

SLAC's In the Room Conversation with Director John Vreeke about THE CARETAKER

SLAC. Our vision for this theatre is to be ever more brave, vibrant, innovative and relevant.

JOHN VREEKE. So why are you doing Pinter, who's dead now, and a play that was written in 1960? (Laughter) It's almost fifty years old.
I think brave because I don't look at it like doing a revival. I think doing revivals is not necessarily brave. Revivals are kind of safe, because it's like doing a museum piece. A revival is something that was extremely impressive, or cogent, or important, or hugely successful at the time that it came out. Usually you associate the word brave with a brand new piece that nobody's done before. I think this is a really bold, brave choice on SLAC's part, Nancy's part, because it's a play that – well, it's fifty years old. It was written at a very specific time. It was written by a playwright that, although I think he will go down in history as one of the greatest playwrights – he'll be remembered right up there with Beckett and Ionesco, Albee, Williams and Miller – there are other people who don't agree with that, that think that the whole Pinter writing was an interesting approach to writing at the time, but that has kind of outlived its effect or its usefulness. So I think it's brave for that reason. I don't agree with that. I think it is every bit as impressive today, as meaningful as it was fifty years ago – and maybe even more so, because in a way very little has changed. Nothing's changed. Everything's the same. We still have the same human issues that we dealt with fifty years ago. Now that's nothing surprising. There's a reason we do Shakespeare all the time, because he wrote about recognizable human psychology that happened then, but that's still relevant today, so that's not surprising. But doing Pinter now in 2009 -- I think it's a big, bold statement. I don't think there are very many companies doing it. I don't think Pinter is necessarily your go-to older playwright. I think it's – the challenge of doing it and making it really, really effective theatre is bigger than your kind of normal run-of-the-mill play. The language is so much more – well, it's so much better. It's so much more interesting, but it's also poetic – it's musical – it's vague – it's mysterious – it's full of tension – it's full of psychology – but you have to find all of that; you have to locate all of that. And you have to have an ear for the music in the writing. I have to have that as a director, and the three actors have to have that and embrace that, and learn it, and figure it out. That's what our rehearsal process is about. So why is it brave? It's brave because it's risky. I don't think there's a lot of gray area between great and it just doesn't work. I think it's really one or the other, which is kind of scary. It's better to have a fall back, "Oh, that could be alright." Alright is never very interesting in my opinion, so I would prefer taking on the task of that – it could be terrific or "nice try".

SLAC. Have you worked on a Pinter play before?

J.V. Yes. I've directed this play before. I directed it forty years ago when I was a student, an undergraduate. And at that time forty years ago in the late sixties in theatre departments all around the country, all the hot writers were the Absurdist: Pinter, Beckett, Ionesco, Albee... Those were all the people that we went to. John Guare. In fact, I directed THE HOUSE OF BLUE LEAVES with Gene Pack at the University of Utah

when I was a graduate student. It was the first off-Broadway, off of Broadway, production into the regions, into the university system. We got to have the first HET grant for it at the time. So Pinter 40 years ago was hot, hot, hot. I remember reading the play when I was a student, and I had to choose between that and something that was very, very much a sure thing – you really couldn't go wrong with it, but with THE CARETAKER, I just thought, "I don't know, I don't know..." My best friend, who's still my best friend, Bernice, said, "Oh, do THE CARETAKER 'cause you don't know how to do it, and that's much more interesting." And I said, "OK." [Laughter] So that's how I went into it, and I remember the experience being really, really thrilling because once you start working on it, you just have to have an ear for the language – you have to be tuned into it. Today's our third day of rehearsal, and we're still looking for that. We're hoping to get on that slide. So, we'll see. So, it's brave! It's scary.

SLAC. Do you find yourself hitting a scene or hitting a moment and saying, "I remember when I first read this, I thought –, and now I think –"?

J.V. No, not really. I remember distinctly the three actors – because it was a student production, so they were all my friends. I remember them, but they were all between 18 and 22 years old. [Laughter] Gene's in his seventies and our two young characters are in their thirties, so this is so much more appropriately cast. But specific moments? I have an image of where we did it. We did it in a little black box.

SLAC. But your understanding of it?

J.V. Actually, I really think I got in then, but I don't get it now. [Laughter/laughing] No, seriously. Now I have a big question about what this is going to do to the audience. I'm very, very curious about it.

I think my response to your question had to do with the fact that when you're in college, you have a captive student audience, and forty years ago, the students were going to love Pinter regardless of what you did with it because it was Pinter, and he was so young and so exciting and just the hottest thing in terms of world class playwrights. And now, forty to fifty years later, this is not an academic project, this is now a theatrical experience we're trying to create for the audiences that come to the Salt Lake Acting Company. That's a whole different deal. I have every reason to believe that the audiences are going to be captivated by it, but I also know that unless there's really specific work done – and this largely falls on my shoulders – that Pinter can be a kind of yawning, long slog if you're not careful with it. I think the themes in THE CARETAKER, the three characters in THE CARETAKER, the extreme situation that the elderly gentleman finds himself in, resonate on a very, very deep level. Whether audiences are going to be able to go home and write a paper about it – that's not going to happen, and that's certainly not my concern, but I hope that it sticks to them. There is tension in it; there is mystery in it; there is a lot of humor in it, but deep down there's a lot of pathos in it – it's just the human situation. And that's not just the old homeless guy, that's the two young men who are outside of society. We can imagine ourselves being there. But we're not, we're all cozy and comfortable and have our little homes that we go to, but these three don't. It questions and asks us to look at that. That could happen to us. That could be us. And on some level, that is us. So, we'll see. There

are other themes that I think are relevant. I think it's about power struggle. All of us do that in our daily lives in subtle and not so subtle ways. We are always competing for status. These three do that; it's a constant power struggle. The whole caretaking theme. The caretaker literally refers to the person who is hired to take care of this particular building that the two brothers have purchased – the one brother lives in and the other brother stays there, and they're looking for a caretaker for the building. So that's the literal quality of that word, but caretaker has to do with "How do we take care of each other?" These three characters – Mick takes care of his brother Aston; Aston takes care of the old man, Davies; Davies takes care of himself – but the whole idea of – "Who is the caretaker? Who is doing the caretaking?" is a pretty big theme.

SLAC. Did Pinter ever answer that question?

J.V. People have asked, and we're indulging it, too, in our discussions with the actors – particularly the two young actors who are very interested in the Freudian implications of all of this and how to get in there and find out what is the bigger metaphor, and is the play really about the political structure in Britain, and... Pinter got asked all these questions, and he denied all of it by saying, 'It's a play about a homeless man and two brothers.' [Laughter] And that's as far as he'd go. Now most playwrights who are great playwrights like that are coy, and they'll do that, but they know they've written something way beyond that. And oftentimes, I think playwrights don't consciously write these kinds of sub-strata themes and relevances and metaphoric nuances that run through the play. They're not really conscious of writing it, but because of their own talent and their own genius and their own sort of instincts, they end up writing something that is that available. I think the genius of *Caretaker* – like one of my favorite plays, *WAITING FOR GODOT* – that play has infinite possibilities and infinite discussion, and if you were to ask Beckett, "Who's Godot?", he'd say, "I don't know." [Laughter] These playwrights sort of do that, but that adds to the allure of it – because imagine what if they did? What if you had three sentences stating exactly what *THE CARETAKER* is supposed to be about? Oh, done. Everybody would stop talking about it because – well, the writer told you. So they are being pretty smart and coy when they are doing that.

SLAC. How about innovative? In your opening rehearsal notes to the actors, you wrote, "Do it all with frenetic vitality and a wry sense of ridiculous." I love that!

J.V. I like to think I did that forty years ago, too. I try to never treat writing too reverently. So when you started to talk about how Pinter pauses became their own thing – Pinter denies it. He said, 'Enough already, it's so stupid.' I certainly believe in looking at those pauses and taking them into account and seeing what it is in these pauses... [phone call]

SLAC. What are you doing that would perhaps be different from a typical production of *THE CARETAKER* in 1960 or even 1970?

J.V. Really, there's not much. It's such a tightly written piece, and he wrote his own stage directions along with the pauses – and he did write pauses in that he meant to be filled with very specific thought processes that then become clear to the audience. The

danger of these pauses in the hands of people that don't really know or understand what they're doing is that they're just empty, they're just silence, they're just pauses. You just sit there and wait until the next person starts to speak. That's not the idea of the Pinter pause, and ultimately people think that's what it is, that it somehow adds to the Pinter mystery of the play. That was foolish then, and it's just as foolish now.

We now have three actors in 2009. Gene's been around a long time. He certainly was around fifty years ago and could have done THE CARETAKER then – maybe played one of the brothers – maybe have played Davies, because younger actors have played that role. We're still doing it. It's sort of like saying to me, "How would you play that Mozart chamber music piece today as opposed to the way he wrote it?" Well, the notes are all the same. It's all the same, and it is so tightly structured that it really doesn't allow itself for a kind of massive reinvention, so we decided to do it the way it was written. We've designed a set very similar to what the set for THE CARETAKER has looked like for fifty years, because there's really no place else to go. In my research, nobody's even really attempted to do something hugely different, and that often happens. Certainly that happens with Shakespeare all the time. I do that with Shakespeare all the time – I have no interest in doing a museum piece of Shakespeare. I wouldn't even know how to do that. I'm interested in reading Shakespeare and finding some kind of more relevant era or conceit or notion or time or whatever to make it, to put it into a more now period, which makes it all the more exciting.

[THE CARETAKER] takes care of that itself; there are no specific year references, so it could be 2009 – it could be 2000, it could be 1990, 1980, 1970, 1960. And we're not saying that in the program; we're not dating – it takes place in West London, and that's it. I thought briefly about changing all the British-isms in it and making it really American, but that's like taking Schubert or Tchaikovsky or Mozart and rewriting their notes. Why would you do that? It's just stupid, so I quickly dropped that. [Laughter] These guys are from London, and they have to be. It's such a classic little piece of theatre, I think – and this is not earth-shatteringly original – it's just the right way to do it; I'm not treating it with a lot of reverence. If I find a good reason for a pause, and it's effective theatre, I'll use a pause, otherwise I won't. If I can elevate their performances to a slightly manic, vital, absurd place, I will – but it's going to be honest and truthful, it's not just going to be stupid and crazy.

It's a good question, because most of the time when I do something – I just did a FIDDLER ON THE ROOF – and I wasn't interested in doing the Jerome Robbins' production of it in 1967 or something like that, I did something – not radical – but I reinvented the whole scenic backdrop for it, but you still do FIDDLER ON THE ROOF, you still sing "Sun Rise, Sun Set" and "Matchmaker" [laughter]. It's the same with THE CARETAKER; the characters are still the same. Our boys – I'm trying to give them a little younger, hipper look than they might have had in 1962. I just had a meeting with the [costume] designer [Kevin Alberts]; there's a kind hipness about some of those retro sixties clothes that one of those characters could wear, but the bum is a bum. He's got to look like he smells and lives on the streets. It needs to do that.

SLAC. Well, we are so lucky to have you. I'd like you to talk about how this came about. How did you come back?

J.V. Nancy just called me out of the blue – I think it was in January. I had just moved back from DC, back to Seattle for a number of reasons I don't really want to get into, but it was appropriate. It was time for us to move back to Seattle, where we had always intended on living again because it is a beautiful place to live, although I loved living in DC, and I miss it a lot. We moved back, and I was just starting to figure out – I had about a half dozen projects back east – some of which I've done since talking to Nancy. I did a production of Chekhov's SEAGULL – a total reinvention, and I did a play called HEROES by Tom Stoppard. I'm going back to do a play called CHASING GEORGE WASHINGTON and another called GRUESOME PLAYGROUND INJURIES. I was just setting up the year and trying to find some work in Seattle, which is difficult to do since I've been gone so long and seasons are set, and Nancy called out of the blue – not really anticipating that I'd remember or even be interested in talking with her – and of course I remembered her. She and I go back a long way. I started her out in theatre actually. I gave her her first acting job. She was a stay at home mom with a couple of young boys. She just came down to the theatre – had not a clue – and auditioned for a little part, and I gave it to her, and she had a great time, and she went on from there. I left Salt Lake City obviously, but she said that she had somehow run into my name via another play – I think BOOM – that she was looking at or reading, and she went to some reviews, and in going to the review, it brought her to my website. As she saw my name, she said she just called. Just out of the blue – and she said she was back at the Salt Lake Acting Company after having been gone for a while – as sort of a caretaker/Executive Producer, and she was trying to put a season together, and she had all these kind of wonderful thoughts. She liked all the connections between me and her and Theatre 138 – and it was sort of like an anniversary season, and would I be interested in doing something? And if I did, what would that be? And I just didn't think about this at all, I said, "Well, Pinter just died, and I love THE CARETAKER. It would be fun to do THE CARETAKER."

"Alright, I'll read THE CARETAKER."

She read it and called back and said, "I love this play. Would you really be serious about doing it?"

And I said, "You should check around and see if Gene Pack is still acting."

And she said, "Yes, he is."

"Well, have him read the play 'cause it's huge. Make sure he reads it, and that he will commit to this because it's a Hamlet-size part."

SLAC. Yes.

J.V. The two boys have it easy compared to the assignment that Gene has. After long consideration, Gene said he wanted to do it, and then I said, "Well, if he does it, we can work the schedule out. I think [Nancy] had to manipulate the schedule a little bit because I had to leave earlier -- I think you usually open a little later. So all of that worked out, and I'm sitting there thinking, "Well, I guess I'm going back to Salt Lake City." [Laughter] I never, ever thought about coming back here.

Then the other thing that was quite -- talking about caretaking -- I'm sort of my mom's caretaker these days. Just two weeks ago, I moved her into an assisted living place, and

that's hard for me to talk about -- so, I'm going to stop there, but -- there's the Caretaker.

SLAC. The caretaker is a difficult job, very difficult...

J.V. ...Yeah. [Laughing]

SLAC. I'd also like to hear how your beginnings at Theatre 138 brought you back here today.

J.V. Well, that was the most fabulous place in the world, you know. I was young -- I was 22. I was a graduate student. The MFA in directing at that time really consisted of a bunch of seminars. I think I had a little bit of coursework, but most of it I had done in undergrad school back east, so they weren't concerned about that. I had to direct four plays -- and it was all the prep that goes into that directing. Then you have to defend your work orally, and then you have to write a paper. Other than having to write out a paper and doing this oral interview -- which was just a joke -- graduate school was so much easier than undergrad school. [Laughter] I remember that because I did what I would have done anyway, so I ended up directing four plays. Someone told me about Theatre 138, and I met Ariel Ballif, and we talked. I said, "I'd really like a place to do one of my thesis projects" -- I think it was WAITING FOR GODOT-- and he said, "Well, you can do it here." We hit it off really well, and I ended up working at Theatre 138 for three years. There would be times when I was actually acting in one show, beginning directing in another, and had a third one running. I mean, it was such a fun place. And Gene and I traded off acting and directing. He would direct me, and then I would direct him; he would direct me, and I would direct him...

SLAC. So Theatre 138 had how many seats?

J.V. 90? 100? Tiny.

SLAC. At it was located?

J.V. It was 138 South 2nd East. It was a very, very exciting place. Ariel Ballif was a very talented man. He did everything there. He built sets; he was a costume designer, so he was always designing costumes for all the shows. Just really crude in retrospect, but... [Laughter] We just had a great time. The rehearsal space was about the size of your office. We did these giant shows. I loved it. It was a very formative time for me. I was trying to make a decision whether I wanted to act or direct, so I did both -- a lot of both -- and it was just great. It was very exciting.

SLAC. So you direct musicals as well?

J.V. Sure. I directed THE FANTASTIKS, IRENE, FIDDLER, MEDEA The Musical [Laughter], THE UNSINKABLE MOLLY BROWN, THE BOYFRIEND, CABARET, 110 IN THE SHADE...

SLAC. You don't see too many directors cross over.

J.V. Oh, I love musicals. I just did a workshop of a new musical, TAKE ME AMERICA, about asylum seekers. ...Sort of like A CHORUS LINE for asylum seekers. It was cool.

SLAC. Could you talk a little bit about that T.S. Eliot quote --

J.V. "I will show you fear and a handful of dust." Why would I like that [for THE CARETAKER], and where did I find it? I guess I found it in reading some of these reviews. You know I read the review of the production you saw with Donald Pleasance. That's what convinced me that going with an older cast -- usually you go with an actor between fifty and sixty years old to play Davies because it is so demanding, but I really felt strongly that Gene can do this, and that the fact that he is himself an older person, you know, approaching eighty, doing this role -- is huge.

"I will show you fear and a handful of dust."

I'm not even sure what the context of that quote was, but I liked it because I think all three of these characters live in a great deal of fear about their lives, and about who they're supposed to be, and what they're supposed to be doing. Looking for their own humanity and not being able to find it.

I think that "I will show you fear and a handful of dust." also has to do with the setting that the whole thing is in. The setting is a very dusty, very crumbled down, dilapidated, skid row house. So I think that's why.

SLAC. Thank you.

Harold Pinter's THE CARETAKER runs September 16-October 11, 2009.

Director John Vreeke, Ensemble: Gene Pack, Daniel Beecher, Matthew Ivan Bennett

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