

**Harold PINTER**

(born 1930)

His plays have been described as 'comedies of menace' because their atmosphere is often one of fear. Relationships are tense or violent with racist insults, threats and violence giving the illusion of power and replacing real communication.

The play takes place in a basement' room, where two professional killers are waiting for their orders concerning the next job. Strange things begin to happen: 'an envelope slides under the door' containing nothing but matches², just before this passage, then the dumb waiter³ which is in the room begins to work, carrying orders for food. The last order will be to kill the first man who comes into the room – which will be Gus.

GUS: Ben, look here.

BEN: What ?

GUS: Look.

(Ben turns his head and sees the envelope.

5 He stands.)

BEN: What's that?

GUS: I don't know.

BEN: Where did it come from?

GUS: Under the door.

10 BEN: Well, what is it?

GUS: I don't know.

(They stare at it.)

BEN: Pick it up.

GUS: What do you mean?

15 BEN: Pick it up!

(Gus slowly moves towards it, bends and picks it up.)

What is it?

GUS: An envelope.

BEN: Is there anything on it?

20 GUS: No.

BEN: Is it sealed?

GUS: Yes.

BEN: Open it.

GUS: What?

25 BEN: Open it!

(Gus opens it and looks inside.)

What's in it?

(Gus empties twelve matches into his hand.)

GUS: . Matches.

30 BEN: Matches?

GUS: Yes.

BEN: Show it to me.

(Gus passes the envelope. Ben examines it.)

Nothing on it. Not a word.

35 GUS: That's funny, isn't it?

BEN: It came under the door?

GUS: Must have done.

BLACK STRIPE THEATER PRESENTS



HAROLD PINTER'S

THE DUMB WAITER

SUNDAY, JUNE 17, 18:00 AND 20:00

SATURDAY, JULY 21, 20:30

SUNDAY, JULY 22, 18:00 AND 20:00

The Dumb Waiter,
Black Stripe Theater, 2007, Tokyo

BEN: Well, go on.

GUS: Go on where?

40 BEN: Open the door and see if you can catch anyone outside.

GUS: Who, me?

BEN: Go on!

Gus stares at him, puts the matches in his pocket, goes to his bed and brings a revolver from under the pillow. He goes to the door, opens it, looks out and
45 *shuts it.*

GUS: No one.

He replaces the revolver.

BEN: What did you see?

GUS: Nothing.

50 BEN: They must have been pretty quick.

Gus takes the matches from his pocket and looks at them.

GUS: Well, they'll come in handy⁴.

BEN: Yes.

GUS: Won't they?

55 BEN: Yes, you're always running out⁵, aren't you?

GUS: All the time.

BEN: Well, they'll come in handy then.

GUS: Yes.

BEN: Won't they?

60 GUS: Yes, I could do with them. I could do with them too.

BEN: You could, eh?

GUS: Yes.

BEN: Why?

GUS: We haven't got any.

65 BEN: Well, you've got some now, haven't you?

GUS: I can light the kettle⁶ now.

BEN: Yes, you're always cadging⁷ matches. How many have you got there?

GUS: About a dozen.

BEN: Well, don't lose them. Red too. You don't even need a box.

70 *Gus probes his ear with a match.*

(Slapping his hand.) Don't waste them! Go on, go and light it.

GUS: Eh?

BEN: Go and light it.

GUS: Light what?

75 BEN: The kettle.

GUS: You mean the gas.

BEN: Who does?

GUS: You do.

BEN: *(His eyes narrowing.)* What do you mean, I mean the gas?

80 GUS: Well, that's what you mean, don't you? The gas.

BEN: *(Powerfully.)* If I say go and light the kettle I mean go and light the kettle.

GUS: How can you light a kettle?

BEN: It's a figure of speech! Light the kettle. It's a figure of speech⁸!

GUS: I've never heard it.

85 BEN: Light the kettle! It's common usage!

GUS: I think you've got it wrong.

BEN: (*Menacing.*) What do you mean?

GUS: They say put on the kettle.

BEN: (*Taut.*) Who says?

90 They stare at each other, breathing hard.

(*Deliberately.*) I have never in all my life heard anyone say put on the kettle.

GUS: I bet my mother used to say it.

BEN: Your mother? When did you last see your mother?

GUS: I don't know, about -

95 BEN: Well, what are you talking about your mother for?

(*They stare.*)

Gus, I'm not trying to be unreasonable. I'm just trying to point out something to you.

GUS: Yes, but -

100 BEN: Who's the senior partner here, me or you?

GUS: You.

BEN: I'm only looking after your interests, Gus. You've got to learn, mate⁹.

GUS: Yes, but I've never heard-

BEN: (*Vehemently.*) Nobody says light the gas! What does the gas light?

105 GUS: What does the gas-?

BEN: (*Grabbing him with two hands by the throat, at arm's length.*)

THE KETTLE, YOU FOOL!

Gus takes the hands from his throat.

GUS: All right, all right.

110 Pause.

BEN: Well, what are you waiting for?

GUS: I want to see if they light.

BEN: What?

GUS: The matches.

115 He takes out the flattened box and tries to strike¹⁰.

No.

He throws the box under the bed.

Ben stares at him.

120 Gus raises his foot.

Shall I try it on here?

Ben stares, Gus strikes a match on his shoe. It lights.

Here we are.

125 BEN: (*Wearily.*) Put on the bloody kettle, for Christ's sake.



The Dumb Waiter,
directed by Adam Barnowski,
The Abreact Performance Space, Detroit, 2006

Ben goes to his bed, but, realising what he has said, stops and half turns. They look at each other.

Gus slowly exits, left. Ben slams his paper down on the bed and sits on it, head
130 in hands.

GUS: (entering). It's going.

BEN: What?

GUS: The stove¹¹.

Gus goes to his bed and sits.

135 I wonder who it'll be tonight.

Silence.

1. a basement: un sous-sol 2. a match: une allumette 3. a dumb waiter: un monte charge
4. to come in handy: être utile 5. to run out of...: manquer de... 6. the kettle: la bouilloire
7. to cadge something: quémander quelque chose 8. it's a figure of speech: c'est une façon de parler
9. mate: mon vieux! 10. to strike a match: faire craquer une allumette 11. the stove: la cuisinière

Zooming in

- 1 Give examples of the way lack of communication is conveyed through:
 - › meaningless remarks: ...
 - › repetitions: ...
 - › absurd quarrels: ...
 - › sentence length: ...
- 2 Show the growing tension between the two men.
 - › through the stage directions: ...
 - › through their words: ...
- 3 What is the relationship between the two men?
- 4 Explain these two sentences:
 - › 'realising what he has said': ...
 - › 'I wonder who it'll be tonight.': ...
- 5 Find examples of emptiness and void in the text.
- 6 Comment on the title of the play.