



Toby Jones as Stanley in *The Birthday Party*

Picture: JOHAN PERSSON

REVIEW: The Birthday Party, Harold Pinter Theatre

★★★★☆

Harold Pinter's notorious early flop baffled critics and audiences alike. Now, we expect his subversion of the mystery thriller that, as a jobbing actor, Pinter was playing in rep. But Ian Rickson's starry 60th-anniversary revival proves the play still has the power to unsettle.

In a rundown seaside boarding house, Stanley is the sole guest of Petey and Meg – until two sinister men, Goldberg and McCann, come to claim him. Rickson's detailed, naturalistic production is supported by the Quay Brothers' spot-on Fifties design: lace curtains and wallpaper puckering with damp.

There's similar care with characterisation. Zoë Wanamaker and Peter Wight make the marriage feel lived-in, Wanamaker hinting that Meg's distraction might signal dementia, the latter touchingly patient with her circular questions. It's clear their lodger has become a surrogate son – although there's also off-kilter flirtation between Meg and Stanley.

Toby Jones is the standout as Stanley, an arresting

combination of demanding infant, wild eccentric and hollowed-out victim. When he bangs a toy drum, he lapses into a manic glee that hints at brutality, but his bullish defence gradually crumbles.

Tom Vaughan-Lawlor provides a furiously paranoid McCann, and superbly handles the rat-a-tat interrogation with Stephen Mangan. The latter convincingly laces Goldberg's garrulous geniality with menace – even his height becomes a weapon – but loses the intensity, and thus the danger, towards the end. Pearl Mackie enlivens the thinly written Lulu (purely present as a sexual victim), bringing a chipper charisma and then convincing sense of trauma.

It's astonishing how defined Pinter's voice is so early on: the musicality of place names, muddling of memory, the absurdities, contradictions and creeping dread beneath the mundane. Now, it strikes a national mood of uncertainty and plans built on a past that might never have existed. But it's also terrifically entertaining and oddly moving theatre.

Marianka Swain

'Pop-up play' exposes flaws in social care for the vulnerable elderly

A play about the difficulties of coping with illness and dementia in old age is performed at Hampstead's Marie Curie Hospice.

Fighting For Life is the true story of former Lancaster bomber pilot James Findlay who married his WAAF sweetheart Joan and had four children. But when Joan developed dementia, James became her carer, despite developing a debilitating illness.

Playwright Brian Daniels, who ran Hampstead's New End Theatre for 14 years says:

"James and Joan were married for 62 years and as you find in long term relationships when one gets ill the other covers so as not to worry the children.

"James was eventually diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease, his decline was rapid,

and the play is about how difficult it is to access the right treatments across different health services who don't speak to each other, and to find care homes who will take a couple."

Having negotiated a fractured health and social care system to get their parents the help they needed to stay together until the end, the Findlay's children wrote a report, which Daniels based his play on.

"I wanted to draw a picture of what it's like for older vulnerable people and the frustrations of their families finding them appropriate care at home," adds Daniels.

Since closing the fringe theatre in 2011, he has penned 11 plays including *Don't Leave Me Now*, which explores early onset dementia, and *Homeward Bound* based on the importance of end

of life palliative care.

"Sadly with no public funding or pub to subsidise the venue, the *New End* wasn't viable," he says.

"After it closed I found a niche writing about health and medical issues."

Daniels himself takes part in the script reading at Marie Curie tonight (Thursday) for hospice users and medical professionals.

It is followed by a Q&A with medical experts and the Findlay's daughter Helen.

Daniels will then take the educational play to different hospices to show to care-givers working with older vulnerable people.

"It's had a great response. At Marie Curie we are using professional actors but in other performances we will use people who work in the hospices."



James and Joan Findlay at their 60th Wedding Anniversary

And the man who spent years finding finance to stage plays starring the likes of Steven Berkoff, Kate O'Mara and Jerry Hall, adds: "The beauty is you can

take these script-in-hand readings anywhere. They don't need a set or costumes, it's like pop-up theatre."

Bridget Galton