. E allora me lo sono diventato.
Il suo corpo nel mio, impersonato.
Così mi immagino i giorni che potevano capitare.
E li faccio.
E li faccio.
E li faccio.

Silenzio, è costernata.

ADELE. Mi escono tutti rotti, però.
Come questa musica che mi faccio dentro la testa.¹⁸²

She slowly starts to undress, as if to determine a new defeat. She takes off her shirt and skirt and remains as she started: underwear and tank top.

ADELE. Sono pazza, è vero?

Nessuna risposta, per cui

ADELE. Sono pazza, sì.
IL FANTASMA. (con un soffio) cos'è la pazzia?
ADELE. (dopo un attimo) è quando l'immaginazione non ti riesce.¹⁸³

At the end of the play, it will be revealed that Luisa, the daughter, was concealed beneath the guise of the ghost. The mother is revealed to be the psychologist, and

¹⁸¹ Typescript.

¹⁸² Typescript.

¹⁸³ Typescript.

the three characters each reclaim their roles as depicted in *Se son fiori moriranno*. In this diptych, the author stages the excruciating, raw pain of losing a child. In the mother's mind her daughter is still alive, highlighting the internal struggle between a tenacious hope and its inevitable end. Thus, this profound grief is intertwined with the loss of hope. By revisiting identical scenes in both parts of the work amidst the unnatural and immeasurable pain of losing a daughter, the author recreates the memory, acknowledging that even the imagination, so cherished by the author, cannot alter the course of events. It is a poignant exploration of the dichotomy between life and death, the acceptance of pain and defeat, and the persistent struggle of hope. In the interview, the author states:

La figliolanza è il futuro. Quello di cui vengono privati i personaggi è il loro futuro. È come se fossero costantemente obbligati al presente senza più margini di speranza legati al nuovo. La mancanza del figlio è sintomatica di una società che non intravede futuro.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁴ Interview with Palazzolo on 11 Dec. 2024.

Chapter III

Beyond the absurd: Rosario Palazzolo and Harold Pinter's interior worlds in comparison

3.1 Different cultures, same unconventional language

As previously mentioned, Harold Pinter and Rosario Palazzolo were raised in different socio-cultural contexts. Harold Pinter was a British playwright, actor and director, who lived during the Second World War, thus experiencing the fear and loneliness of those years. However, he used every opportunity to make statements against dictatorships and wars. Pinter's activism extended beyond the boundaries of his nation, as he dedicated his life to fighting against global injustice, wars and despotism. London, as a multicultural metropolis, provided Pinter with a rich and diverse cultural landscape. Indeed, his works are universal masterpieces, addressing a worldwide audience with a language characterized by pauses and silences. On the other hand, Palazzolo grew up in a different context and time, in a period fortunately not affected by the world wars, and in a land, Sicily, shaped by sounds, scents, and colours derived from the diverse foreign dominations that settled on the island. However, Sicily is characterized by a more isolated environment compared to the European context of which it is part, and it has maintained its traditions and folklore identity. During his youth, Palazzolo lived in Palermo, a city plagued by crime stemming from high rates of ignorance and poverty, in a period when the gap between northern and southern Italy was very evident. Thus, he experienced the feeling of impotence and desire for rebellion that came from those years. Like the world population, he has lived the recent period of the COVID-19 pandemic which led to the closure of theatres. However, he never lost hope of working for the theatre, so his activities continued online. The cultural context from which the two authors come has of course strongly influenced their life and their works, which, however, transcend their national boundaries. Their

plays are firstly characterized by their unconventional language. Palazzolo's language, which seems rooted in Sicilian dialect, is transformed into a unique, almost universal tongue that serves as a tool for rebellion against a corrupt system.

The language that Palazzolo employs in his works is:

una lingua anarchica, estrema ed estremizzata [...], una lingua che è lacerazione, delirio e inganno. [...] La sua lingua tanto più sembra realistica tanto più diventa metafora di una realtà enigmatica in cui predomina il paradosso, una lingua indomabile che sonda in una marginalità umana, alla deriva da tutto, anche dalle coordinate spazio-temporali. Una lingua che inforca uno sguardo distonico su un nulla inconoscibile, su una psiche prismatica in cui non esiste la verità. Una lingua «impiantata come un microchip - sono parole dell'autore - nella coscienza intima dei personaggi, e perciò super falsa, che fa del disagio per il neo-reale una prodigiosa contingenza della realtà, e insomma una lingua che mira alla forma per risolvere il contenuto. Una lingua scotennata dall'insopportabile medietà linguistica della lingua e anche una lingua disponibile all'orrore, al fallimento, all'incomprensione.»¹⁸⁵

Finally, Palazzolo's mission to rebel against power is firstly achieved through a language that uses dialect as a basis to create a new language that does not belong anywhere. Through this language, he makes the spectator reflect on the human condition, as well as the relationships and power dynamics. This linguistic innovation strives for a universality of thought.

Il linguaggio ci chiarisce, dice chi siamo, anche addirittura chi potremmo essere. Il linguaggio è la nostra capacità di intercedere nei confronti della realtà, del mondo, ci dice anche il tipo di qualità di vita che viviamo, è un termometro importante. La prima cosa che cerco di far guadagnare ai miei personaggi è la lingua affinché si possano affrancare da me, è una lotta. Spesso accade che i personaggi comincino a parlare come parlo io e loro si rivoltano, perché non parlano come parlo io. Quando si guadagnano il loro linguaggio cominciano a essere reali.¹⁸⁶

In this regard, Pinter, in an interview for the Nobel prize, claimed: "The relationship between author and characters should be a highly respectful one, both ways."¹⁸⁷ On the other hand, according to Pinter, language is:

[...] a highly ambiguous business. So often, below the word spoken, is the thing known and unspoken. My characters tell me so much and no more, with reference to their

¹⁸⁵ Ilardo, Filippa, "Cromosoma Sicilia: l'Isola plurale come forma", *La Nuova Drammaturgia Contemporanea in Sicilia: anatomia di un'estetica divergente*, <https://www.accademiadipalermo.it/wp/wp-content/uploads/ISOLA-PLURALE-ANATOMIA-DI-UNESTETICA-DIVERGENTE.pdf> Accessed on 2 Jan. 2025

¹⁸⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KsuzBIgwVpA> Accessed on 6 Jan. 2025.

¹⁸⁷ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays One*, cit., p. xii.

experience, their aspirations, their motives, their history. Between my lack of biographical data about them and the ambiguity of what they say lies a territory which is not only worthy of exploration but which is compulsory to explore.¹⁸⁸

Pinter's linguistic style does not seek rhetoric or moralism, instead he makes his characters speak with the language of everyday life that is realistic but at the same time symbolic. "Pinter's dialogue tends to 'correspond' to what we hear outside the world of the play, even though it is made to cohere with the overall rhythm of the play."¹⁸⁹ Beneath the words of Pinter's characters, which mirror varieties of contemporary English, lie the unspoken, that the spectator must capture. However, it does not always happen that words conceal definitive truths; rather, they often pose questions that remain open to interpretation. Pinter communicates not only through his words but also through pauses and silences, which Palazzolo also employs with the same ethic significance. However, especially in Palazzolo's more recent plays, he employs also "*Un tempo e*", which is a little pause that the author requires of the characters:

la pausa che utilizzo spesso è, nell'accezione pinteriana, una pausa in cui stanno scorrendo delle parole ma sono silenziose, è un non dire ricolmo di significato. Il tempo che chiedo ai personaggi e che i personaggi si chiedono prima di parlare, invece, è un tempo in cui si soffermano su ciò che hanno detto e ripartono con ciò che devono dire. È un tempo in cui all'interno non c'è la costruzione di un pensiero narrativo, drammaturgico, come nei silenzi in cui scorrono sotto-parole. Quel tempo è come se fosse il deflagrare di un'idea, di un pensiero che è rimasto latente e con quel tempo si palesa. Questo tempo ha un tempo minore rispetto alla pausa ed è legato a ciò che ha detto prima e a quello che dirà dopo.¹⁹⁰

3.2 From acting practice to playwrighting

Both Harold Pinter and Rosario Palazzolo have been actors before being playwrights. Both have interpreted different roles under the guidance of different directors, and therefore under different styles of directing. Through their experiences as actors, they have developed the ability to delve deeply into characters, having undergone the transformative process of shedding their own

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Kennedy, Andrew, *Six dramatists in search of language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 169.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with Palazzolo on 9 Dec. 2024.

identity to adopt another. By embodying other characters, they have developed a keen empathy for actors. In addition to directing their own characters, both have directed and acted in plays based on their own scripts. However, their approaches to playwriting and character development diverge significantly. In Pinter's Nobel Prize speech, *Art, Truth and Politics*, he explains his playwriting practice as follows:

I always start a play by calling the characters A, B and C. In the play that became *The Homecoming* I saw a man enter a stark room and ask his question of a younger man sitting on an ugly sofa reading a racing paper. I somehow suspected that A was a father, and that B was his son, but I had no proof. This was however confirmed a short time later when B (later to become Lenny) says to A (later to become Max), 'Dad, do you mind if I change the subject? I want to ask you something. The dinner we had before, what was the name of it? What do you call it? Why don't you buy a dog? You're a dog cook. Honest. You think you're cooking for a lot of dogs.' So since B calls A 'Dad' it seemed to me reasonable to assume that they were father and son. A was also clearly the cook and his cooking did not seem to be held in high regard. Did this mean that there was no mother? I didn't know. But, as I told myself at the time, our beginnings never know our ends. 'Dark.' A large window. Evening sky. A man, A (later to become Deeley), and a woman, B (later to become Kate), sitting with drinks. 'Fat or thin?' the man asks. Who are they talking about? But I then see, standing at the window, a woman, C (later to become Anna), in another condition of light, her back to them, her hair dark. It's a strange moment, the moment of creating characters who up to that moment have had no existence. What follows is fitful, uncertain, even hallucinatory, although sometimes it can be an unstoppable avalanche. The author's position is an odd one. In a sense he is not welcomed by the characters. The characters resist him, they are not easy to live with, they are impossible to define. You certainly can't dictate to them. To a certain extent you play a never-ending game with them, cat and mouse, blind man's buff, hide and seek. But finally you find that you have people of flesh and blood on your hands, people with will and an individual sensibility of their own, made out of component parts you are unable to change, manipulate or distort. So language in art remains a highly ambiguous transaction, a quicksand, a trampoline, a frozen pool which might give way under you, the author, at any time.¹⁹¹

Palazzolo writes the story and its development, but as he said in an interview: "è un lavoro che va oltre la scena, ogni lavoro è interminabile, non si esaurisce con la prima replica che dura per tutta la vita del personaggio e dello spettacolo."¹⁹² A common practice for Palazzolo is to create a character with a clear idea of the actor who will interpret it. The playwright's curiosity about the actor's personality serves

¹⁹¹ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Art, Truth & Politics*, cit.

¹⁹² Interview with Palazzolo on 9 Dec. 2024.

as a major stimulus in the creative process, fostering an immediate bond between the director and actor. This empathy allows the actor to become the character. The character's personality is delineated from the beginning of the play and has a particular face and voice. Through the use of imagination, which is a powerful tool useful to transform the unreal into the real, the author gives life to his characters, which he visualises already on stage with fully formed personality and image. Rosario Palazzolo's productions frequently employ the device of cross-casting, assigning female roles to male performers. Through their distinct corporeality, these actors underscore the ambiguity of the character/actor dualism, which aligns well with a poetics that reflects on both hyper-representation and identity. While these motifs initially seem to be played out within a purely performative perspective, a closer examination reveals that the reasons for this scenic choice are always motivated by the dramatic text.

Mi interessa parecchio il concetto di identità, ovvero ciò che noi siamo, e ciò che facciamo per somigliare all'immagine che gli altri si aspettano da noi, ed è soprattutto quest'ultimo aspetto che desidero indagare, ossia il tentativo malato di somigliarci, è come se solo così riuscissimo a garantirci un minimo di esistenza, è un gioco a cui crediamo, una duplicazione di noi stessi a cui ci affezioniamo. Per cui la mia creazione prende spesso spunto dal tradimento della categoria maschile/ femminile, dal concetto di iper-rappresentazione, dall'impossibilità dell'individuo di determinare la propria realtà, dal fallimento esistenziale che proibisce qualsiasi tipo di riscatto, propendendo per un'esistenza penitente, ramificata, reiterante, che disarciona costantemente la felicità, indicando in una sorta di atarassia dolente-e divertita- l'unica via di fuga. E però non avendo mai certezza di nulla.¹⁹³

Moreover, differently from Pinter, Palazzolo includes the public in his dramaturgy, with which the actors interact. As both playwright and director of his works, Palazzolo maintains a distinct understanding of the separate roles involved:

Quando faccio la regia devo dimenticarmi che ho scritto io il testo. La regia e la scrittura non devono andare in relazione, anche se sono sempre io a fare l'uno e a fare l'altro, e quindi quando scrivo già lo so, ma devo fare in modo di non saperlo, e lavorare in maniera asettica come se cominciassi da zero quando faccio la regia. Infatti, quando si presenta qualche problema drammaturgico durante le fasi della regia dico sempre ai miei attori "stasera parlo con Palazzolo", perché è lui l'autore che sta a casa; quindi, sono due lavori diversi che trovano una osmosi nel momento della messa in scena. Ogni tanto questa cosa

¹⁹³ Ilardo, Filippa, *La drammaturgia nell'abisso, il teatro-mondo di Rosario Palazzolo*, *Hystrio*, n.1, 2022.

riesce a Palazzolo regista e autore, ma può anche fallire. È una lotta la cui soluzione non è mai certa.¹⁹⁴

He defines being a playwright today as both a curse and a form of resistance against the superficiality of contemporary culture, arguing that language is paramount, revealing not only who we are but also hinting at who we could become. The characters are works of art, therefore immortal. An anecdote that the author often tells is that he imagines his own characters visiting him during his wake, in an almost mocking gesture that emphasizes their immortality as opposed to the mortality of the author who has created them. On the other hand, Pinter writes for himself. He does not imagine his works in relation to the public, neither does he think about the actors who will interpret his plays. He presents his characters and lets them develop themselves. In this extract from the interview conducted by Masolino d'Amico, Pinter talks about his relationship with the public.

Interviewer: Quando lei scrive una commedia che tipo di pubblico ha in mente? Per chi la scrive?

Pinter: Per me solo, non ho in mente nessun altro. La cosa essenziale è che funzioni per te. In ogni caso io mi sento abbastanza a disagio nel mio rapporto con il pubblico.¹⁹⁵

3.3 Parallels and differences in Harold Pinter and Rosario Palazzolo's oeuvre

Palazzolo was fascinated by Pinter's theatre from the first moment he saw *Party Time* and was so deeply impressed that he drew inspiration from Pinter in some of his own works. The affinity with Pinter's plays is more evident in '*A Cirimonia* and *Ouminicch*', where the characters, as well as the contexts in which they are set, are undefined. The presence of this mysterious and threatening outsider emerges in these plays. The theme of threat is pervasive in both authors' works. In Palazzolo's works, an unknown otherness exerts a menacing power over the characters, representing an external threat, a theme that in Pinter is evident in plays

¹⁹⁴ Interview with Rosario Palazzolo on 27 Dec. 2024.

¹⁹⁵ D'Amico, Masolino, "Il mestiere del drammaturgo: Intervista con Harold Pinter e *Voci di famiglia*", cit.

such as *The Room*, *The Dumb Waiter*, and *The Birthday Party*. There is the same play of pauses and silences that characterizes the dialogues of Pinter's plays. It is impossible not to think of Ben and Gus from *The Dumb Waiter* when confronted with the characters Trentasetti and Trentaquattru, protagonists of *Ouminicch'*, who are called with numbers and are constantly waiting for a phone call that will affect their existence. Also, in Pinter's *The Hothouse*, the clinic's patients are nameless, referred to only by numbers, like Trentasetti and Trentaquattru. However, while in *Ouminicch'*, Trentasetti and Trentaquattru have a voice in the play and strive to redeem themselves from their confinement, in *The Hothouse* the characters remain mere ciphers, devoid of any attempt at self-expression. In *Ouminicch'*, Trentasetti and Trentaquattru are two men confined to a room alongside a coffin, forced to participate in a ritual imposed upon them by an external, unknown force. Dressed in elegant attire and equipped with guns and screwdrivers, they attempt to carry out the rituals dictated by *Iddi* while awaiting a phone call that will reveal which of the two must kill the other. In Harold Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, there are also two characters, Ben and Gus, who are hitmen confined to a basement. They receive orders through a dumbwaiter from unknown entities and wait for the arrival of their victim. Ben, who has no questions to ask, comfortably reads the newspaper and comments on current events, while Gus is more inquisitive and restless, seeking to understand the mystery behind the dumbwaiter. He cannot tolerate the anonymous authority that commands them and the ambiguity of their demands. A similar rebellious character can be found in Trentaquattru, who, convinces Trentasetti to rebel against the system by forcing open the door of their room. However, as already seen, the mysterious entity calls and instructs them to replace the door using the same screwdriver they were given. Thus, no one is killed, and the characters return to their submissive state under the power. In contrast, in Pinter's plays, the victim to be killed will be unveiled at the story's conclusion, and it will be Gus who, having grasped the power dynamics, could be a potential menace for the power. However, the end of the story remains open as it is not clear if Ben will really kill Gus. Thus, behind the phone calls directing Trentasetti and

Trentaquattro there are *Iddi*, whereas the authority figure issuing orders to Ben and Gus through the dumb waiter in Pinter's play does not have a name, it is enigmatic. In *Portobello never dies* there are also Letto Dui and Letto Tri, two opposite characters like those of Ben and Gus, where one always asks questions while the other is a strict observer of the rules. Pinter's works, like Palazzolo's, are dominated by a few characters. Waiting is the permanent condition of their characters, who are trapped in a reality that immobilizes them and to which they prove unable to escape, allowing themselves to be conditioned by the will of a mysterious otherness that threatens them and directs their existence. The works of Pinter, as those of Palazzolo, are played on a mechanism that keeps waiting for a revelation, as if it were a mystery, and the viewer is waiting throughout the play for this revelation. Line after line the authors create tensions. Sometimes the characters say one thing but at a certain point that same thing is put into doubt by something else that is said, increasing suspicion and anxiety in the spectator. However, very often at the end of the matter there is no solution, the play is a mystery without solution. Not only are the characters' words questioned, but also their own identity. In Palazzolo's plays there is a game of role swaps, personalization, depersonalization, but also roles of women personified by men. Ambiguity is not only present in words but also in the scenic practice. In Pinter, instead, ambiguity is present only in the dialogues and the dramaturgy. His characters are mysterious people, nothing is known about them, nor does the author give the spectator precise clues to understand it. For example, Davies in *The Caretaker* left his documents at Sidcup and will never take them back. Finally, in both Pinter and Palazzolo, the characters represent an insoluble enigma, they are figures devoid of identity, lacking memory, confined to rooms that are metaphysical spaces, awaiting a liberation that will never come, where threat is always lurking. In *A Cirimonia* as well, the characters are identified only by their gender, and neither the audience nor the characters themselves have a clear understanding of their identities. However, Palazzolo's characters ask themselves who they are:

‘A FIMMINA. Il *Chi siamo*, il *Perché siamo*, il *Dove siamo*, il *Quando siamo*... Ci sono troppi *Siamo*... E di tutti ‘sti *Siamo*, non mi ricordo manco un *Siamo*...¹⁹⁶

Moreover, the suspended ending is a hallmark of both Pinter and Palazzolo’s works. In *The Room*, for instance, it remains unclear whether at the end Bert kills the black man. On the other hand, in *Letizia Forever*, the audience is left uncertain about Letizia’s identity and whether she truly murdered her husband. *The Homecoming* and *Letizia Forever* are also two plays in which the condition of woman of two different societies and cultures subtly and unconsciously emerges. In *Letizia Forever*, the protagonist is a woman devoted to her husband, who first encountered him a Sunday morning and fell so much in love that she changed her life to move with him to Milan. She is a woman submitted to social conventions. Ruth, instead, is a woman free from social conventions, free from any constraints, even free from her marriage bond with Teddy. At first, she seems a woman tied to her family but later will turn out to be a woman without feelings, ready only to satisfy her own pleasures and those of her husband’s family. At the beginning, Letizia does not look like a free woman, as she has not chosen for her future, but when she finds out that her husband cheats on her, she tries to get revenge, and here Palazzolo does not end the story but leaves it open. But, if the spectator thinks that Letizia really kills Salvatore, she might be the freest woman, a true heroine who rewrites her life. But deeper, the most extensive form of freedom is found in relation to the definition of her gender identity, as, through the expedient of *cross-casting*, his or her sex is never determined, but it is a form of wide freedom, that does not concern its gender relationship but concerns the woman in the society she belongs to. In Palazzolo’s works there is also the presence of the religious element, in fact very often he mentions saints, Madonna, priests, or Jesus himself, but his is an invective against the corrupt system of the church. Pinter, on the other hand, given his Jewish roots, may allude to the violence perceived by Jews during the Nazi era. Regarding *Il dittico del sabotaggio*, the audience that saw *Se son fiori*

¹⁹⁶ Typescript.

moriranno, is disoriented when seeing that in *Ti dico una cosa segreta* the director has interchanged the roles of the actors, which, however, will be re-established at the end of the play. In *The Homecoming*, the initial impressions of characters are dramatically subverted by their subsequent actions. Ruth's character in *The Homecoming* undergoes a transformation as her initial appearance is contradicted by her later behaviour. Likewise, in *Ti dico una cosa segreta*, the characters' initial presentations are deceptive, revealing a different reality as they assume their true identities at the end of the play. *Il dittico del sabotaggio* offers references, especially in the dialogues, to the play of Pinter *A Kind of Alaska*, that is a one-act play based on the book *Awakenings* by the neurologist Oliver Sacks. *A Kind of Alaska*, first performed in 1982, is centred around the character of Deborah, a middle-aged woman, struck by *encephalitis lethargica*, sleeping sickness, at the age of 16, who wakes up after 29 years of apparent sleep following the injection of an unnamed drug. In the diptych, instead, the daughter, who died in a domestic accident, is recalled by the imagination of the mother, Adele, who imagines her still alive, talking to her after waking up from a dream. Similarities are found between the dialogue of Deborah and Hornby and Luisa and Adele.

DEBORAH. Well, how long have I been asleep?

Pause.

HORNBY. You have been asleep for twenty-nine years.

Silence.

DEBORAH. You mean I'm dead?

HORNBY. No.

DEBORAH. I don't feel dead.

HORNBY. You're not.

DEBORAH. But you mean I've been dead?

HORNBY. If you had been dead you wouldn't be alive now.

DEBORAH. Are you sure?

HORNBY. No one wakes from the dead.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ Pinter, Harold, *Harold Pinter: Plays Four*, cit., p.164.

In Palazzolo, the daughter wakes up from death, but it is only the imagination of the mother that evokes her and makes her speak.

LA FIGLIA. Sto dormendo, è vero?

ADELE. Da dieci anni.

LA FIGLIA. E allora... perché mi parli?

ADELE. Perché mi senti.

Un tempo e

LA FIGLIA. (*con un sogghigno*) Dieci anni è un sacco di tempo!¹⁹⁸

Finally, Palazzolo's characters, like those of Pinter, are losers, they do not have success in their life. Dario Calimani in *Radici sepolte* wrote:

I personaggi pinteriani più affascinanti ed emblematici sono proprio tutte queste figure in bilico fra lo *schlemiel* e lo *schlimazel*. Sono figure di individui a cui la sorte non concede alcuna possibilità di riuscita; nulla di ciò che essi si ripropongono di fare ha successo [...] Ci troviamo di fronte all'antieroe, al perdente in partenza, in parte anche a causa del suo stesso modo di essere. [...] Ciò di cui lo *schlemiel* non sembra rendersi conto è che la sorte lo vuole perdente, e contro la sorte (o la società?) non vi è possibilità di vittoria.¹⁹⁹

In conclusion, while influenced by Pinter, Palazzolo developed a distinctive voice, blending Pinter's theatrical style with his own unique cultural and artistic vision. This dialogue between the two playwrights enriches the landscape of contemporary drama, offering profound insights into the human condition and the complexities of the modern world. The two authors offer many points of reflection, retaining distinctive features in their works, which characterise them in an original way. Pinterian influences in Rosario Palazzolo's oeuvre has created a unique and inimitable work in a typically Sicilian culture. Finally, this study is a small shred of light in two vast and complex worlds as those of these two authors, and as Oscar Wilde wrote:

All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors. Diversity of opinion about a work of art shows that the work is new, complex and vital.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ Typescript.

¹⁹⁹ Calimani, Dario, *Radici Sepolte*, cit., p. 72.

²⁰⁰ Wilde, Oscar, *The picture of Dorian Gray*, 1980,

https://ia802302.us.archive.org/25/items/oscar-wilde_the-picture-of-dorian-gray/oscar-wilde_the-picture-of-dorian-gray.pdf Accessed on 10 Jan. 2025.

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