

Theatre: Modern Parable of Scorn and Sorrow

Harold Pinter's 'The Caretaker' Opens

By HOWARD TAUBMAN

OUT of a scabrous derelict and two mentally unbalanced brothers Harold Pinter has woven a play of strangely compelling beauty and passion. "The Caretaker," which opened last night at the Lyceum, proclaims its young English author as one of the important playwrights of our day.

At first glance the materials of this play could hardly be less promising. Two of the characters are just this side of articulate, and the third spins a glib, wild line about real estate, leases, interior decoration and other common concerns. Yet Mr. Pinter finds comedy, tenderness and heartbreak in all three. He builds his spare elements into powerful drama with a climax that tears at the heart.

"The Caretaker" begins as if it will turn into sardonic comedy, beatnik style. An old bum receives shelter in a cluttered room of an abandoned house. His samaritan is a gentle young man whose kindness is so casual that he seems almost indifferent. Dirty, tattered, unkempt, itching and scratching, the tramp is by turns wheedling, truculent and full of bravado.

This human jetsam, Davies or Jenkins or whatever his name may be, begins as a grossly comic figure. He speaks the proud lingo of those who have untold resources awaiting them at near-by havens. He pronounces his meager phrases with the exaggerated precision of one unaccustomed to being heeded. He flails a fist into a palm or into the air with the belligerence of a



Donald Pleasence, left, and Robert Shaw in a scene from "The Caretaker," the drama by Harold Pinter of Britain.

The Cast

THE CARETAKER, a comedy-drama by Harold Pinter. Staged by Donald McWhinnie; presented by Roger L. Stevens, Frederick Brisson and Gilbert Miller; scenery by Brian Currah; supervision and lighting by Paul Morrison; production stage manager, Fred Hebert. At the Lyceum Theatre, 149 West Forty-fifth Street.

Mick.....	Alan Bates
Aston.....	Robert Shaw
Davies.....	Donald Pleasence

fighter no one will ever corner. He associates himself with fastidious practices like soap as if they were his daily habit. He is very funny—at first.

But the laughter shades increasingly into pity. Like a

cornered animal, he cannot believe anyone means to be kind to him. He complains about the hospitality he receives, and although it is impoverished, it clearly exceeds any recent comfort he has known. He looks down on the blacks who live in an adjacent abandoned house and is fearful that they will share his lavatory. He hates foreigners. He trusts no one, and fears everyone.

He alienates the two brothers who separately have offered him a job as caretaker of the premises. Their offers and the job itself become themes with subtle overtones.

Work Puts Playwright in Front Rank

For Aston, the samaritan, lives in personal and emotional isolation, tinkering with gadgets and dreaming of building a shed out in the yard. And Mick, who carries on like a man of affairs, inhabits a dream world that resembles an extrovert's nightmares.

Mr. Pinter has been vehement in his assertions that his play is no more than the story it tells. But he cannot prevent his audiences from finding in it a modern parable of derisive scorn and bitter sorrow. Who will take care of Davies, the caretaker? Even the demented cannot endure the scrofulous old vagrant. If it is possible for one such as Davies to have a Gethsemane, this play at last brings him to it.

Donald Pleasence gives an unforgettable performance as Davies. He exudes a sense of degradation. He speaks in a strangled voice and then shouts with the anger of the frightened. He is comic and pathetic and, in his facing up to what seems his last agony, shattering. A very distinguished actor.

Robert Shaw is enormously touching as Aston, particularly in a long soliloquy at the end of the second act. Alan Bates brilliantly manages the eager geniality and the mad intensity of Mick. Donald McWhinnie's staging in Brian Currah's imaginatively cluttered set has the strength of character to begin patiently and to build with cumulative force.

A work of rare originality, "The Caretaker" will tease and cling to the mind. No matter what happens in the months to come, it will lend luster to this Broadway season.