Unpacking the Pinteresque in The Dumb Waiter and Beyond Marc E. Shaw "Lady, if I have to tell you, you'll never know." -- Louis Armstrong, when a reporter asked him to define jazz.1 During an interview with Lawrence Bensky in 1966, Harold Pinter heard the word Pinteresque: "That word!" Pinter exclaimed, "These damn words and that word Pinteresque particularly -- I don't know what they're bloody well talking about! I think it's a great burden for me to carry, and for other writers to carry" (34). A term weighed down with years of baggage deserves to be critically unpacked, and Pinteresque is no exception. The word itself appeared within a few years of Pinter's rise to prominence in the early 1960s, as reviewers attempted to name and explain what Pinter does in his early "room plays:" The Room (1959), The Birthday Party (1959), The Dumb Waiter (1960), and The Caretaker (1960).2 One review in The Daily Telegraph in 1963 was headlined "Pinter at his most Pinteresque." Describing the lesser-known The Dwarfs (1962), the review humorously emphasized the unique character of a Pinter evening: "pintation at its most pinticular," and "directed pinteresquely by the author" (qtd in Zarhy-Levo 36). But such morphological license did not put everyone in good humor. For example, in 1971, Herman T. Schroll surveyed the first ten years of Pinter reviews and criticism, declaring the playwright "trapped" by "facets of the Pinter fashion" -- the tendency to pigeonhole Pinter by introducing reductive terms. Schroll charts the main labels in that initial trajectory: "from menace to realism and absurd, to hyper-realism, and finally to Pinterism." However, according to Schroll, "'development' in the criticism could be no more than an illusion since each term represented an attempt to define categorically something impossible to define" (76-7). As "impossible" or weighty as Pinteresque may or may not be, not all critics agree that the word itself constitutes a burden for Pinter or other writers. On the contrary, Yael Zarhy-Levo sees Pinteresque as a boost for Pinter, as part of the positive marketing strategy utilized by theater reviewers in Britain and then the United States in the early and mid-1960s. Once the reviewers allowed Pinter in to their favor, moving him from transgressive to en vogue, they needed to explain his stylistic originality: Its usage [Pinteresque] marks Pinter's acceptance, because it reflects the reviewers' assumption that hereafter Pinter's plays can be "sold" by a "Pinter" label, detached from the association with Beckett. This label seems to function as a substitute for clarification of incoherent elements, thus, familiarizing Pinter's unique style, the unfamiliarity of which led to his rejection in the first place. (Zarhy-Levo 31) The initial reviewers performed Pinter a service by preparing his audience for a new experience. However, there still remains a risk of over-simplification, reducing to a lone signifier everything that reverberates in every Pinter room. For now, it is not worth second-guessing if the burden of Pinteresque indeed "trapped" Pinter; or, was it actually a blessing, providing resistance that spurred Pinter into new territory. With hindsight, we know that Pinter's career is long and varied, punctuated by milestones that mark shifts in his theatrical journey: The Homecoming (1965), Silence and Landscape (1968), Betrayal (1978), A Kind of Alaska (1983), and One for the Road (1984). What is worth second-guessing is possibility within Pinteresque -- not the Pinteresque-as-trap and finite, but rather, understanding the foundational concepts of the word, then discovering its inherent theatrical possibilities in the present in revivals of Pinter and in new productions by Pinter's "inheritors." I have purposely not listed any specific attributes of the Pinteresque until now because I wanted to complicate that defining act with everything that has preceded it. Pinter's early room plays capture the Pinteresque, so The Dumb

Waiter is an ideal work to begin to query the word. After surveying early reviewers' usage of Pinteresque, Zarhy-Levo clarifies its typical characterizations as: (1) "Pinter's atmospheric gift," consisting of an atmosphere of menace; (2) Pinter's "mastery of rhythmic powerful dialogue," including "timing" and "use of pauses;" and, (3) Pinter's "authority to make an audience accept unexplained actions" (37). Although any act of categorizing poses trouble, Zarhy- Levo's summary identifies many of the exciting ideas that early Pinter offered. I would add a fourth element to Pinteresque, one that has solidified itself in the 1980s and 90s as Pinter more openly discussed the political nature of his earliest plays: (4) the potential destruction of an individual who contends with authority. As I will show, this addition allows for further exploration of Pinteresque beyond Pinter's early work, showing a direct connection between those first plays and many of his later "political" works. Another reason for this addition is to fully emphasize the audience's cerebral process of discovery as the plot unfolds. The potential destruction of an individual who contends with authority might normally be construed as a result of the atmosphere of menace, Zarhy- Levo's primary characterization of Pinteresque. Yet, there is a distinction between the two. During performance, menace is a feeling, an atmosphere, that fills the theater; alternately, an individual's potential destruction arrives as a thought deducted from the texts (spoken lines, visual elements of acting) provided by Pinter and the actors. The critical act of unpacking Pinteresque components in The Dumb Waiter both simplifies and complicates Pinter's work. On one hand, we can tease out different moments of the Pinteresque and understand how The Dumb Waiter unfolds as a theatrical work; on the other hand, critical explication reminds us of the almost unlimited interpretative possibilities in performance. Unlike the structured list derived from Zarhy-Levo, in performance, Pinteresque characteristics do not function independently. The Pinteresque is a mix and flow of moments wherein its components inform each other, heightening the others simultaneously. For example, drawing from that list above and applying them to The Dumb Waiter, the eventual pauses would not feel as pregnant without the dialogic rhythms that intensify back-and- forth between Ben and Gus. Furthermore, without those same pauses and how the actors flesh them out, the atmosphere of menace could not be sustained as thoroughly. Without that same sustained atmosphere of menace, the unexplained actions might lose their sinister edge, merely appearing absurd or comic. Finally, without Ben's unexplained actions, or the inexplicable and seemingly random intrusions of the dumb waiter, we might not realize the possibility that Gus is next on the hit list. As Susan Hollis Merritt states about a performance of The Dumb Waiter that she attended, "Though to some it might appear arbitrary or improper, a theatrical production reproduces a play so as to recreate (for an audience) a so-called meaningful experience, just as any reading of any play [...] attempts to do" (80). Indeed, the stronger the choices, and the better the theatrical execution, the more effective the theatrical interpretation. It is my belief that as an actor, director, and all-around man of the theater, Pinter always writes with the audience in mind; we must see the Pinteresque as a live, electrical entity moving between the actors and audience in the same room. While the atmosphere of menace, the rhythms, the pauses, and the timing all lend themselves to a structure of feeling, other aspects of the Pinteresque are cerebral in nature. Questioning and accepting unexplained actions or details is a cerebral act, as is becoming conscious of an individual's impending destruction. Varun Begley defines Pinteresque as both an implied "unique,

artistic voice, deserving of its own adjectives" and, simultaneously, a "manufactured feeling-tone [that] one associates with lowbrow cultural forms (melodrama, thrillers, slapstick comedies, etc.), reducible to a set of techniques or tricks that can be readily imitated" (24). While Begley's first supposition is true, his second assertion is worth questioning. The Pinteresque as I have defined it here functions as a "feeling-tone," but it is more than sensation aimed at the body, as Begley implies. Begley's insistence on the Pinteresque "feeling-tone" as a "lowbrow" shortcut also possibly demonstrates an anti-theatrical bias. While moments of staging Pinter might mimic melodrama, slapstick, or a thriller, the plays and their characters are more than melodramatic or farcical stock characters [or, as Begley implies, actors in pornography or horror films (23)]. Each of Pinter's foundational works is a tragicomedy that requires a high level of artistry and rehearsal to perform well. Pinter is most interesting and theatrically effecting when actors flesh out and embody the opposing forces of tragedy and comedy. Such artistry from the actors includes complex characterization built from moment to moment, appropriate vocal work and movement, and suitable comic tone, among other textual interpretive skills. Pinter's memorable characters, in order to remain memorable, are not, "readily imitated" or actable with "tricks" (Begley 24). Perhaps bad Pinter can be performed or "manufactured" in that context, but not the Pinter performance that, as Samuel Beckett said about Betrayal, "wrings the heart" (qtd in Regal 110).3 In the essay also contained in this collection, "The First Last Look in the Shadows: Pinter and the Pinteresque," Anne Luyat emphasizes the "probing exploration of the human condition" that Pinter's audiences witness onstage, filled with tragicomic moments that require gifted actors to stage. Most certainly, a playwright might attempt to copy The Dumb Waiter or The Caretaker, but the result would ring hollow theatrically. There is evidence of successful and less successful Pinter-influenced (Pinterfluenced?) works later in the chapter. 2. Exploration of the Pinteresque in The Dumb Waiter Because of the intertwined or melded nature of these strands of the Pinteresque, it is necessary to isolate three moments in the play and tease out the different components, while still focusing on their interrelation. Again, very briefly in skeleton form, the Pinteresque includes an atmosphere of menace, dialogic rhythms, the withholding of information, and the potential destruction of an individual. With that in mind, an excerpt from the beginning of The Dumb Waiter shows the rhythm in Ben's and Gus's dialogue, highlighting the banal but comic subject matter. Whereas traditionally a playwright might spend the opening introducing us to the characters and their lives, here such details are apparently postponed or may never materialize. Banalities, such as reading unimportant findings from the daily news, frustrate the full explanation of action or plot advancement: BEN: What about this? Listen to this! He refers to the paper. A man of eighty-seven wanted to cross the road. but there was a lot of traffic, see? He couldn't see how he was going to squeeze through. So he crawled under a lorry. GUS: He what? BEN: He crawled under a lorry. A stationary lorry. GUS: No? BEN: The lorry started and ran over him. GUS: Go on! BEN: That's what it says here. GUS: Get away. BEN: It's enough to make you want to puke, isn't it? GUS: Who advised him to do a thing like that? BEN: A man of eighty-seven crawling under a lorry! GUS: It's unbelievable. BEN: It's down here in black and white. GUS: Incredible. (114) Like a newspaper, there are facts in this opening sequence written in "black and white," but their accumulation does not warrant much more than face value. The quick rhythms of this initial exchange are typical of the Pinteresque and the entire play.

Ben, the informer, gives us facts from his newspaper, and Gus receives the information and responds. Potentially, a hierarchy or pecking order has already developed in their informer/receiver binary. But perhaps not: the exchange itself provides plenty for the actors to subtextualize in performance, and one important choice in Gus's dialogic responses is his level of sincerity and the tone he exudes. If he is sincere, and his rhythm and pace match Ben's, we sense they are a united team or, at least, that Gus is loyal. If Gus delays the rhythm of the exchange, or even if Ben reads more to himself than to Gus, a rift might be implied. Ben might even be bothered by Gus' questions. Those cracks, felt as a hint of menace in the audience, could soon become the realization that the pair are coming apart, foreshadowing the definitive fissure in the play's final tableau. Another exchange highlights this increasing divide by revealing selective details about Ben and Gus's employment. While working as hired killers already provides a menacing aura, what is increasingly alarming in the following exchange is just how little Gus knows about his own existence. We sympathize with Gus because he, like us, wants more details. The repetition of his seemingly reasonable questions creates a rhythm of doubt that functions as the scene's underscore and pushes the pair further apart. We might view Ben as less trustworthy or more sinister, because he thwarts Gus' (and our) desire for verification. We remain ignorant on the whole, yet still fully engaged throughout, and we might increasingly note that Gus is pushing up against an authority figure: GUS: Eh, I've been meaning to ask you. BEN: What the hell is it now? GUS: Why did you stop the car this morning in the middle of that road? BEN: (lowering the paper) I thought you were asleep. GUS: I was, but I woke up when you stopped. You did stop, didn't you? Pause. In the middle of that road. It was still dark, don't you remember? I looked out. It was all misty. I thought perhaps you wanted to kip, but you were sitting up dead straight, like you were waiting for something. BEN: I wasn't waiting for anything. GUS: I must have fallen asleep again. What was all that about then? Why did you stop? BEN: (picking up the paper) We were too early. GUS: Early? (He rises.) What do you mean? We got the call, didn't we, saying we were to start right away. We did. We shoved out on the dot. So how could we be too early? BEN: (quietly) Who took the call? Me or you? GUS: You. BEN: We were too early. GUS: Too early for what? Pause. You mean someone had to get out before we got in? He examines the bedclothes. I thought these sheets didn't look too bright. (119–20) The Pinteresque builds by way of the dialogic rhythm of the questions; the unexplained details that will remain so (as those questions go unanswered), and the increasing sense that Gus now contends with authority, or at the very least, with the authority of Ben. Furthermore, alongside the lack of detail, the banal prop –– Ben's newspaper –– frustrates Gus and us because it is utilized as a shield, deflecting questions. To increase the tension in performance, the first pause might be filled with Ben's surprise that Gus would ask that question, or at least a silence that makes us want to know even more. By the second silence, Ben fully communicates that he will not communicate. Gus's second question only makes him more pathetic, and discussing sheets after yet another pause proves Gus's downward –– although possibly still slightly comic –– spiral. His non– sequitur proves his absurd state. While Gus doubts, Ben apparently does not, or, at the least, Ben tries not to show it. He knows he is a cog in a larger machine with all its departments, and that is all the information he needs. Gus has yet to understand his place, and this weakness is what builds tension in the play. As the Pinteresque components accumulate, the dramatic question resounds, "Who is on the

other end of the dumb waiter, and how will their menacing presence affect the characters onstage?" Ben attempts to answer Gus's queries (and our concerns) about the dumb waiter, but once Gus erupts, signified by the first "all capitals" exclamation of the play, Ben lets the moment pass: BEN: (quickly) No. It's not funny. It probably used to be a café here, that's all. Upstairs. These places change hands very quickly. GUS: A café? BEN: Yes. GUS: What, you mean this was the kitchen, down here? BEN: Yes, they change hands overnight, these places. Go into liquidation. The people who run it, you know, they don't find it a going concern, they move out. GUS: You mean the people who ran this place didn't find it a going concern and moved out? BEN: Sure. GUS: WELL, WHO'S GOT IT NOW? Silence. BEN: What do you mean, who's got it now? GUS: Who's got it now? If they moved out, who moved in? The box descends with a clatter and bang. Ben levels his revolver. (132) The rhythmic repetition of "who's got it now?" is one of the key lines of the entire play because it translates to "who's got us now?" Who or what controls the room where Ben and Gus, and we, the audience, now reside? The "clatter and bang" of the dumb waiter's descent is a noisy, jarring reminder that some other force exists outside the immediate room. For the audience, this force is an addition not listed on the cast list in the program. Ben quickly "levels his revolver" because he seems nervous about what comes next. This image is a foreshadowing of The Dumb Waiter's closing moment, where Ben stands with gun drawn, and Gus "stumbles in" (121). And, still, in that final tableau, we are left to question what happens next. 3. Up Against Authority Like Gus in The Dumb Waiter, there is a populous gallery of Pinter characters whose distress stems from a run-in with authority. That gallery bridges Pinter's career, from the characters in his later political works -- Gila and Victor (One for the Road, 1985), various prisoners (Mountain Language, 1988), a nameless blindfolded man (New World Order, 1991) -- and, back to his earliest plays, Rose and Bert in The Room, and Stanley in The Birthday Party (1959), among many others. The potential destruction of each character magnifies the Pinteresque in any given work. For a long time, Pinter avoided making too much of a political connection to his works. However, increasingly in usage, the Pinteresque takes on a political edge, making a more inclusive approach seem consistent with Pinter's claim that: My earlier plays are much more political than they seem on the face of it. […] [P]lays like The Birthday Party, The Dumb Waiter and The Hothouse are metaphors, really. When you look at them, they're much closer to an extremely critical look at authoritarian postures -- state power, family power, religious power, power used to undermine, if not destroy, the individual, or the questioning voice, or the voice which simply went away from the mainstream. (qtd in Ford 85) One cannot help but think of Gus's questioning voice and the metaphorical implications such questioning implies in any rigid apparatus of power. The same can be said for Bert and Rose in The Room or Stanley in The Birthday Party. Adding a political edge to the Pinteresque creates common ground with later more overtly political Pinter. In the early Pinteresque-filled "room plays," and in the later more political plays, there is great concern regarding the abuse of authority and the environment that cultivates that abuse. One for the Road (1984), Mountain Language (1988), New World Order (1991), Party Time (1991) and Ashes to Ashes (1996) present political regimes where torture is never far under the surface of supposed civility. But Pinter's statement that his early works are "more political than they seem," and that they are "critical look[s]" at authority and the undermining of the "questioning voice," gives context to characters like Gus and Stanley years earlier.

For example, as a questioning voice, Party Time's (1991) Jimmy deserves comparison to early Pinter. In the play's closing moment, Jimmy explains his punishment for opposing the presiding political power. His speech is eerily similar to Stanley's removal from the world of the play in The Birthday Party. With Party Time and The Birthday Party, Pinter recycles the word "party" in the title. As Charles Grimes notes, one can see The Birthday Party's Stanley reconceptualized and resurrected as Jimmy in Party Time more than thirty years later (112). Though both of these Pinter "Party" pieces present literal celebrations, "party" holds a dual meaning in both titles. The playwright puns on the term for the unnamed factions, or parties, that assert control, first, over the boarding house where Goldberg and McCann interrogate and extricate Stanley, and, second, in the flat in Party Time where the ruling elite celebrate their political status, deliberately avoiding the outside reality of roadblocks and their disappeared opponents, like Jimmy. Both Stanley and Jimmy –– and Gus in The Dumb Waiter –– are silenced and set apart from the parties because of their vocal opposition to authority. 4. Pinteresque Influence Adding that political edge to Pinteresque increases the possibilities of the word and better represents the word's use by critics in London and beyond. To further examine this proposition, we can look at some recent plays performed in London. There is little doubt that Harold Pinter is the most influential British playwright of the past fifty years. In 1977, Steven H. Gale proclaimed, "Pinter is by consensus without question the major force in the contemporary English-speaking theater" (278). More recently in 2000, British artistic director Dominic Dromgoole, who cultivated new theater writing in London in the 1980s and 90s, asserted that Pinter is "still the biggest ship in the fleet. Still the aircraft carrier from which many planes take off on shorter, less majestic trips" (8). No one is "more respected by the younger generation [of playwrights]" than Harold Pinter (225). In 2000, for example, Dromgoole could look over the past decade in British theater, with its "in-yer-face" generation or New Brutalism, and see playwrights like Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson, Patrick Marber and Mark Ravenhill, all notably influenced by the 2005 Nobel Prize Laureate, Pinter. Granted, identifying influence is a subjective act, a value judgment based on an individual's interpretation and experience. Mary Orr asserts that instead of influence's "influx" or "flow" arriving down from the hierarchical stars in a Harold-Bloomian-"Anxiety-of- Influence"-sense, influence can be imagined as a tributary merging with another to create a wider river. "Influence for," as Orr points out, [r]everses hierarchies or understands influence as complex and plural…multiple, dialogic or reciprocal […] More radically, a truly influential work may be one that knows its own increase by being central to others subsequently. Power is in having given to, not usurping from (83-4). If The Dumb Waiter is an influential work, and the Pinteresque still reverberates as a theatrical idea, how is that power manifest? The quality of a work might be measured by how long we receive satisfaction from it, or how long it gives new inspiration. Orr calls it "power," but we might say "quality" is added to Pinter's works when we see his influence in new and unexpected ways. Conversely, simply repeating Pinter, or mimicking the Pinteresque, adds nothing to Pinter or our notions of Pinteresque. This would be the trap that Begley mentions when he presents the Pinteresque as merely a manufactured phenomenon in performance (24). Recent theatrical productions in London show the influence of the Pinteresque, clarify its political edge, and illuminate how the word is perceived by current critics. First, performed at the Royal Court in 1994, Anthony Neilson's Penetrator, was one of the first plays of the wave characterized as in-yer-face

theater. In Penetrator, Neilson mirrors the room play motif of early Pinter plays like The Dumb Waiter. However, Neilson refashions Pinter's model to create a room that changes from dystopian horror to a hopeful final conclusion. Penetrator's resolution is a clearing that we arrive to after experiencing components of the Pinteresque: the ambiguities, the menace, the terror, and threats from authority, all drift away like fog. Neilson's play details the arrival of Tadge, a Gulf War I veteran who has his share of mental issues, to the flat of an old friend Max. Tadge's odd actions build to a tense climax that brings up issues of the friends' past. But without the Pinteresque components that Neilson works into Penetrator, none of what follows after the climax would have the same value; because of the tension in the room, we are prepared for the peaceful post-Pinteresque resolution. Neilson does not end his play with uncertainty or even the grimness with which Pinter ends his. While describing the original production of Neilson's play, Aleks Sierz, author of In-Yer-Face Theatre, briefly connects Penetrator to the abuses of early and later Pinter. Quoting Tadge's description of the "penetrators," Sierz asserts that, "Tadge's paranoid fantasies occur in a 'black room.' His idea of the tormentors is reminiscent of Pinter's vision of torture" (80). In Penetrator, in the early room plays, and in the later more political Pinter plays, there is great concern regarding the abuse of authority and the environment that cultivates that abuse. The most renowned playwright of the in-yer-face generation, Sarah Kane, has also been compared to Pinter, and she admitted Pinter's influence on her work. Although Graham Saunders never uses the word Pinteresque, he connects Kane's controversial debut work, Blasted (1995), to Harold Pinter's room play form, specifically The Dumb Waiter. Saunders notes the small hotel room in Kane's play, the similar chaos that lurks outside in both works, the series of knocks on doors that we never fully comprehend, and finally, that Gus, Ben, and Kane's Ian all work as hired killers -- continuously and ominously checking and rechecking their guns (56-7). While later critics have noted Pinteresque connections in these plays from Kane and Neilson, none of the initial reviewers labeled the plays as such. This is perhaps because Neilson's play was not a huge event or much reviewed at first, although since its premiere, it has received several exciting revivals. Much attention was given to Blasted, but almost all the critics' column-inches were reserved for shock and awe at the extreme acts on stage. Often one can better understand a concept by clarifying what it is not. An explicit example of this is Patrick Marber's Closer (1997), one of the more celebrated convergences between Pinter's work and a younger playwright. Simply put, no critic ever labeled Marber's play Pinteresque, perhaps because it did not emphasize any of the characteristics that have been emphasized here as indicative of that term. Nevertheless, when Marber's exploration of love, sex and deceit premiered at the National Theater, numerous reviewers found in Closer reflections of Pinter's play Betrayal (1978). As a play from Pinter's middle period, Betrayal does not address the same issues of power and abuses of authority categorized in the early and later plays as the Pinteresque. Betrayal and Closer share the subject matter of love and deceit, as well as an episodic scene structure that often skips months and years at a time. Both transpire in realistic contemporary middle-class London living rooms, flats, restaurants and bars. Both manipulate time: Betrayal's scenes unfold mostly in reverse, whereas Closer's action occasionally overlaps in time sequences. Both plays have a limited number of characters with intertwined interests (Betrayal has three characters; Closer has four). These characters navigate the mundane while also wounding or being

wounded in love. The reviewers themselves celebrated Marber without seeing his Pinter connection as a negative factor. For example, David Benedict of The Independent found that from Closer, “British naughtiness and innuendo have been banished. Instead, there are echoes of Pinter’s Betrayal or a London take on Mamet’s Sexual Perversity in Chicago” (5). Alastair Macaulay of the Financial Times wrote that “one can, I think, mention Closer in the same breath as Betrayal” (1997, 8). While Charles Spencer of The Daily Telegraph concluded that, “Though Marber’s style and vision are his own, there are moments in this new piece which reminded me of both Pinter’s Betrayal and David Hare’s Skylight. What’s amazing is that Closer can stand comparison with such magnificent plays” (2008). Finally, Matt Wolf, writing in Variety, made an initial Pinter connection, and then focused more specifically on Closer “coming to a climax of sorts in a restaurant encounter that neatly distills Pinter’s Betrayal” (103). Since Closer’s opening, as the play moved from the smaller Cottlesloe auditorium at the National Theater to the larger Lyttleton, and then to the West End, Broadway, and everywhere else via stage and motion picture, other prominent theater critics positively connect Marber with Pinter. The Guardian’s Michael Billington calls Marber one of the “younger writers” among the “numerous beneficiaries” of Pinter’s “legacy” as evidenced in Marber’s “sexually exploratory” Closer (2001, 2.1). The Independent’s Paul Taylor identifies Pinter as one of Marber’s “main writing influences” (5). But while all those critics have seen Marber as Pinter influenced, none have seen his works as Pinteresque. More recently, in tactical coordination with the 2005 Nobel Prize announcement, some London theatrical premieres seem to have taken off from that influential aircraft carrier, “HMS Pinter.” When I interviewed in-yer-face playwright Mark Ravenhill just after Pinter won the Nobel Prize, the young dramatist mentioned that his next play, The Cut (2006), [i]s probably the most Pinter-like play that I’ve written. It’s not the same really, but when people ask me what’s it like, and I’m trying to describe it, I say it’s a little bit like Mountain Language or one of those kind of plays. It’s set in a fictional country. And the process of oppression that goes on is like one of those later Pinter plays, like One for the Road or Mountain Language. (“Ravenhill interview”) But Ravenhill utilized the Pinter parallel in a specific situation: “people ask me what The Cut’s like.” Needing to succinctly explain his work caused Ravenhill to use Pinter as accessible shorthand even though it was perhaps not altogether correct. This sort of limitation happens to some extent in all communication, but Ravenhill turns critic when he attempts to explain The Cut. The critical desire to classify, to sort, to provide access, is always in battle with a dangerous tendency to reduce. This same process can happen when critics overuse Pinteresque. That said, a few months after Mark Ravenhill’s quick description of The Cut, many London theater critics identified Pinter parallels in varying degrees, including Pinteresque components in his play. Premiered at the Donmar Warehouse, Ravenhill’s play is about a torturer who administers “the cut” -- a quick operation for enemies of the state that makes them more agreeable. In three lengthy scenes, we see Paul, the cutter, played by Ian McKellen, go through a personal crisis of guilt; first, with a young male prisoner who wants the cut as a badge of honor; second, with his wife at home; third with his politically-minded son, who, as part of the new guard overtaking the state, considers his father evil. Toby Young of The Spectator said that “To call The Cut Pinteresque doesn’t do justice to Ravenhill’s earnest duplication of most every trope in the Nobel Prize winner’s theatrical playbook. It is more like a fawning homage, a deferential tribute.” But Young is never

completely clear on what he means by Pinteresque -- since the rest of the review provides no clear clues to the reasons for his assessment. He believes Ravenhill's play is incomprehensible and boring, so perhaps he thinks the same of Pinter! Sarah Hemming of The Financial Times is a little clearer in her review: "It's a Pinteresque study of power play and moral equivocation set in a nameless state" (12). In addition, while never using the Pinteresque label, Jane Edwardes of Time Out London, lists some of the components: "The details are vague and the atmosphere tense. Ravenhill's play owes something to Pinter not just in its power struggles, but also in the way it harks on certain words" (232). Perhaps the most humorous review came from Quentin Letts of The Daily Mail who simultaneously insults Pinter while adding a non-complimentary prefix to our word: "Quite well acted but pseudishly cryptic, The Cut is a sub-Pinteresque affair. Yes, even worse than old gloomy guts!" (Sec 4.8) While never using the word Pinteresque, The Daily Telegraph's Charles Spencer gives the most insightful comments of all the reviews: Mark Ravenhill's new play is so up to its ears in debt to Harold Pinter that I'm not sure whether the Nobel Laureate should be merely flattered or demanding a slice of the royalties. Initially intriguing, but ultimately frustrating, the piece combines the enigma and menace of early Pinter with the political anger of late Pinter. [...] But what are we meant to read into The Cut? Like Pinter, Ravenhill withholds information more conventional dramatists would consider crucial. (2006, 28) Most important to our reconsideration of Pinteresque here is Spencer's convergence of early and later Pinter. The Cut withholds information like all of Pinter's plays, but, importantly, Pinter supplements his ambiguity with precise images and clever dialogue that keep the audience intrigued -- Pinter's authority listed in Zarhy-Levo's characteristics. Ravenhill, unfortunately, falls short on the horrific or pathos-inducing details that hold our interest and tie us emotionally to the play. The conversations between torturer and tortured mirror Pinter's later works like One for the Road and Ashes to Ashes. And the bare, simple language and repetition could come from a number of Pinter's works. The three scenes allow us to see Paul the Cutter from three different angles, but their cumulative effect is not as powerful as some of Ravenhill's other works. And so, unlike Penetrator or even Blasted, to use Mary Orr's phrase, Pinter's influence is not quite "influence for" anything new. One week after The Cut opened at the Donmar, Jez Butterworth's The Winterling premiered at the Royal Court. Butterworth's best known play is the 1995 in-yer-face hit, Mojo, which involves 1950's English gangsters and was made into a movie starring Harold Pinter. Butterworth keeps the gangsters around for The Winterling, and he keeps Pinter around in spirit too. Set in a farmhouse in the countryside region of Dartmoor, the plot involves gangsters, revenge, surprises, a slightly hopeful ending, and a character who is a reincarnated Davies from The Caretaker. Of the thirteen reviews in the London press, twelve of them connect The Winterling to Pinter in various ways, including a close connection to The Dumb Waiter and the Pinteresque presence. Benedict Nightingale's review in The Times echoes that "Harold Pinter himself hates the word Pinteresque." But Nightingale continues the tricky process of critical comparison by saying "but if ever [Pinteresque] were apt it is here" (21). Helpfully, Nightingale gets more specific with a list of characteristics: If you know Pinter's Dumb Waiter you'll have an inkling and if you know the rest of Pinter's work you'll find much that's familiar in a play with more than its quota of disturbing intruders, innocent-seeming yet loaded exchanges, amorphous threats, deviousness, mystification and eccentric attempts to gain territory or

dominate others. (21) Likewise, Alastair Macaulay asserts that “Act One feels Pinterer–than–thou; Act Two, with its ambiguities of who used to be what and who will do what to whom, looks like variations on the fall– guy strangeness of Pinter’s The Dumb Waiter” (2006, 11). And, finally, Michael Billington of The Guardian saw The Winterling’s biggest influence as Pinter, calling his presence “ubiquitous,” and noting that “the denouement inescapably evokes The Dumb Waiter” (2006, 34). As with The Cut, there is not much of what Orr calls a “dialogue” between the old text and the new. It is in not introducing anything new dramatically or worth celebrating theatrically that Butterworth and Ravenhill fall short. And because Ravenhill and Butterworth are prominent, celebrated young writers producing plays at the most prominent theaters, this falling short is worth noting. Michael Billington of The Guardian agrees that Pinter’s “distinctive voice is reverberating through British drama in ways that begin to worry me. […] After seeing [The Winterling] and The Cut, I’m concerned that too many writers are imitating the master’s voice rather than discovering their own” (34). As can be seen, like it or not, Pinteresque is the most common term used for that imitation. Yet, embracing the Pinteresque, or other aspects of Pinter’s work, does not have to be framed pejoratively. In 2004, Ben Brantley of the New York Times wrote an article called “Pinter Is Still Pointing the Way, With Shadows and Darkness,” a critique which posits Pinter’s influence on Michael Frayn’s Democracy and Conor McPherson’s Shining City. His criterion for the Pinteresque was that both new works acknowledge the unknowability of people in personal and public realms. Importantly, both plays offer us so much more than mere repetition of that Pinterly characteristic. Speaking subjectively, upon reading Brantley’s article and realizing the plays’ intertextualities, I was pleasantly surprised, especially with respect to McPherson’s play, which I had read a few times but never thought of as Pinteresque. I found Shining City touching, and then I realized it touched me in a similar tragicomic way to how The Dumb Waiter and Betrayal affect me, because of the ultimate impenetrability of the characters’ selves and situations. This unknowability can be simultaneously comic and tragic in its irony. As Anne Luyat quotes Pinter’s Nobel Prize speech at the end of her essay in this volume, so can I: “Truth in drama is forever elusive. You never quite find it but the search for it is compulsive.” In McPherson’s Shining City, we search for the details between a man and his deceased wife who now haunts him. Democracy, Frayn’s play about Chancellor Willy Brandt of West Germany, also reminds us that almost everyone is a contradiction, a variety of selves. As in The Dumb Waiter, where actions and characters go unexplained, incongruities and gaps drive each play. And again we feel the Pinteresque as an individual contending with authority: the individual is each of us, contending with that elusive authority, Truth. Marc E. Shaw, Hartwick College Notes 1 Axelrod, 3. 2 The dates I list are publication dates of the scripts, as dates of first performance vary depending on criteria of what one considers a “first” performance (whether it be a university performance, tour outside of London, radio performance, or London premiere, for example). 3 Beckett was referring to Emma and Jerry’s final gaze .in a draft of Betrayal that Pinter had sent him. However, this phrase applies to many of Pinter’s works