



By **Shiroma Silva**

It's bleak, it's double edged, tight, wry and very witty. Yes it's Harold Pinter, the grand auteur of British theatre, this time played by the Royal Shakespeare Company at its home in Stratford upon Avon. Directed by David Farr, Pinter's play remains engaging and as ever watchable.

The story goes that after six years of living in America as a professor of Philosophy, Teddy returns to his north London home to find that nothing has changed. He brings his wife, Ruth, who he married in England but who has never met his family. She is soon jettisoned into an awkward rivalry between Teddy and his father Max, this bachelor uncle, Sam, and his two younger brothers, Lenny and Joey. Unsaid family one upmanships, violence, failed ambitions and absent parents manifest in the underlying sexual tensions brought about by sudden the presence of a woman in this dysfunctional household. It's typical of Pinter, and the contrived scripting that means that no word is ever used unless it needs to be leaves that in this, one of his best-known plays, there's little room for interpretation other than what the playwright himself wanted. Instead, David Farr's direction smoothly rides the waves of double meanings, implications and innuendos, just as Pinter would have wanted, in this classical production of a well practiced work.

The set is a late 60s/early 70s family lounge, where the colour is red – a red sofa, red carpet and even red blood around the main entrance hall. And although it's faded, the colour red symbolises the volcano about to erupt in the home that has undoubtedly witnessed aggression and domestic abuse. It's also the colour of Max's day to day surroundings because for decades, he worked as a butcher to keep the family in tow. The reasons behind his immense anger never quite emerge – does he resent the job he had to take on for the sake of the family or the woman he married (now long dead and spoken about with mixed sentiments?) Teddy's the family's success story, but has achieved this by actively removing himself from the environment that quickly diseases everything around it. "It's dirty here" he says, comparing it to his life in America where he has gained recognition. "My department is *highly* successful," Teddy tells his young brothers, whose positions in life are ostensibly no further on than their father's.

And equally outdated is the brothers' attitudes to women – it's so absurd in its level of misogyny that it becomes quite farcical. Ruth is initially verbally passed between the "boys" in the way that one would refer to a prostitute who was out to make as much money as she can in an evening's work. Is she a victim or is she controlling those who think they are controlling her? Ultimately, Aislin McGuckin's tight lipped performance and sensual body movements means that she probably has the last laugh: the men talk about her ability to bring in enough to cover her keep there once she's left Teddy to live with them, but they are spurred on to talk like that because she instigates it all. And when they do, the red lights of the stage brighten, in line with sexual control she exerts over the hapless males who have never been able to engage with a woman since their mother's death. Was their mother the victim of domestic violence or the Lady Macbeth figure who used her prowess to manipulate the men around her? It's never quite clear but what is clear is that boys have never had a normal relationship with a woman. Their dialogue becomes more outrageous and the wit grows proportionally in Farr's faithful production. Little can be faulted with this RSC play, but the audience is left with a nagging feeling of where else any current director can take Pinter to.

*The Homecoming continues at the Swan Theatre, Stratford until Oct 15th*