

The Birthday Party-1968: Not so much a party as a parting....

Having seen many of Pinter's efforts on screen (The Servant, The Pumpkin Eater, Accident, The Last Tycoon, Sleuth etc) over many years, it was a great pleasure to finally see this early work which entertains and tantalizes in equal measures. From a Pinter-written play first produced in 1958, one of my favorite directors, William Friedkin, briskly directed a handful of brilliant actors in a story which has puzzled viewers and critics for over forty years.

Recognizing that every viewer's experience of reality is different, let me describe what I saw and suggest a possible theme: A typical, sea-side boarding house owned by a less-than-middle class, middle-aged couple (Dandy Nichols, Moultrie Kelsall) eking out their daily drudge; a lone, youngish boarder and apparent musician (Robert Shaw) who looks and acts like a rude, lazy bum; and a mysterious pair of men (Patrick Magee, Sydney Tafler) who arrive at the abode to visit the young boarder and celebrate his birthday.

The action - talk-fest is a better word - takes place in the front dining-sitting room over the course of the day, the evening and the next morning. Initially, Stanley (Robert Shaw) is verbally battered and intimidated by Nat (Sydney Tafler) and Shamus (Patrick Magee) with conversation which oscillates from the banal to the insidious; at one point, Stanley even punches Nat. Meanwhile, Meg (Dandy Nichols) goes out food shopping; her husband, Pete (Kelsall) is out at work as beach deck-chair supervisor. Shamus, significantly, has the unsettling habit of tearing a page of newspaper into precisely ordered strips; and then arranging them as a 'page' again. Over and over again.....

As evening arrives, there is a birthday 'party' of sorts which gradually degenerates into a drunken altercation between the three men, leaving Stanley mentally bowed and beaten - but not physically so. The party includes the infantile game of Blind Man's Bluff, a long toast to Stanley's birthday, binge drinking, and ends with Stanley smashing bottles, glasses and finally screaming for help in the darkness. Fade to black.

The next morning, with Meg and Pete out of the house, a fresh-looking Nat, looking every bit The Organization Man - including sleek, smart, black briefcase - discusses Stanley's condition with Shamus while he, once again, proceeds to tear newspaper into orderly shreds. It is during that exchange where we learn the nature of Stanley's problem and why they need to take him away. At which point, Stanley now enters as the New Man after his Birth Day: showered, shaved, and suited up appropriately - looking and acting like a condemned man. As the three prepare to depart, Pete arrives, concerned for Stanley, but is told by Nat to leave it to them to handle it all. As the front door closes, Pete calls out after them: "Stan - don't let them tell you what to do!"

Pete goes back to his newspaper reading. Meg returns and, when assured by Pete that Stanley is fine, they simply continue with their new day - thus cementing their implicit acceptance of Stanley's fate. Fade to black.

In my view (no pun intended), this play is a metaphor, showing how modern capitalism squeezes the young - including the artistic Stanleys of the world - into a sleazily-suited life of mindless, office sludge. Hence, it could be compared to, say, *Patterns* (1956) which is all about raw corporate ethics. Or, better still, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956) - a somewhat less strident critique of modern man's self-made commercial trap which ensnares most into pointless paper-pushing - and the self-destructive consequences thereof. Is there more than just a touch of Pinter in Stanley's dilemma which Pinter wrote when only 28? Perhaps.

The acting, direction and cinematography are simply brilliant; as is the dialog, which must be followed closely to enjoy to the fullest. Sure, it's a claustrophobic setting for some viewers, being in one room for most of the time. All the better to concentrate on the characters, surely? Are we not, ourselves, always in one room much of the time, anyway?

Highly recommended for all. Rating: 9.

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