

**Critical Modes and the “Rebellious” Playwright:
Pinter's *Alaska*, Stoppard's *Arcadia***

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Reviewers at a cross-road

But even this reading of ours of the last short plays seems presumptuous; indeed **all** of our readings of Pinter's plays have seemed presumptuous to a degree. Pinter, like his characters, is a master of mimicry, a Houdini of the text. Though he has denied being the kind of uncommitted writer who refuses to take responsibility for his work, he remains practiced at the art of disengaging himself from the tiresome responsibility of authorship, whereby author and text overlap, the one being the blueprint for the other. Pinter cannot be pinned down to any view expressed by a character or extracted from his plays by a critic's dental pliers. . . . Though his words linger around the venue of many a scandalous verbal outrage, Harold Pinter is **not there**. (Almansi and Henderson, 1983: 101)¹

The above quotation, which concludes Almansi and Henderson's study of Pinter's plays, describes the playwright-critic interaction as a game of "hide and seek." According to this description, critics search for the playwright's blueprint—poetic image—via his plays, while the playwright seeks escape from the critics' "dental pliers." Although throughout their study Almansi and Henderson indeed attempt to trace the playwright's footprints via his various plays, their conclusion—which seems a deconstruction of their own study—endows the playwright with a victory in the final round. Though related to their readings of all Harold Pinter's plays, Almansi and Henderson's description of this playwright's "escape-artistry," refers particularly to his play *A Kind of Alaska* (see *ibid.*: 100-101). Executing an unexpected move, Pinter, they claim, frees himself—as Houdini of the text—from the critics' "straitjacket." Presenting Pinter as the winner of the critics vs. playwright

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game of "hide and seek," however, can be seen as compatible (although only indirectly) with the major tendency of Almansi and Henderson's study—to view Pinter's plays as based on various models of games.

Within the context of my exploration of the playwright-critic interaction at large, suggested elsewhere,² the case of Pinter's *Alaska*, raises especially interesting questions. These questions relate to the role of a particular group of critics—theatre reviewers—throughout the middle to later phases of a playwright's dramatic career. I have suggested that the reviewers play a dominant role in the acceptance of a new playwright into the theatrical canon.³ According to that view, which adopts the orientation of Bourdieu's socio-cultural studies,⁴ reviewers serve as institutional agents with regard to a new theatrical product. Bourdieu (1985a: 19) argues that "any act of cultural production implies an affirmation of its claim to cultural legitimacy." The reviewers acting as mediators, endowed with the establishment's authority, provide an initial legitimation for playwrights whose acceptance into the theatrical canon has not yet been determined. In line with this approach, critical practice is viewed as the means by which the agents, in this case theatre reviewers, fulfill their particular function.

Accepting a new playwright into the theatrical canon involves, in fact, the affiliation of the new playwright with theatrical schools and/or dramatic styles which have been already accepted. As such, new acceptance plays a determining factor in canon formation and canon borders as well as in the definition of theatrical schools and historical sequence.

Subsequently, though, the new playwright's acceptance into the canon reinforces the reviewers' position and function in the theatrical field. Throughout the process of the playwright's acceptance, early critical assertions concerning the playwright's dramatic style are gradually molded into a "trademark package of attributes" which serves the reviewers as a "marketing" tactic. (To relate to the reviewers' conduct as "selling" a playwright, in this context, does not refer literally to the marketing of a consumable product [e.g., theatre tickets], but is a figurative way of talking about the enhancement of a playwright's prestige/cultural capital.)

Following the playwright's establishment the reviewers' objectives inevitably change and therefore their function, throughout the middle/late stages of a playwright's dramatic career, is presumably altered. Seeking to ensure the playwright's central position in the theatrical canon, the reviewers, reacting to his new plays, would typically tend to affirm the playwright's image as previously constructed.⁵ In fact, the established playwright seems to acquire a "critical existence" which "belongs" to the critics, who have created him as a critical construct.⁶

But what happens in a case when an established playwright writes a play which seems incompatible with his/her previous works? In such a case, the playwright seems to challenge his/her constructed image and hence to challenge

the particular critical criteria by which he/she was judged. Whether or not the play is “objectively” incompatible with the playwright’s previous work is irrelevant here. What is significant is that, according to their own responses, many of the critics consider it to be so. Note, however, that what is at stake in such cases is not power for its own sake, but rather the questioning of critical authority and function regarding issues such as the essentiality of theatrical attributes, theatrical trends and historical sequence. These issues, which form the grounds for and determine critical acceptance and attitude to new playwrights, are brought to the fore and re-examined in light of the playwright’s unexpected poetic move, thereby endangering a chain of critical assumptions that involve every individual case.

In light of Almansi and Henderson’s conclusion, I venture to explore the conduct of theatre reviewers in two cases in which established playwrights can be viewed as attempting to free themselves from the critics’ “straitjacket.” Specifically, I examine the principles governing the conduct of theatre reviewers, as manifested in their responses to (1) the first two productions of *A Kind of Alaska* (1982; 1985),⁷ and (2) the first production of Stoppard’s play, *Arcadia* (1993).⁸

Exploring the cases of Pinter and Stoppard seems a natural choice. They are both useful because they have been in the public eye so long and have accumulated such a body of critical literature. Both have acquired a “critical existence.” Namely, Pinter and Stoppard, the playwrights, are thus distinguished from “Pinter” and “Stoppard,” the critical constructs, to whom the reviewers’ discourse relates throughout the middle/late stages of these playwrights’ careers. At the time of the *Alaska* and *Arcadia* productions, Pinter and Stoppard were both recognized and accepted by the critical establishment as occupying central positions in the theatrical canon. Both playwrights can hence serve as particularly relevant cases to my argument.

Theatre reviewers, however, as I intend to show in this paper, respond cautiously to the “escape-artistry” of an established playwright. Rather than legitimize the playwright’s unpredictable move, they employ differing “emergency” modes which seek to affirm and guard the existing critical repertoire relating to the playwright in question.

Note, however, that for the purpose of the present argument I treat reviewers as a monolithic whole. Deliberately down-playing the illuminating differences among individual reviewers, I rather seek to emphasize their similarities of strategy. The difference of quality, insight, etc., among the individual reviewers (which might be very important indeed in another kind of study) are much less relevant for my argument than the similarities among the strategies employed by them to fulfill their theatrical function.

Considering the reviewers’ position in a case of a “deviant” play, I would suggest five optional modes of reaction:

- (1) **Freeing the playwright:** the reviewers, adhering to their function as creators of the dramatist's image, enhance the playwright's differing play. They thereby deconstruct/invalidate their previous critical assertions with regard to the playwright's affiliation. In such a case the reviewers endanger their authority as a determining factor in the theatrical field.
- (2) **Re-devising the construct:** the reviewers devise a new construct, which suits the playwright's differing play, relocating his position accordingly. This latter option involves, however, a series of changes (regarding the playwright's affiliation etc.) which requires a longer adjustment period. Forced to react promptly the reviewers are, in fact, unable to present a "substitute" construct.
- (3) **Maintaining the existing construct:** the reviewers ignore the play's differing nature. They present the new play as a development in the playwright's poetics subordinating it to their previous critical assertions.
- (4) **Denouncing the deviant play:** not having a ready-made alternative and yet unwilling to endanger their authority, the reviewers use their powers to present the play as lacking the quality of the playwright's previous dramatic works, hence pronouncing the play as a theatrical failure.
- (5) **The double mode:** the reviewers embark on a critical mode which seeks to achieve a double function, that is, that of "selective" acknowledgment of the novelty of the new play, which simultaneously sustains the validity of previous critical assertions.

Comparing the cases of Pinter and Stoppard, with respect to the reviewers' responses, reveals that the critics are reluctant to use the first two options. They neither free the playwright, nor re-devise the construct. In the case of Pinter's *Alaska* they endorse the fifth option, the double mode. In the case of Stoppard's *Arcadia* they employ the third or fourth options, that is, maintaining their previous assertions, or denouncing the play. Both cases represent, in fact, different modes of the same critical tendency. Namely, since neither play conforms comfortably to the labels attached by critics to previous plays of either playwright, the reviewers' manipulative strategies are intended to re-engage the "rebellious" playwrights. Attempting to preserve their authoritative position in the field, the reviewers hence endorse those of the options accessible to them which enhance their powers.

The Early Views of *A Kind of Alaska*

Almansi and Henderson (1983: 100), concluding their study with *A Kind of Alaska*, present this play as a turning-point. The reviews of the play, following its first London production (directed by Peter Hall in a triple-bill with "Family Voices"⁹ and "Victoria Station"¹⁰ at the National Theatre, Cottesloe, on 14 October 1982), reflect similar critical notions. Yet, unlike Almansi and Henderson, who free the playwright, the reviewers modify (although just to a point) their critical means in order to re-engage the evasive playwright. The reviewers' reaction in this case exemplifies the option of the double mode.

The double mode is primarily manifested by the reviewers' eagerness to draw attention to the different image of the enigmatic playwright, while avoiding specification of the theatrical components which brought about such critical assertion.

Several examples from early reviews can serve to demonstrate two major components of the "Pinter" construct. Pinter was viewed by reviewers during the early stages of his career as a playwright who creates "a world of his own, an entirely personal world" (Muller, *Daily Mail*, 30 April 1960). As another reviewer remarked, "Mr. Pinter is to be admired for having mastered so thoroughly the precarious art of mystifying an audience and entrancing them at the same time" (Gibbs, *Daily Telegraph*, 28 April 1960). "Pinter" was hence "sold" to the public, by the reviewers, as offering a "world of his own" and a unique, enigmatic theatrical style.

The critics' puzzled attitude towards Pinter's poetics, which gradually dictated their "marketing" strategy throughout the process of his acceptance, seems to vanish utterly when they come to deal with his play *A Kind of Alaska*. It is as though, to the critics' great relief, "Pinter-land" has ceased to be obscure. As one of the reviewers remarks, "he was never less obscure than here, or more profoundly eloquent about the fragile joy of being alive" (Barber, *Daily Telegraph*, 16 October 1982). Following the production of *A Kind of Alaska* Pinter is presented as a rather engaged playwright who offers human concern. Furthermore, he is "sold" to the public not as a playwright who presents a personal world, but as one who can be viewed as *connected with a highly popular book based on medical phenomena*, Oliver Sacks' *Awakenings*,¹¹ which had aroused wide public interest. Evidently, Pinter acknowledges the literary source of his new play, thereby supplying a context within which one can, or should, grasp the unusual situation depicted in the play. "A Kind of Alaska," writes Cushman (*Observer*, October 17, 1982), "is a departure for Mr. Pinter as *Footfalls* was for Samuel Beckett. Once again, we are presented with a character in a world of her own, but we are given medical evidence for her condition documented in the programme." Note this critic's attempt to link the "new" image to the one previously constructed.

In light of the medical phenomenon, that is, a woman who fell victim to the

sleeping sickness (encephalitis lethargica) and has been awakened 29 years later, the dialogue, as well as the character's motivation, does not seem enigmatic, but rather evokes the audience's sympathy. The particular situation depicted in the play is coherent, rather than "puzzling." Caught by surprise by Pinter's divergent play the reviewers are at a loss: the previous "Pinter" construct is not compatible with the playwright's new work, yet they do not have a ready-made alternative. Employing the "double" mode, the reviewers choose to highlight the reference to the literary source (Sacks') as the play's major anomalous feature, suppressing, or rather avoiding, a direct consideration of the other, more radically, different dramatic attributes, such as the particular nature of the awakening of the woman in the play.

Striking evidence for my claim is found in the reviewers' "selective" treatment of the literary source. None of the reviewers, excluding Nightingale (see the *New Statesman*, 22 October 1982, p. 36), mention Sacks' ([1973] 1990) particular case of Rose. R. (74-87), which is most probably the one on which the play is based. None of the reviews, including Nightingale's, relates to Pinter's specific choice to base his play on this case history rather than on another (Sacks' book includes several cases of men and women). Moreover, the reviewers, while repeatedly acknowledging the literary source, do not mention or discuss Pinter's changes to the source's data, which seem quite significant. Unlike Deborah (the awakened woman in the play) who was 16 years old when she fell victim to the sleeping-sickness, Rose (Sacks' case) was 21 years old. Whereas Deborah's awakening occurs after 29 years when she was 45 years old, Rose's awakening occurs after 43 years when she was 64.

Deborah, the woman in Pinter's play, has been "asleep" throughout the years of her feminine maturation. Furthermore, Deborah, awakened by a drug (L-Dopa) injected by her doctor, confronts the implications of her situation courageously. Recalling the passive conduct of the princess in "The Sleeping Beauty" tale, Deborah seems to present an independent and autonomous woman figure, which corresponds to a more current view of women. A treatment of Pinter's particular choice to base the play on Rose's case, as well as of his fictional or differing "data," would require from the reviewers a consideration of new issues (such as the possible influence of a feminist approach) which are "foreign" to the established critical repertoire (previously constructed regarding Pinter's plays).

Avoiding a direct treatment of the play's novelty, the reviewers endorse a policy of promotion which is rather a defense tactic. This policy consists of two different, though linked, strategies "comparison" and "forecasting." These strategies are modified applications of the two major strategies that are, as I suggested elsewhere,¹² typically employed by reviewers throughout the first stage of the playwright's process of acceptance. Throughout the phases of the playwright's reception, the new play is compared by the reviewers to plays by other playwrights, previously accepted and established, with a view toward creating a familiar context

for the new play. Throughout the later stages of the playwright's career, however, the strategy of "comparison" undergoes a modification in accordance with the reviewers' current needs. Comparing *Alaska* to Pinter's previous works the reviewers relate primarily to the elimination of the familiar "Pinteresque" attributes. The use of this strategy thus serves, simultaneously, as a retrospective affirmation of earlier critical assertions and as a confirmation of the reviewers' continuing role as the authoritative force in determining the playwright's image.

The second strategy, that of "forecasting," is employed by the reviewers throughout the phase of reception, and serves to present the new play as containing the promise of future developments,¹³ and thus to facilitate the new play's acceptance into the canon. The later modification of the strategy of "forecasting" marks the new play of the established playwright as a turning-point, thereby shifting the dominance from the particularities of the play in question to the broader implications concerning future changes in the playwright's poetics. To present a change in the playwright's poetics can be viewed as assisting the reviewers to further enhance the "marketing" of an established, yet familiar, playwright, and so to reinforce his canonical position. The reviewers' use of this second strategy, like their use of the first one, reaffirm their authoritative position in the theatrical field. Several examples from the reviews can demonstrate the policy endorsed by the critics.

Wardle's (*Times*, 15 October 1982) opening statement in the review of *Other Places*, differentiates between the three plays constituting the production: "The first two plays in this triple bill by Harold Pinter show him re-exploring familiar territory: the third, *A Kind of Alaska*" Wardle claims, "shows him breaking into new ground. Most unusually for this author, the play comes with an explanatory programme note citing a literary source: Oliver Sacks *Awakenings*." Nightingale (*New Statement*, 22 October 1982) starts his review of this same production by referring to Pinter's reputation. The third play, *A Kind of Alaska*, according to Nightingale, demands most attention, since "for the first time in his stage career, Pinter acknowledges a source."

Sheridan (*Punch*, 27 October 1982) describes the production of *Other Places* as "a complete and utter guide to one of its own directors, Harold Pinter, which should on no account be missed." According to Sheridan, however, the other two plays of the production "are really only a curtain-raiser for the last, *A Kind of Alaska*, which instead of harking back to past triumphs suggests that Pinter is in fact now moving forward into some altogether new direction. In the first place, and extremely unusually for him, the play is derived from a book, and a book of medical fact."

All other reviews of the first London production of *Other Places*, besides those cited above, include in their account of Pinter's *A Kind of Alaska* some mention of Oliver Sacks' book and the medical phenomenon on which his case histories are based (see *Country Life*, 25 November 1982; Shulman, *The Standard*, 15 October

1982; Cushman, *Observer*, 17 October 1982; Barber, *Daily Telegraph*, 16 October 1982; Coveney, *Financial Times*, 15 October 1982). Most reviews are highly favorable.

The reviewers' reaction to the play's revival in 1985 (directed by Kenneth Ives in a triple-bill, *Other Places*, this time with *One for the Road* and *Victoria Station*) further confirms their use of the double mode. Billington's review of the 1985 production (*Arts Guardian*, 8 March 1985), entitled "A New Map of Pinterland," states: "What makes the evening significant is Pinter's own move into other theatrical places. But, now that he has mapped out new territory, I just wish he would extend his discoveries into a full-length play." Note this reviewer's portentous title, and word-choice ("significant," "other theatrical places," "new territory") as well as his demanding agenda for Pinter's future development.

Although Wardle, in his review (*Times*, 8 March 1985), traces familiar Pinter elements in the two plays, *Alaska* and *One for the Road*, his major claim about the 1985 production is that "both plays show Pinter himself on the move to other places and, for the first time, taking his material direct from the world of public reality: *Alaska*, deriving from Oliver Sacks' case histories, *Awakenings*; and *One for the Road* marking his self-proclaimed debut as a political writer" (see also Peter's review in the *Sunday Times*, 10 March 1985).

Based on the reviews of the two productions it appears that in this case the reviewers adjust the existing repertoire to meet their current needs, rather than actually extending the critical repertoire. The reviewers' discourse is restricted to a limited repertoire and so the means at their disposal are in fact incongruous with the requirements of the current challenge: a direct critical consideration of the playwright's "unpredictable" poetic move. Consequently, the reviewers seem to devise a form of modification which serves to disguise the repertoire's restricted nature, yet which simultaneously ensures their own authority.

In the case of Pinter's *Alaska*, the reviewers adjust the use of the two strategies, "comparison" and "forecasting," in accordance with their current needs. Thus they view the playwright's move into a new territory as a confirmation of the earlier defined territory, and attribute this move, reflected by the single play, to a more general poetic change designating new grounds which are critically acknowledged and defined in advance. In other words, my argument is that the reviewers actually reclaim his unpredictable move as further corroboration of their own powers in the field.

Moreover, since the playwright's image by the middle/late stages of his career has already been formed and established, the reviewers' conduct in this case requires a modification of his "trademark package." Lacking an alternative "package," yet aiming to guard their privileged position with respect to control of the playwright's image, the reviewers indeed relate to a new image of the playwright. However, rather than specifying its dramatic constituents, they limit any modifications to the

repertoire formed by earlier critical constructions of "Pinter."

Academic Critics and *A Kind of Alaska*

According to Rees (1989: 191),¹⁶ in the case of literary works, "critics lead the public to adopt certain views on literature. To achieve this effect, the modus operandi of critics should obey specific principles or rules which we could call regulative." In order to isolate the "regulative principles" peculiar to the reviewers' responses, as displayed in the two cases, Pinter's and Stoppard's, I further intend to compare the reviewers' discourse, manifested in the reviews of Pinter's *Alaska* with the critical discourse in academic studies of this same play.¹⁷ Academic critics definitely have different rhetorical intentions and audience from those of reviewers. They operate with different time-frames and function in different institutional settings. Yet, the alternative options they adopt shed light on the limitations binding the reviewers' discourse. It is true that, in the later stage of the playwright's career, the reviewers can be viewed as acquiring a "historical" perspective like that of academic scholars. Nevertheless, the major factors which govern their response to the playwright's unexpected move are still derived from the constrained nature of their discourse and their attempt to maintain their authoritative function within the theatrical field.

Indeed one can argue that studies produced in the academic institutions demonstrate a different sort of critical constraint, namely, they strive to subordinate the retrospective readings of the play to their respective ideological/critical orientations. (In this case, the academic studies are for the most part feminist in their methodology and ideological commitments.) Nevertheless, these academic studies, in attempting to present new/different readings of the play, tend to integrate and/or apply more current ideologies in their approach to the playwright's poetics.¹⁸ As such, these academic studies reflect a direct consideration of the playwright's new territory, unlike the reviews which tend to approach the play's differing nature only indirectly, in terms of the stylistic attributes critically associated with the playwright's previous works. Observing these academic studies thus serves to indicate, by way of contrast, that the reviewers' choice of particular modes of critical reaction derives from their function in the field.

I have selected four academic studies dealing with *Alaska*, which were published by various university presses: a relatively early one by Burkman¹⁹ (1986, Associated University Presses);²⁰ two later studies, Ham's²¹ and Burkman's²² (Indiana University Press), which were presented at a conference²³ celebrating Pinter's 60th birthday in 1991, and as such represent major critical approaches to this play; and Hall's 1993 study (Southern Illinois University Press).²⁴ All four studies revolve around the centrality of the woman figure, Deborah. According to these studies, Pinter's main interest in the play lies in the process undergone by Deborah, through which she comes to recognize herself as a grown woman.

Burkman (1986: 153) perceives Deborah's awakening state in the context of modern existence, that is, she views Deborah's disorientation as akin to that of the characters in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.²⁵ According to Burkman, Deborah's disorientation "seems to express both her lost condition and a progress toward a fundamental re-orientation and rebirth, a true awakening." "Deborah," remarks Burkman, "is clearly not the fairy tale Sleeping Beauty to whom feminist writers have so often objected as a figure of feminine passivity, who depends upon the arrival of Prince Charming for her awakening and happiness. Nor is Pinter's Deborah the victim of a patriarchal society" (ibid.). Deborah, according to Burkman (ibid.), exhibits both will and awareness in her Beckettian struggle to become truly awake.

It suffices to examine several citations from the earlier reviews of the play in the light of Burkman's assertions in order to illustrate the "deviant" nature of the reviewers' discourse. Billington, for example, compares the 1985 production of *Alaska* to the earlier one, suggesting that "In Kenneth Ives's production it emerges as a much more Beckettian study of human solitude" (Billington, *Arts Guardian*, 8 March 1985). While Billington at least refers, if only indirectly, to Deborah, another review "denies" her centrality more decisively: "few plays convey a more desolate sense of time irretrievably lost in this case, not merely by the woman, but by the sister and the doctor who have sacrificed their own lives to bring her back from the dead" (*Sunday Telegraph*, 10 March 1985). Although a reference to Beckett does appear in Billington's review, Beckett being a familiar component in the critical repertoire of Pinter, one notes the elimination of the issue of feminine awareness in both reviews, the latter issue being "foreign" to the reviewers' repertoire for "Pinter's" plays.

"The play," Burkman further remarks (1986: 158-9), "explores the complexities and uncertainties of being a woman or rather of becoming a woman and of becoming a person. And what we experience as we watch Pinter's Sleeping Beauty wake up and assess her situation is an assessment of our own." One notes the very different description of the "awakening" process undergone by Deborah in two earlier reviews of the play: "Deborah, in *A Kind of Alaska* awakens blinking into the daylight after a life sentence inside her own skull" (*Times*, 8 March 1985); "the performance is a study of a unique terror; the terror of a young girl on whom consciousness has played an unforgivable trick" (Fenton, *The Sunday Times*, 17 October 1982). Whereas Burkman's description, although colored by her particular critical orientation, attempts to treat directly the nature of Deborah's awakening, the reviewers' descriptions tend to employ generalized non committal statements, thereby dissolving the unique nature of the awakening in the play.

In another academic study of *Alaska*, Ham (1993) draws a comparison between Cixous's play, *Portrait of Dora*,²⁶ which dramatizes Freud's case of Dora, and Pinter's play dramatizing Sacks' case of Rose. Ham (1993: 185) claims that "both plays demonstrate a correlation between theatre and psychoanalysis and their relation to

the working of a gender politics.” The case histories, according to Ham (186), reveal the doctors' need for control and “the representation of the bodies of female patients as spectacles for the mastering male analytic gaze.” Ham claims (186) that, in this respect, the case histories can be accommodated to the paradigm of traditional theatre which “has exploited and victimized woman as an object, as a spectacle offered to a male gaze to satisfy a desire for mastery.” Both analysts, Freud and Sacks, “inadvertently hide the holes in their analyses of the patients by marginalizing them, although they know and admit their failures. Cixous and Pinter, the playwrights, however, displace these “holes” from the margins and relocate them in the center to reveal and stress them in their theatrical versions.” (ibid. 187.) The theatrical versions, according to Ham (ibid. 188), shift the roles of subject and object. Cixous portrays Dora, as the “newly born woman” in theatre, while Deborah is depicted in Pinter's play as she “awakens from her long sleep during which she has journeyed from the position of victim to the position of a living woman.” Thus, concludes Ham (ibid., 191), “Dora and Deborah, in the theatrical versions, at last become ‘newly born women’ in theatre who are no longer placed in the subordinate position of victim, spectacle, object.”

In view of Ham's construction of Pinter's theatrical case history as a “liberated/ liberating” play, Wardle's (*Times*, 15 October 1982) view seems rather sterile: “the case histories combined the power of fairy tale with a range of questions that undermine the received idea of individual psychology. Where had these people been during their long sleep; who were they then; and who are they now, awakening from childhood into middle age? Such questions lie at the core of Pinter's dramatic world, and in *A Kind of Alaska* he sets out to examine the experience of one isolated awakening. . . . What we get is not a case history, but the imagined journey of any patient from the entombed isolation of the disease back to the living society.” (ibid.). Wardle's review illustrates the reviewers' tendency to eliminate components incompatible with the “Pinter” repertoire by using oblique and general statements. As such, the reviewers' explicit intention to present the playwright's “new grounds” is rather a camouflage for their lack of an alternative leaving them with the existing repertoire as their only means to reinforce their authoritative role.

Interestingly enough, Burkman's (1993) later study of the play questions altogether the adequacy of the reviewers' responses to *Alaska*. Burkman (ibid. 194) argues that “critics, who had been baffled by some of Pinter's depictions of the Absurd, responded to *A Kind of Alaska* with some relief—it was, after all, based on fact, a case history from Oliver Sacks' *Awakenings*. Although based on fact, Pinter's play is finally no less enigmatic than any of his former ones. All one needs to do is to compare the recent Robert De Niro film's treatment of Sacks' *Awakenings*, in which the male patient Leonard is the central concern, with Pinter's treatment of Deborah to see how differently life's absurdities are treated.”

In the fourth academic study, Hall (1993: 82) views Pinter's *Alaska* as a play

which “offers an accurate metaphor for the alterity of women in general regardless of class by creating a modern version of the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*.” Hall (ibid. 83), like Burkman (1993), questions the reviewers' reactions to the play, explaining: “Pinter's rare admission of source material has prompted many critics to argue that the situation of reluctant awakening provided him with the perfect opportunity to develop his usual ‘universal’ themes such as the unreliabilities of memory, the problematic nature of communication, and the uncertain status of human existence and identity.” “Admittedly,” Hall (ibid.) argues, “the play raises these issues, but to sacrifice the centrality of the female character in order to support ‘universal’ considerations not only ignores the important choice Pinter made when creating the play—Sacks’ study, after all, contains male patients as well as female—but it also ignores the political content of the play.” Hall (ibid. 84) refers to the collective title of the 1981 triple bill, and Pinter's volume of plays containing *Alaska, Other Places*: “while the other plays do not focus on femininity, *Alaska* does, so it is difficult to ignore the title *Other Places*. Throughout the play, Pinter explores the place of the other, the place of women within a patriarchal context.”

Striking illustration of my claim regarding the five optional modes (see p. 4) of critical reaction to a “rebellious” playwright, is the choice of academic critics to endorse the two critical modes that are avoided by the reviewers. Whereas the reviewers avoid the first option which endanger their authority, Almansí and Henderson (1983: 101) propose to “free” the “rebellious” playwright. In fact, the critical mode these critics adopt reinforces their overview of Pinter's work. Unlike the reviewers who are unable to re-devise the playwright's construct, the four other academic studies I have discussed, exemplify the second option, that of “opening up” and enlarging the “Pinter” repertoire. Indeed, these studies derive their powers from the alternative view they suggest of Pinter's play.²⁷ This enables one to have a valuable insight which further clarifies the constraining nature of the reviewers' discourse. The reviews of Stoppard's *Arcadia* present a different mode of this same phenomenon.

The Early Views of *Arcadia*

The reviews of the first London production of Stoppard's play *Arcadia* (13 April 1993, at the National Theatre), reflect a critical controversy and confusion which are particularly noteworthy in the context of Stoppard's critical reception to date. In contrast to Pinter, whose dramatic style was regarded by the reviewers in earlier stages of his career as enigmatic, puzzling, obscure, Stoppard's dramatic style was described in terms of his mastery of pastiche. This implied that reviewers regarded the heterogeneous blend of components as having been structured by Stoppard into an orderly, coherent dramatic form. Thus the favorable responses in the case of Pinter's *Alaska* exemplify a critical mode which welcomes the abandonment of enigma while striving, in light of the play's differing nature, to

preserve the reviewers' authority to control the playwright's image. The controversy over Stoppard's *Arcadia*, however, reflects the reviewers' difficulties with the play's enigmatic nature as well as with the threat it poses to their construction of Stoppard's dramatic style. Unlike the critics' choice to adopt a "double" mode (the fifth option) in Pinter's case, when it comes to Stoppard the reviewers are divided. Having to deal with the play's enigmatic nature, and unable promptly to devise a substitute Stoppard construct, the reviewers either adhere to the familiar "Stoppard" construct (third option), or denounce the play (fourth option).²⁸

As in the case of Pinter, the reviewers of *Arcadia* employ (whether explicitly or implicitly) the strategy of "comparison." All the reviews mention the heterogeneous blend of dramatic components, a familiar "Stoppard" trait. The reviews divide, however, into those which approach the play as a continuation or extension of the playwright's poetics and those which view it as chaotic or disordered.

The favorable reviews exhibit the third option. They refer to previous Stoppard plays in order to illustrate the playwright's progress, thus describing the play in line with the established critical notions. Nightingale (*Times*, 14 April, 1993), for example, claims: "the play is Stoppard's tribute to the complexity, unpredictability and inscrutability of the world—pet themes since *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*—[...] the piece comes as close as any to fulfilling his creative aim, 'the perfect marriage of ideas and high comedy.'" Or, in another review (see Spencer in the *Telegraph*, 14 April, 1993), "*Arcadia*, however, sees a terrific return to form. The gags—and there are plenty of them—have all their old exuberance and elegance, but this is also a play that makes you think, and think hard. Stoppard has continued to make science a key theme of his play. But this time you find yourself hanging on to every word."²⁹

The unfavorable reviews, displaying the fourth option, reflect the critics' restricted means of dealing with the play's divergent nature. The tone of the unfavorable reviews ranges from mild reservation to harsh attack. Although in several reviews the critics' attacks are directed explicitly at various dramatic attributes, their claims denouncing the play reveal that the source of their difficulty lies mainly in the play's incompatibility with previous critical constructions of "Stoppard."

The play's richness which is praised by several reviewers is, according to still other reviewers, the play's main weakness. Copping (*News London*, 6 June 1993) attacks: "all this confusion and mix-up is a good enough yarn, with historical, academic and aristocratic elements and plenty of humor; 'cycling is the safest form of sex' etc., but unfortunately this doesn't hide the rather dry and ultimately tedious content and acting. It is Stoppard's first play since 1988, and frankly it's hardly worth the wait."³⁰

Examination of the unfavorable reviews suggests that the reviewers' key

words are “order” and “weight.” These words, which seem particularly relevant with respect to *Arcadia*, a play that attempts to integrate theories from physics and mathematics such as chaos theory and quantum mechanics into a theatrical context, seem endowed with special meaning when used in the context of Stoppard's poetics at large.

The reviewers, in fact, demonstrate an “over sensitive” attitude to “order” and “weight,” two familiar “Stoppard” traits. The unfavorable reviews tend to attack the play for its lack of this key quality of “order” whereas, with respect to the other key quality of “weight,” the critics seem to be divided. That is, several reviewers find the play “too heavy” thematically, while other reviewers perceive it as “weightless,” lacking a serious tone, too playful. The reviewers’ contrasting views of the play as “weighed down” by its themes, on the one hand, and as “weightless,” on the other, reflect the critical confusion and frustration, due to the critics’ lack of suitable means to approach the unfamiliar Stoppard.

Compare, for example, these two critical views: Nicholas de Jongh's review (*Evening Standard*, 14 April 1993) is titled “Complicating the Meaning of Life in Stoppard's Maze.” The play's main problem, according to de Jongh, is, on the one hand, the “heavy weight” it carries: “*Arcadia* staggers beneath the weight of its intellectual garb,” and the lack of order, on the other: “it keeps plunging down discursive byways, dramatic impetus delayed.” The reviewer thus sums up the play with a crushing dismissal: “such simple concepts so pretentiously arrayed.” This review sharply contradicts earlier critical evaluations of Stoppard's unique characteristics, described at the time as a “taste and talent for pastiche” (see Cushman, in the *Observer*, 16 June 1974).

The other review, by Gross (*Sunday Telegraph*, 18 April 1993), is titled “Chaos and Weightlessness.” This title refers to what the reviewer perceives as the main flaws of Stoppard's *Arcadia*. These are, the reviewer claims, “a lack of dramatic momentum and inner coherence. And everything seems curiously weightless. We are in a kind of theatrical never-land.” Stoppard's play is described by Gross not as a play of ideas, but rather as one which plays with ideas. Furthermore, this reviewer asserts, “if my own experience is any guide, the ideas only come to life piecemeal, in isolated bursts; and some of them, the ones about romanticism, seem muddled.” Thus Gross, like de Jongh, but in marked contrast to the early enthusiastic reviews that praised Stoppard's powers of integration,³¹ charges *Arcadia* primarily with lack of integration.

Another unfavorable review, by Rutherford (*Financial Times*, 15 April 1993), attacks the play severely. Citing a witty line, Rutherford asserts: “this is the Stoppard of old, and there is not enough of it.”³² Counting the play's flaws, Rutherford claims, “*Arcadia* runs for over three hours, yet the plot is unclear. No one knows who made love to whom, nor is there any reason to care.”

Rutherford's review is interesting, however, for yet another reason. The

reviewer refers in his review to the late Kenneth Tynan, a major theatre critic who was, during the mid 1960s, the Artistic Director of the National Theatre. Tynan's involvement with the productions of Stoppard's plays is recalled by the reviewer: "Kenneth Tynan suggested a rule about Stoppard that 'the shorter the play, the harder it is to summarize the plot without sounding unhinged.'" "*Arcadia*," Rutherford asserts, "defies the Tynan dictum." The reviewer's ironic remark, concluding his unfavorable review of *Arcadia*, expresses implicitly the reviewers' wishful attempt to practice an authority over a "rebellious" playwright. Rutherford addresses his readers: "still, do not be deterred. Here we have the National Theatre trying to be witty and serious at the same time and an audience willing it to succeed. It is a near miss. Tynan would have cut it."

Within the present framework, Rutherford's reference to Kenneth Tynan can be seen to evoke the authority practiced by Tynan as an institutional agent, who intervened in the course of Stoppard's dramatic career. Rutherford recalls Laurence Olivier's account of Tynan's involvement with Stoppard's earlier play *Jumpers*.³³ According to this account, Tynan insisted on certain cuts and *Jumpers* consequently "became a much better play." The reviewer's implicit comparison between Stoppard's two plays, *Jumpers*, the earlier play which became better thanks to Tynan's cuts, and *Arcadia*, the later "near miss," in need of an artistic director's advice, presents rather directly the critics' struggle to tame, and thus maintain their authoritative position over the "rebellious" playwright.

In line with my view of the mediating function filled by theatre reviewers, suggested elsewhere, the cases explored in this paper further reveal that critical modes are conditioned by and restricted to the agents' particular role. In other words, within the dynamics of the theatrical field, the reviewers' "assigned" role, with respect to a new playwright, (e.g., creating a dramatic construct and "positioning" the playwright within the canon) turns, in a case of a "rebellious" playwright, into a binding contract which sets limits on their critical conduct. That is, the reviewers' particular function, which endows them with their powers in the first place, forces them to replicate both themselves and that model in their work.

Notes

1. Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson, *Harold Pinter* (London: Methuen, 1983) 101.

2. See Yael Zarhy-Levo, *The Theatrical Critic as Cultural Agent: Constructing Pinter, Orton and Stoppard as Absurdist Playwrights* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2001).

3. See Yael Zarhy-Levo, "The Theatre Critic as a Cultural Agent: Esslin, Marowitz and Tynan," *Poetics* 21 (1993): 525.

4. See especially: Pierre Bourdieu, "La Métamorphose des Goûts," *Questions De Sociology* (Paris: Le Editions De Minuit, 1980): 161-173.; Bourdieu, "Mais Qui A Créé Les Createur," *Questions*

De Sociology (Paris: Le Editions De Minuit, 1980) 207-221.; Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods," *Media, Culture and Society* 2 (1980): 261-293.; Bourdieu, "The Market of Symbolic Goods," *Poetics* 14 (1985) 13-44.; Bourdieu, "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups," *Theory and Society* 14 (1985) 723-744.

5. Discussing the reviewers' use of analogies when reacting to a new publication of an established author, Verdaasdonk (1994: 386) writes: "that reviewers rely heavily on drawing analogies in judging recent publications suggest that the perception of [literary] books is strongly context bound. Linking a particular title to other items of the same category affects the way it is perceived and valued."

6. H. Verdaasdonk, "Analogies as Tools for Classifying and Appraising Literary Texts," *Poetics* 22 (1994) 373-388.

7. Harold Pinter, *Other Places* (New York: Grove Press, 1983).

8. Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993).

9. Harold Pinter, 1983.

10. Ibid.

11. Oliver Sacks, *Awakenings* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

12. See Yael Zarhy-Levo (1993; 2001).

13. Discussing the agents' representation of the social world, Bourdieu [1985b: 728] analyzes the strategies employed by the agents. He draws a linkage between the element of uncertainty, which derives from a degree of indeterminacy that is always included in the objects of the social world, and "the cognitive 'filling in' strategies that produce the meaning of the objects of the social world by going beyond the directly visible attributes by reference to the future or the past." In political struggles, as well, Bourdieu claims, references to the past and the future are employed as strategic means. The past is being reconstructed in accordance with the needs of the present and the future "with creative forecasting, is endlessly invoked, to determine, delimit and define the always open meaning of the present."

14. Harold Pinter, *One for the Road* (London: Methuen, 1984).

15. The reviewers' choice in presenting Pinter's anomalous play as heralding a substantial change of his poetics in the future seems to derive mainly from the specific nature of critical dynamics. This is borne out by the evidence of an alternative critical response, as exemplified by a review that does not respond to the consensual conduct. The strategy of "forecasting," which is manifested by most reviewers when they treat "Alaska" as reflecting a major change in Pinter's poetics, is not employed in the cautious review appearing in *Country Life* (30 March 1985), which seems to solve the anomalous nature of "Alaska" by presenting the current Pinter enigma otherwise. This review claims, "on the face of it, this compassionate play has little in common with Pinter's previous work. It has never been easy to isolate the plays in which Pinter seems to be striking out in new directions from those in which he simply offers variations on familiar themes and patterns."

16. C. J. Van Rees, "The Institutional Foundation of a Critic's Connoisseurship," *Poetics* 18 (1989) 179-198.

17. These studies, bearing the imprimatur of academic institutions, exemplify different paradigms of critical discourse. According to Rees (1989: 190) "when critics are apparently describing works of art, they perform a specific communicative play—they covertly interpret and/or evaluate them. . . . Such a play is institutionally determined. I would suggest that it owes its *raison d'être* mainly to the

relative autonomy which the institution of criticism has gained within the cultural field. This implies *inter alia* that the normative conceptions of art developed within the institution and their use by people possessing authority represent inescapable institutional facts." My intention here is to explore in particular the principles governing the reviewers' discourse as institutionally determined. The principles governing academic studies deserve a separate inquiry.

18. See Bourdieu's (1985a: 26) claim: "academies, [...] claiming a monopoly over the consecration of contemporary producers, are obliged to combine tradition and tempered innovation."

19. Katherine Burkman is a Professor of English at The Ohio State University.

20. Katherine H. Burkman, *The Arrival of Godot* (London: Associated University Presses, 1986).

21. Moonyoung C. Ham, "Portrait of Deborah: *A Kind of Alaska*" in *Pinter at Sixty*, ed. Katherine H. Burkman and John L. Kundert-Gibbs (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993) 185-192. By 1993, the date of this study's publication, Ham was affiliated with The University of Delaware.

22. Katherine H. Burkman, "Deborah's Homecoming in *A Kind of Alaska*: An Afterword" in *Pinter at Sixty*, ed. Katherine H. Burkman and John L. Kundert-Gibbs (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993) 193-199.

23. A Pinter Festival: An International Meeting, Ohio State University (April 19-21, 1991).

24. Ann C. Hall, *A Kind of Alaska: Women in the Plays of O'Neill, Pinter, and Shepard*. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois P, 1993).

25. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954).

26. Helen Cixous, "Portrait of Dora," trans. Sarah Burd, *Diacritics* (Spring 1983) 2-32.

27. See note 18.

28. In her interview with Stoppard, following the opening of *Arcadia*, Sandra Barwick (*Independent*, 17 April 1993) explains the motivation for the interview: "Tom Stoppard chooses to show the past and present confused. His audiences are also often a little confused. So are the critics. What are his plays about? Time, mathematics, death, verbal acrobatics, the tortoise as metaphor, the unfairness of critics?" Moreover, the line under the playwright's photograph, which appears in the interview, reads: Tom Stoppard, a creator of confusion."

29. See also Michael Billington (*Guardian*, 14 April 1993), who presents *Arcadia* as a manifestation of Stoppard's development as a playwright.

30. See also Jack Tinker (*Daily Mail*, 14 April 1993), who complains, "alas, Mr. Stoppard cannot resist making it too clever by about two-and-three-quarters," and John Peter (*The Sunday Times*, 18 April, 1993), who asserts: "Stoppard's central metaphor hangs loosely on his plot: his physics and metaphysics keep bumping into the facts and techniques of the detective story."

31. Michael Billington (*Guardian*, 11 June 1974), for example, writes:

"*Travesties*: a dazzling pyrotechnical feat that combines Wildean pastiche, political history, artistic debate, spoof reminiscence, and song-and-dance in marvelously judicious proportions. The text itself is a dense Joycean web of literary allusions; . . . What is hard to convey, however, is the sheer theatrical panache with which Stoppard juggles these, and other themes . . . and the music, such as the brisk ragtime duet for Gwendolen and Cecily, seems perfectly integrated into the text. . . . [H]e manages the stylistic transition with breathtaking fluency."

32. See also John Peter's review (*The Sunday Times*, 18 April 1993), which attacks *Arcadia* on

various levels, explicitly comparing the new play with Stoppard's previous plays in order to illustrate its shortcomings.

33. Tom Stoppard, *Jumpers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972).