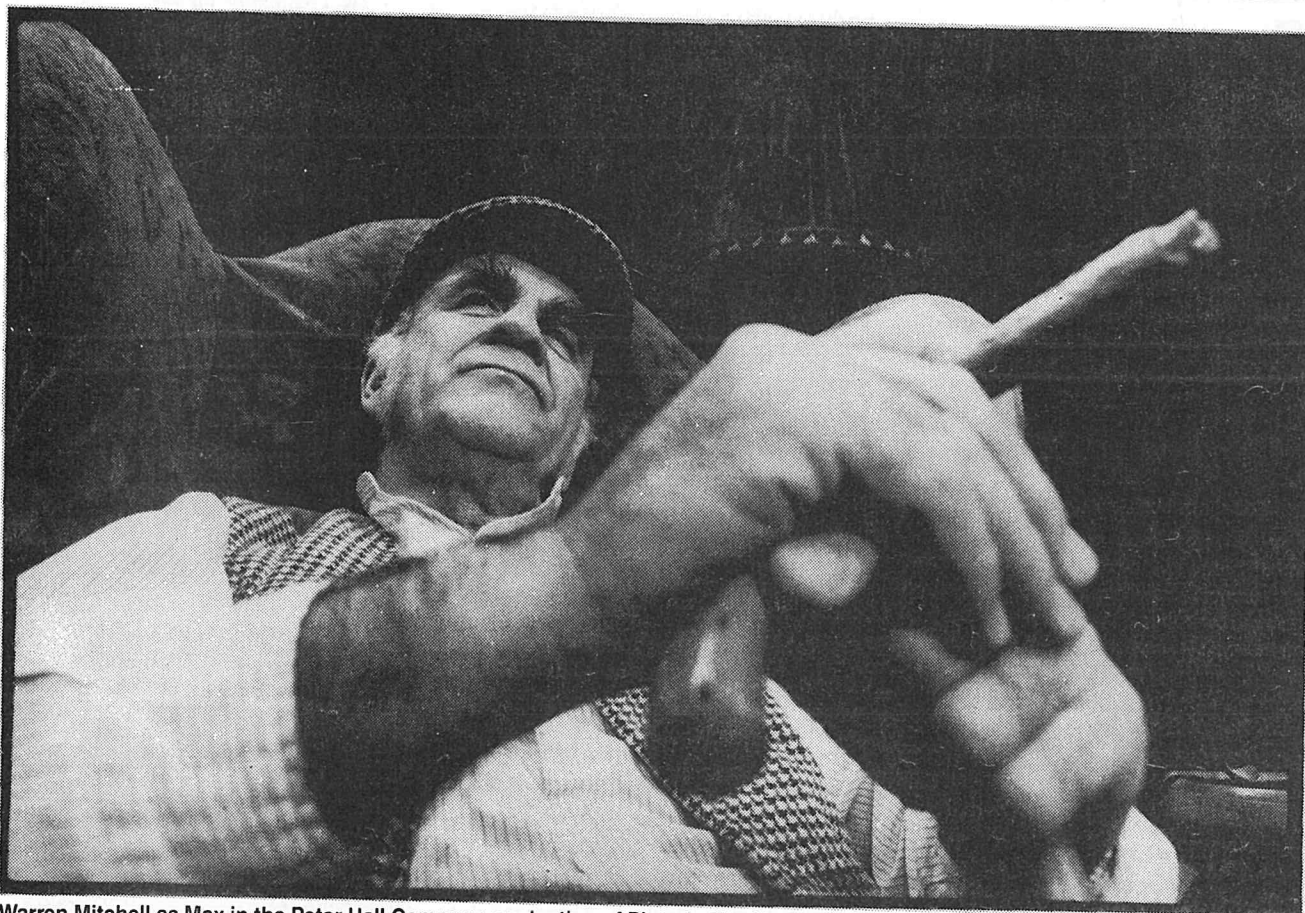


Letter from London

by Gerard Raymond



Warren Mitchell as Max in the Peter Hall Company production of Pinter's *The Homecoming* in London.

London Celebrates Pinter

PAUSES. . . SILENCE. . . MENACE . . . seemingly inconsequential snatches of dialogue—"Pinteresque" theater is a cliché today, but the plays themselves still captivate audiences around the world. A recent West End revival of the 60-year-old British playwright's *The Homecoming* felt fresh, as if it were being produced for the first time.

The Homecoming premiered in London in 1965, directed by Peter Hall receiving mixed notices from the critics. Two years later the same production was a resounding success on Broadway, winning the 1967 Tony award for Best Play. Now, a quarter century after its London debut, Hall has returned to the play with a lucid and enthralling production for his Peter Hall Company.

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The play focuses on a North London working-class family—a father, his three sons and his brother. The eldest son returns from America to introduce his wife for the first time to the family. Pinter observes their territorial battles with a savage humor that shocked audiences in the '60s. All the characters are monsters in this play, yet at different points we feel sympathy for each of them as they are victimized by someone else. The young woman is adopted by the family which intends to set her up as a whore. She doesn't seem to mind; in fact she appears to welcome the chance of getting away from her insufferable husband, now an academic in California. At the end of the play she becomes a surrogate mother to the family. She has taken the place of the person who, in all probability, was the biggest monster in the

bunch—the deceased mother/whore of the family.

Some may accuse Pinter of the worst kind of misogyny, but Hall's production makes us understand that Ruth, the eldest son's wife, is the character most firmly in control. The virulent attacks on her are merely acts of chauvinistic bravado by men trying desperately to mask their own weakness. The old man, Max, is played by Warren Mitchell, by now permanently associated with the foul-mouthed bigot he played on the popular television series, *Till Death Do Us Part*. At times menacing and bullying, at others whining and sentimental, Mitchell obviously relishes this bravura part. Nicholas Woodeson (recently a superb King John in Deborah Warner's RSC production) excels as Lenny, the streetwise son who runs a prostitution ring in

Soho. Cherie Lunghi gives Ruth the poise which keeps her in control even when she receives the worst abuse.

This production is fresh and exciting because the director gives us the best realization of the playwright's particular style. Hall once described the famous Pinter pause thus: "A pause is really a bridge where the audience thinks that you're this side of the river, then when you speak again, you're the other side. That's a pause. And it's alarming, often. It's a gap, which retrospectively gets filled in."

Hall has noted that when you direct a Pinter play you have to direct two plays at the same time. "What stirs the audience is not the mask, not the control, but what is underneath it: that's what upsets them, that's what terrifies and moves them." Recently he described how *The Homecoming* had to be anchored properly by acting out the unspoken subtext during some of the rehearsals. "What is interesting about the language is that it is used to contain and suppress, never to show what a character is feeling. But the actors have to know what they are feeling, or it becomes one of those abstract, pretentious productions where everything is very vague. The task is to uncover an emotional life underlying the text which the actors can feel is real. Otherwise they become abstractions saying significant things without understanding why."

Hall worked closely with Pinter, directing *Old Times*, *No Man's Land*, and *Betrayal*, until the playwright fell out with him after the publication of Hall's diaries in 1983. Pinter objected to Hall's references to the breakdown of the playwright's marriage to Vivien Merchant (the original Ruth). Relations between the two are apparently mended and this excellent revival is the happy result. "I think it is one of the best plays of the mid-century . . . it has classic dimensions," Hall said recently. "Most plays written in the '60s look dated, but *The Homecoming* speaks to any generation and any nationality." □

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