

Sands @ Hope Q&A

A Q&A with Julian Sands, on his performance of “A Celebration of Harold Pinter” and his continuing relationship with the famed playwright.

– By K.D. Norris, November 2015

Q. I read that you first encountered Mr. Pinter’s work while in high school; what sort of an experience was that for a young actor?

“I didn’t know who Harold Pinter was, really. In school we were given this play to read and it was astonishing. I had never read anything quite like it before. The characters, the language, the landscapes; it was extraordinary. ... (after reading several) I thought, this is the work of a genius. So I knew the work before I knew something about Harold Pinter. It made a big impression on me in high school, a formative impression. Really it gave me the enthusiasm, the desire, to be an actor. Really far more than any playwright, even Shakespeare.”

Q. There is a new performance of Pinter’s play “The Homecoming” playing in London, and it is very well received. Why do you think Pinter’s words have such staying power?

“I think (his works) have now been included in the international repertoire, with Ibsen and Chekhov and Arthur Miller and Strindberg ... because of the commonness and the situations he puts his characters in, and the way they interact, which are common to cultures and background that go far beyond the mostly London settings. There is a transformative power in his language. ... There is a truth to his language. I think people relate to it, because there is a truth to his characters, to what they say and who they are.”

Q. Had you worked directly with Pinter before you and he discussed a staging of his poems that became this performance, “A Celebration of Harold Pinter”?

“I had done a film of one of his plays, ‘The Room’, directed by Robert Altman, in which I played, coincidentally, Mr. Sands. He had been associated with that (film) production, but I hadn’t really worked with him until he was asking me to work with him on this recital. It came from a discussion we were having at a lunch, when we were discussing a play I was in, portraying (ex-Prime Minister of Britain) Tony Blair.”

Q. I understand the performance is much more than simply a reading of Pinter’s poetry and prose, so what do the audiences experience?

“I think they will hear a great deal they might not know. What I set out to do, what we set out to create, was above all else, entertainment. Anybody thinking this is going to be a dry or academic evening, you know, forget it. Fasten your seatbelts, this is Harold Pinter. It is filled with humor and emotions and ideas and feelings. What we set out to do is tell the story of the life and work of Harold Pinter, mostly through his own words, as revealed in his poetry, his prose, the

interviews ... but also through the words of others, who knew him, who had opinions about him, lived and worked with him. ... The man, the myth and the reality.

“Harold Pinter, the author, is hard to pin down from reading his plays, he is there as an oblique figure. But in his poetry, and the prose, and in his speech, the interviews, he shows himself exactly as he thinks and feels. In the poetry, especially, there is this interior dimension that is so remarkably revealing. His tenderness, the romance, his love, his humanity. His viscera is exposed in a way in which it is very unfiltered. That is a quite extraordinary experience.

“I knew nothing of this body of work when Harold said ‘Would you read this recital for me?’ ... the cancer, the advancing illness, had impaired him, his voice. That was in 2005. ... I am still utterly turned on by the material. Every time I preform it, there are new insights and nuances I discover. It is a completely organic and ever-revealing interaction with the work, with the audience. ... It is because of the density of the work. The brevity of the work, of the content, is truly beautiful, exciting I would say. ... You do not have to be a Pinter scholar to appreciate the story of this man. He is a man who represents our common humanity. That is the glory of being a poet.

Q. The New York Times said that your performance allows the audience to “feel the playwright’s presence”; is there a kind of channeling Pinter when you go on stage with this work?

“I do not think I could do this show if I were not continually in some kind of relationship with Pinter while doing so. I don’t impersonate him, but he does channel himself through the material. It is so specifically written and he was such a master of his own language, that I cannot help but hear his voice – and feel his presence. He has a habit of hovering around. I am never alone on stage.

“This is something, I feel, that is picked up by people at the show. Harold is never far away, and it is a very reassuring thing, but it is also a thing which keeps me mindful of the conductor at the podium. ... The time we spent working together on this show was so powerful for me, in all aspects of my work. I would say I haven’t done a play or film since these sessions with Harold which have not been touched by our time together.”