

4-22-1975

## 'The Birthday Party' a Well-Done Celebration

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### Recommended Citation

Lazenby, Walter, "'The Birthday Party' a Well-Done Celebration" (1975). *Walter Lazenby Reviews*. 37.  
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# 'The B

By WALTER LAZENBY

For the first time in the fifteen years that Harold Pinter has been a successful Absurdist playwright, Eastern's Theatre Department is presenting one of his plays.

This premiere is "The Birthday Party," to be celebrated again Friday and Saturday nights and Sunday afternoon.

Called by one critic "a comedy of chilling fascination," the play creates a sinister mood hardly in keeping with expectations aroused by the label "comedy" and by the title.

A seemingly inane but revealing conversation between a husband and wife who

## *Birthday Party' a Well-Done Celebration*

are proprietors of a seaside boarding house starts the play, and for a few moments it seems to be the kind of play they discuss, where "just talk" occurs.

Then things begin to happen, most of them with allegorical overtones, none of them altogether explained by play's end.

Of most interest is what befalls Stanley, a lodger who seems not to have been outside for a long time. Two mysterious strangers, Goldberg and McCann, take lodgings at the same house, confront Stanley with unstated threats of violence, and then batter him mercilessly with words,

platitudes, impossible questions, and scoldings. The birthday party which Goldberg insists on arranging for him erupts into violence, and the upshot is a change in Stanley's personality: ironically a new Stanley is born.

Program notes suggest that Stanley can be seen as a kind of Everyman, hiding from "the relentless necessity of facing his inhibiting world," and that we can recognize our mingled guilts and fears in him, as well as the identities of our private dreads in the two strangers.

But if the two strangers are to be thus identified, I must quarrel a little with E. G. Gabbard's direction of the

scene in which they verbally abuse Stanley. True, in the allegory they represent dehumanizing forces in society (including routine and ritual); but to ritualize their

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movements (even though it livens pace) around Stanley's chair seems to me to detract from the force of this moment in the surface-level story. The men should have the full

dreadful reality here that they have in their well-staged final exit, where Goldberg deftly twists Stanley's head around so that he will be pointed in the right direction, i. e., back to the inhibiting world.

Robert Dodd's performance as Goldberg is one of the best I've seen on Eastern stages recently. His Goldberg is the enigma that Pinter intended: the smiling, hearty representative of the middle-class, often reminiscing about his childhood and Mum and Dad, offering fatherly advice, oiling the machine of social intercourse with politeness and platitudinous formulas, but the ominous villain through it all.

Dodd maintains suave control in every appearance; and his monologue in Act Three, in which he rises to oratorical peaks and then gradually runs out of steam, is a tour de force.

Bob Bacon also rises admirably to the demands of Stanley's ordeal, especially near the end in his imitation of the overwhelmed little man who tries to talk but cannot.

Karen Eubank's portrayal of Meg inevitably invites comparison with Jean Stapleton's Edith Bunker, and she does not come off badly in the comparison. Yet she slights the sensuality hinted at in the role.

All that John Malkovich lacks to make a finely credible Petye

is more robust delivery; his mannered movements and impassive face are successful.

Jayne Ball appears siren-like in a stereotyped siren's role and then surprises by her ability to show hurt after she, too, has been victimized by Goldberg.

To his acting in the rather flat role of McCann, Dan Dailey adds dimension by a cultivated facial twitch and his resemblance to James Cagney.

As it should, Clarence Blanchette's sturdy fortress-like set stands detached from any surroundings, to emphasize Stanley's retreat from the world. Its wide-angled "V" shape affords nice focus on entrances and particularly on the final exit.