"I Say, Can You Hear Me?": Pinter's *A Slight Ache* as Radio Drama

Ava McLean*

Abstract

Harold Pinter's 1959 radio play *A Slight Ache* serves to illuminate how the constraints of radio drama provided Pinter with the opportunity to examine themes such as passive aggression and competition within outwardly bland social interactions, in an entirely new form. Pinter's approach to radio drama goes against the principles of clarity and unambiguousness that the BBC attempted to push its writers towards at the time, instead favouring the unease and uncertainty that a total lack of visual information allows him to visit upon his audience. In particular, Pinter's decision to render the character of the Matchseller entirely mute allows his presence to constantly challenge the listening audience, forcing them to constantly revaluate the validity of everything they hear. Through Flora and Edward's contradictory assessments of the Matchseller, their respective goals, desires and insecurities are exposed, shining increasing light on their divergent views of the world around them. The combination of the Matchseller's silence and the total lack of visual information given about him allow The Matchseller to become an increasingly obscure, changeable presence in the play. *A Slight Ache* emerges as a play so well suited to the constraints of radio that later stage and television productions only serve to expose how added visuals actually render the play far less effective, closing off the opportunity for multiple interpretations of the Matchseller to coexist, as they do in the original radio format.

Keywords: Mid-century drama, radio plays, Harold Pinter, British Broadcasting Corporation, playwriting

The mix of humour and creeping intimidation that pervades so much of Harold Pinter's early work has become a central aspect of his plays: *The Homecoming*, *The Caretaker*, and *The Birthday Party* offer examples of his knack for infusing wit with terror and terror with wit. But Pinter's early comic work was not merely limited to the stage: He also wrote plays specifically for radio, to be beamed out to listeners all over Britain on the BBC airwaves. Through his first attempt at radio drama, *A Slight Ache*, Pinter effectively manipulates the constraints of radio to his advantage, turning the fact that listeners are limited to only one of their senses into a chance to examine the intricacies of verbal communication, and throwing listeners into doubt about the viability of the perceptions that the central characters have of others. As the leading couple, Edward and Flora, engage in alternately friendly and combative interaction with a mysterious man who sells matches in their street, Pinter deftly combines sharp dialogue, silence, and a total lack of visual information to make the listener feel as if they too are situated in Edward and Flora's home. Perhaps more importantly, however, Pinter uses these techniques to encourage the listener to doubt and criticize everything they hear – including Edward's

* Department of English, College of Arts and Science, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK, Canada
Correspondence: **ava.mclean@usask.ca**

University of Saskatchewan Undergraduate Research Journal
Volume 6, Issue 2, 2020

and Flora's holds on reality. In fact, the play is so clearly crafted with radio in mind that stage and television versions of it can sometimes blunt its power if they do not lean into its strengths as audio-based drama.

A Slight Ache was Pinter's first successful foray into the world of radio drama, receiving its first airing on July 29, 1959 (Pinter, *Complete Works: One*, 7). According to his biographer Michael Billington, Pinter may have taken up the challenge of writing for radio in part to rehabilitate his own reputation as a writer after his first full-length play, *The Birthday Party*, received a critical mauling less than a year before (Billington, *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter*, 95). As Billington theorizes, practical motivations, like the opportunity for name recognition or the chance to collect a paycheque, were certainly not the only reasons for a writer to dabble in radio, particularly if you were as fascinated by throwing the audience into a state of uncertainty as Pinter was: "For a writer who questioned verifiable certainties and who believed in the audience's power to determine the 'meaning' of a work, radio drama was obviously the happiest of mediums," Billington observes. "Addressing an often solitary listener in conditions of domestic privacy, radio-plays positively demanded creative participation" (95). In his essay "How to Not Write Broadcast Plays," Jacob Stulberg provides context for the creation of *A Slight Ache* by examining other, more conventional radio drama from the same period. According to Stulberg, the BBC attempted to "foster a playwriting style suited to the conditions of radio" (509) through a series of manuals that were meant to instruct playwrights in the corporation's idea of successful radio drama. Stulberg characterizes the content of these manuals by saying that "central to this style was an emphasis on clarity and coherence. Well into the 1950s, even the BBC's more experimental radio plays tended to maintain strong and audible distinctions among characters, plotlines, and sound effects" (510), with the corporation even advising would-be radio writers that "visual images . . . must have no element of mistiness or indecision about them" (Sieveking, qtd in Stulberg 510). Pinter's play, though, revels in just the sort of mistiness and indecision that the BBC derided, turning uncertainty into a key asset. Stulberg observes that, throughout *A Slight Ache*, the visuals referenced by the characters remain inconcrete: "the physical world described never settles into anything clear enough for the listener to visualize" (510). *A Slight Ache* may have been written with the constraints of radio firmly in mind, but it is far from the kind of straightforward radio drama the BBC often encouraged its writers to produce at the time.

Keenly aware as he was of the points at which the inanities of life can intersect with feelings of foreboding or threat, Pinter uses the medium of radio drama to both comic and chilling effect, using the play's choppy dialogue style to create a sense of authenticity that legitimizes the unusual events of the plot. In the opening scene, for example, listeners are introduced to the play's central couple, Edward and Flora, and hear them alternate between cheerfulness and bickering upon discovering that a wasp is about to invade their afternoon tea (Pinter 171). Pinter carefully manipulates his characteristic use of repetition in the dialogue in order to create a sense of intimacy for the listener: As Edward and Flora dispute whether her garden contains convolvulus or japonica (170), it feels as if the listening audience might be close enough to them to occupy a seat in the very same picturesque garden they are speaking of. But what is perhaps even more important is the way that Pinter uses his main couple's dialogue to create suspense that seems unique to the medium of radio. Edward's play-by-play description of his efforts to maim the creature is written in a highly choppy style that reflects his struggle to simultaneously conduct a conversation and rid his living space of the irritating insect, carrying the audience along with him with every word. For example, look at this exchange between Edward and Flora at the beginning of the play:

> FLORA. It's going in the pot.
> EDWARD. Give me the lid.
> FLORA. It's in.
> EDWARD. Give me the lid.
> FLORA. I'll do it.
> EDWARD. Give it to me! Now. . . Slowly . . .
> FLORA. What are you doing?
> EDWARD. Be quiet. Slowly . . .carefully . . .on . . .the. . .pot! Ha-ha-ha. Very good.
> FLORA. Now he's in the marmalade.
> (Pinter, *Complete Works: One*, 171)

When this scene is delivered with visuals, Edward and Flora's rapid commentary is rendered redundant, since the viewing audience can see Edward's every move as he attempts to grab the marmalade lid from Flora, then trap the offending wasp in the teapot. On the radio, however, Edward and Flora's tendency towards narrating their every physical action is vital to the audience's understanding of what is taking place. Through Edward and Flora's dialogue in this scene, Pinter ensures that listeners are consistently aware of the presence of the wasp, turning the need for exposition into a chance for listeners to observe Edward and Flora's dynamic so closely that it feels almost like eavesdropping.

As fascinating as Pinter's rather creative use of expository dialogue is, an even more important aspect of how well the play works for radio performance lies in his use of silence to create a tense, unpredictable atmosphere. Though the play has three characters (Flora, Edward, and the Matchseller), Flora and Edward are the only two who actually speak. In fact, with the exception of the brief sound of his footsteps, the Matchseller makes no sound at all (Taylor–Batty 40). Through his silence, The Matchseller exists primarily as a blank slate of sorts, one that people as self-centred as Edward and Flora delight in taking advantage of

as they ramble endlessly at their quiet new guest. Pinter's lifelong friend and collaborator Henry Woolf suggests in a personal interview (2019) that Edward even sees the Matchseller as a kind of reflection of his former self, before Edward rose through the ranks of the British class system and adopted a life as an essayist. "He invites this derelict into his house," says Woolf, "as if he's urging himself to think 'there but for the grace of God go I'" (Woolf). Evidence of Edward's conflation of himself with his guest may be seen in a lengthy sequence in which Edward attempts to draw parallels between himself and the Matchseller in increasingly improbable ways, reciting a rapid, boastful monologue about his career as a successful essayist, at one point directly comparing the Matchseller to himself through the admission that he "was in commerce too [With a chuckle]" (Pinter 184 [stage direction]). Each time Edward reveals something about himself, he pauses as if waiting for the Matchseller's response, at one point repeating the words, "I say, can you hear me?" (Pinter 184), as if to underscore the lack of verbal communication between them. No response comes, however, and Edward's irritation continues to mount, finally reaching a climax as he implores the silent man, "Why do you stand outside my back gate, from dawn till dusk, why do you pretend to sell matches, why . . . ? What is it, damn you?" (Pinter 187). Despite his initial enthusiasm for the idea of inviting the Matchseller into his home, Edward becomes incensed at the other man's lack of a response to his achievements, allowing Pinter to poke holes in Edward's confidence and reveal that underneath his enviable life as a man of letters lurks a host of insecurities.

Where the Matchseller's silence appears to irritate Edward – to suggest, perhaps, as Mark Taylor-Batty does, that he interprets the Matchseller's silences as a challenge to his authority (40) – the mysterious man appears to evoke from Flora quite a positive response, a development which allows Pinter to demonstrate how each half of the play's speaking couple responds differently to the Matchseller's presence, according to their own desires. In her private moment with the Matchseller, Flora eagerly attempts to grill him on his thoughts about romance, offers to run him a bath, and gives him the name Barnabas unprompted, all before finally instructing him to "[seductively] Tell me about love. Speak to me of love" (Pinter 192 [stage direction]). According to Henry Woolf, the reasoning behind Flora's sudden attachment to Barnabas may lie in her unhappiness with the current state of her marriage, compared to her life with Edward in the past: "A point could be made for her sensing in Barnabas the man she married," says Woolf, "not the hollow figure that Edward has become." Flora's need to take care of Barnabas also drives her to see Barnabas's physical attributes very differently than her husband does, describing him as ancient and in ill health, even about to die (Pinter 193). While Flora may see him as someone whom she can take care of, eagerly telling her husband that "the man is desperately ill!" (193), Edward disputes this, saying their houseguest is entirely healthy, and remarking to Barnabas how "extraordinarily youthful" he looks underneath his balaclava (199). Elissa Guralnick theorizes that the radio format allows Pinter to use the figure of the Matchseller as a kind of Rorschach test to show how Edward and Flora perceive the world around them: "The matchseller is as he seems to whoever perceives him; for his silence and passivity give consent to all perceptions," she says. "He corrects no misjudgements, ratifies no truths. Hence those who would fathom him have to create him, revealing in the process their own casts of mind– exactly what happens to Edward and Flora" (115). Through Edward's and Flora's discordant assessments of their lodger, Pinter underscores that radio cannot provide a concrete visual representation. Such a constraint allows Pinter to present to listeners multiple contradictory pictures of Barnabas, a fact that deepens their understanding of Edward's and Flora's differences and leaves the listeners in a crucial state of ambivalence about Barnabas for much of the play.

Pinter's choice to keep Barnabas silent allows for yet another possibility about the character's existence, one that goes beyond what his appearance signifies to his hosts. Alongside the reading that Edward and Flora project their own impressions and desires onto the Matchseller exists the possibility that the decrepit, mysterious figure who haunts the couple's garden is a figment of their imaginations. The fact that the Matchseller exists in a radio play and utters no dialogue means that Edward and Flora's commentary is the only way through which the listening audience can glean information about the Matchseller. And because Edward's and Flora's testimonies about their guest's appearance vary so wildly throughout the course of the play, neither of them can easily be called measured, reliable sources. In making Edward's and Flora's opinions so contradictory, Pinter encourages doubt about a concrete view of the Matchseller's identity – including any tangible sense of his existence at all. The changeable, mysterious quality of the Matchseller's character indicates that black-and-white judgements about his presence would be too simplistic, but the idea of the Matchseller as an illusion conjured by Edward and Flora's overactive imaginations is one that seems well-suited to the ambivalence that Pinter creates for his listeners.

This feeling of constant uncertainty that Pinter evokes in his listeners may, in fact, be the vital thing that a radio format contributes to *A Slight Ache*. When listening to a well-performed radio play, the lack of visuals prevents the listener from feeling that there is a single right way to analyze the play's content and limits their ability to feel that any one character's impressions of reality are entirely true. For example, the audience's inability to see Barnabas means that the various shapes he takes for Edward and Flora – everything from an infirm old man who will die at any moment, to a hale and hearty young specimen – may all be considered to be equally likely. The alternative that is introduced when visuals are added proves disappointing by

comparison. Elissa Guralnick dissects the issues that arise when the Matchseller is given a physical form, saying, "Is the matchseller cast as decrepit and obtuse? Then the couple emerges as completely deluded. Does the matchseller change in appearance and demeanour at the couple's least suggestion as the play runs its course? Then the couple is sane, though their world is surreal. Is the matchseller simply a void on the stage, an absence where a man is reputed to be? Then the couple demonstrably hallucinate. Only one of these options can apply per production; the choice is the director's and, once it is made, the play is constrained by it" (123). An example of the problem that Guralnick describes can be clearly seen in the 1967 television version of *A Slight Ache*, directed by Christopher Morahan. In Morahan's version, any changeable, ambiguous qualities given to the Matchseller by Pinter are thoroughly diluted, not just through his physical presence, but also through the specific portrayal of him chosen for the television version. On television, the mere physical presence of the Matchseller changes the dynamic between himself, Edward, and Flora from one of tense competition to a series of bland monologues in which Edward and Flora talk seemingly endlessly about their personal opinions, with little appearing to motivate their actions. Pinter's attempts to create an atmosphere of unease become undermined when the audience can see the man who supposedly strikes so much terror into Edward. Even as Edward's sense of the Matchseller as a threat rises and rises as the play nears its end, the 1967 television Matchseller remains entirely passive, behaving more like a wax figure than a fully-fledged threat to Edward and Flora's peaceful domestic existences. So much so, in fact, that Lyn Gardner's observation about a 2008 stage production of the play, in which "*A Slight Ache* is transformed from a play about metaphysical and emotional crisis into a play about a couple of Daily Telegraph readers concerned about people loitering with intent" seems to describe the perils of adapting the play to TV just as well as it does the dangers of a stage production (Gardner, "A Slight Ache: Lyttelton, London," *The Guardian*).

Therefore, many of the same problems that a fully-realized Matchseller presents in Morahan's television version afflict stage productions of the play as well. As Michael Billington pointed out in a review of Jamie Lloyd's production of *A Slight Ache* for the Harold Pinter theatre in 2018, stage productions of the play tend to simply represent Barnabas onstage, complete with a signature look that Billington describes as "sweaty, decrepit and balaclava-helmeted," (Billington, "Pinter Seven Review," *The Guardian*) presumably in an attempt to honour the original script, in which Edward and Flora describe him as such (181). But in representing Barnabas in such a conventional visual way, productions that adopt this method run the risk of undermining the sense that he is a changeable figure. Indeed, Billington observes in his 1996 biography of Pinter that while stage and television productions of *A Slight Ache* are still effective, a visible Matchseller leads the play to come across as "a more obvious study of territorial takeover and psychological displacement" (96). Henry Woolf feels even more strongly, saying that literal representations of Edward, Flora and Barnabas detract from the way that radio drama encourages audiences to engage with their own conceptions of the characters. "They're so liberating of the imagination," he says of radio plays. "In a fantasy play [like *A Slight Ach*e], when you put three-dimensional bodies onstage, there's a literal quality that comes into it." The pleasure of *A Slight Ache* becomes diminished when Barnabas is treated as a fully-fledged character in the way that Flora and Edward are, rather than as a sort of mysterious, slightly ethereal presence.

Through *A Slight Ache*, Pinter creates a sense of remarkable tension lurking within Edward and Flora's presumably picturesque homestead. Rather than the lack of visual content being a limitation on the power of the play, Pinter deftly manages the medium of radio in a way that only serves to increase the impact of Edward and Flora's bizarre struggle for control with their silent guest. By making the Matchseller a non-speaking character in a medium that depends entirely on sound, Pinter robs the listeners of any factual certainty with which to interpret Edward and Flora's assessments of their guest. Pinter carefully avoids an objective view of the identity of the Matchseller, to the extent that listeners of the radio version may even be invited to doubt whether Edward and Flora's visitor exists at all. The combination of silence and a lack of visual information are, in fact, so central to the tension of the play that *A Slight Ache* actually becomes less effective when adapted to Pinter's usual stage or television formats, as the added visuals turn the Matchseller into a simple oddity rather than a changeable, mysterious presence. Perhaps, then, the ideal way to enter into Edward, Flora and Barnabas's world is to embrace the chilling brilliance of the play in its original form as radio drama – silence and all.

Works Cited and Consulted

Billington, Michael. *The Life and Work of Harold Pinter.* Faber & Faber, 1996.

Billington, Michael. "Pinter Seven Review: Danny Dyer and Martin Freeman on fire in glorious double bill." *The Guardian,* 7 February 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/feb/07/pinter-seven-review-dumb-waiter-danny-dyer-martin-freeman-a-slight-ache-jamie-lloyd.

Gardner, Lyn. "A Slight Ache: Lyttelton, London." *The Guardian,* 30 July 2008, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/jul/30/theatre.

Guralnick, Elissa S. *Sight Unseen: Beckett, Pinter, Stoppard and Other Contemporary Dramatists on Radio.* Ohio UP, 1996.

"A Slight Ache." *Theatre 625.* Directed by Christopher Morahan, performances by Maurice Denham, Gordon Richardson, season 4, episode 12, The British Broadcasting Corporation, 1967.

"A Slight Ache." The Friday Play. BBC, BBC Radio 4 FM, 13 October 2000.

"A Slight Ache." *HaroldPinter.org*, http://www.haroldpinter.org/plays/title_slightache.shtml. Accessed March 18, 2019.

Stulberg, Jacob. " How (Not) to Write Broadcast Plays: Pinter and the BBC." *Modern Drama*, Winter 2015, Vol.58 (4), pp. 502–523.

Pinter, Harold. *Complete Works: One.* Grove Press, 1990.

Taylor-Batty, Mark. *The Theatre Of Harold Pinter*. Bloomsbury, 2014

Woolf, Henry. Personal Interview. 19 March 2019.