

# British Theatre Guide

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## Betrayal

Harold Pinter

Sheffield Theatres

Crucible Theatre, Sheffield

17 May–9 June 2012

Pinter wrote *Betrayal* in 1978 while he was having an affair with Antonia Fraser which led to the breakdown of his long term marriage to Vivien Merchant and Fraser's to her husband.

Pinter was no stranger to *Betrayal*. An earlier affair with Joan Bakewell, which was conducted in secrecy for seven years, provides the subject matter for this play. 'It's a situation you find yourself in', said Pinter, 'and what do you do about it? You live it and you find your ways out... This is life... What can I say about *Betrayal*?' Interestingly, Peter Hall comments, 'He seems to be saying that if you start with self-betrayal, it gradually infects everything like a dreadful, destructive virus'..

An earlier play, *The Lover*, (Vivien Merchant played the wife in the 1963 TV version) gives a comic, 'absurdist' twist to the same events. The respectable husband leaves for work, then returns in the afternoon to conduct a torrid affair as the disreputable 'lover' of his wife. *Betrayal* is a much more agonised version of the love affair, starting at the ending, retracing the 'viral' effect on all concerned, and ending at the passionate and irrepressible start of the affair. The reverse order scenes provide a forward momentum in our understanding of the real nature of the relationships.

From the opening of the play, with husband and wife standing in separate, distanced spot lights, director Nick Bagnall approaches the text with exemplary clarity and attention to detail. Even the positioning of the chairs is crucial in providing metaphoric space between the characters; and the sometimes long pauses allow the actors to explore and express the complex sub text of the relationships. Colin Richmond's set, inspired by a David Hockney painting, is conceptually effective and also a model of clarity. The glass revolve works like a ticking clock; and the inverted reflections and detritus of the love affair suggest the uncertainty of memory. The lighting design and sound effects also contribute effectively to the overall production concept.

The performances by the principals (and also by Thomas Tinker as the waiter) are object lessons in how to approach Pinter. Ruth Gemmell, (Deborah Dean in *Eastenders*) brings an impressive quality of stillness to her interpretation of the wife, Emma. Consequently, every slight movement or inflexion is weighted with significance. She looks beautiful but also homely, suggesting that this affair is not one that she has entered into lightly, and the flat that is the meeting place is intended as a home where loving, not just fucking, can take place.

Colin Tierney, as Robert, gives a subtle and complex performance as the husband betrayed not only by his wife but by his best friend. It is probably the latter that matters more. He urgently wants to reinstate the ritual of the squash game (squash, shower, pint, lunch) from which women are excluded. The crucial scene in Venice, in which Emma's infidelity is revealed, crackles with intensity, and casts a shadow over the whole play.

John Simm, the lover Jerry, last seen on the Crucible stage as Hamlet, is particularly impressive in suggesting a whole range of subtextual nuances through gesture and facial expression, especially in the long pauses. Timing throughout is excellent. The final scene in which he drunkenly expresses his uncontrollable love for Emma, is impassioned and entirely believable.

Every aspect of the production is worked out in fine detail. The scene and costume changes take place in semi-darkness as the revolve moves round, and are fascinating to watch in themselves, as well as contributing to the almost balletic quality of the whole. This is a fine production which must be seen.

**Reviewer:** [Velda Harris](#)