

# Changing the ground rules

An American director's engagement with two towering British playwrights

By [John Stokes](#)



Carey Perloff and Tom Stoppard during a rehearsal, 2016  
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## IN THIS REVIEW

### PINTER AND STOPPARD

A director's view

240pp. Methuen Drama. £60 (paperback, £18.99).

Carey Perloff

Carey Perloff is a writer and theatre director whose most celebrated achievement so far has been an extended period reviving and running the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, where her repertoires were exceptionally wide-ranging. She has a long-standing fondness for two British playwrights, Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard, and her new book is an elaboration of what she had to say about the pair in an earlier memoir, *Beautiful Chaos: A life in the theater* (2015). Although she has directed many plays by both men, she concentrates here on specific productions. In the case of Pinter, the emphasis is on *The Birthday Party*, *The Room*, *The Homecoming* and *Celebration*, while the treatment of, say, *The Caretaker*, *Old Times* and *No Man's Land* is slight; for Stoppard, we have Perloff's considered thoughts on *Indian Ink*, *Arcadia* and a certain amount on *The Hard Problem*, but little on *Travesties* and virtually

nothing on *The Coast of Utopia* trilogy. These restrictions limit her commentary, but are enough to distinguish the book from the more comprehensive approach that we might expect in an academic work.

With two sturdy biographical volumes already available – Michael Billington’s study of Pinter and Hermione Lee’s *Life of Stoppard* – Perloff is free to make the most of her experiences of working closely with the playwrights, often with them present in the rehearsal room. What her “director’s view” lacks in critical coverage, it compensates for with professional depth and a personal perspective that includes the occasional difficulties – but undoubted rewards – of staging intrinsically English plays before an American audience. There is a powerful memory of performing a double bill of *The Room* and *Celebration* in San Francisco on the night following the 9/11 attack on New York, when Perloff stood on stage, asking each member of the audience “to look down the row they were sitting in and take a moment to acknowledge the people around them”. This was theatre as a profoundly shared occasion, the director as inspirational leader.

Reinforcing her conviction that the two dramatists deserve to be considered together, Perloff begins by offering their Jewish heritage (which she shares) as an explanation for their mutual preoccupation with identity, threat, memory, loss and what she calls “a passion for the word”. She goes on to provide textual exegesis of a particular kind, born of a common set of intellectual preoccupations that underpin the collaboration between director and writer. Directing, as Perloff conceives of it, “is an iterative process in which a script slowly reveals itself on stage through rigorous examination and the freedom to play and fail until solutions are reached which feel true to the spirit of the text”. The question is therefore: “How does a director uncover the laws governing the unique and mysterious world of a given play?”. These “laws” or “rules of play” are the operating principles within a work that will allow it to generate a theatrical event; they are discovered in rehearsal and realized in performance. They are not universal and they shift with the shifting times, sometimes fundamentally. Stoppard, for instance, has said of Pinter that “he changed the ground rules” so you no longer necessarily believe what a character might say, even on the most mundane level.

With a nod to Clive Barker’s classic *Theatre Games* (1977), Perloff connects her concept of “rules of play” with theatre as a competitive enterprise, the very word “play” being conveniently ambiguous. Theatrical rules are similar to those governing games in that they are prescriptive but have no preordained outcome. They may sometimes seem, to those brought up in other theatrical traditions – predominantly realist – to be counterintuitive. Perloff repeatedly makes the point that neither dramatist constructs linear narratives. Pinter is cited as telling actors to “let go of one scene, and begin clean with the next scene”. Nevertheless, this “rule of play” does challenge the assumption beloved of many actors that a play offers an overall route map, each character embarking on an individual “journey” that will ultimately take the form of an “arc of experience”. For Perloff it is unpredictability that keeps the play going. Like Pinter, Stoppard “is always more interested in surprise than in sentiment”.

It follows that what may look like digression on the page can be engrossing in performance. In her initial account of *The Birthday Party*, Perloff defines Goldberg’s long speeches, which seem

to be unmoored from the immediate context, as “arias”. She is even more suggestive when recognizing the spontaneous interjections on cultural history made by the Waiter in *Celebration* as the “pulse” of the play. Addressing the much-discussed topic of Pinter’s dramatic pauses and significant silences, she is able to report that “one thing he insisted upon in rehearsal was to honor the music of those rhythmic indications even before understanding how they functioned or how they should be filled”. As rehearsals continued the empty space would eventually be occupied by menace, by sexuality or by whatever impulse lay beneath the surface. We are given a pertinent example from *Old Times*. Stoppard is recorded as making a related demand when he tells actors working on *The Hard Problem*: “Don’t add punctuation where it is not indicated. It only confuses everything”. What counts in an actor, Stoppard has said, is “clarity of utterance”, and Perloff has taken the point. She listens to the text, not just to what it is saying, but to how it is said. Both playwrights, she notes, love words ending in “k” (and not just the obvious one).

Insights and practicalities are two aspects of the same process. Once the rules are established, a floorplan must be designed on which “the verbal action of the play can detonate”. Props must be tactically framed – even down to a single glass of water in *The Homecoming*. The resulting decisions may occasionally seem a little obvious, but they have been validated in front of an audience and in rehearsal they no doubt came as a revelation. As they sometimes still do. While working with Pinter on *The Birthday Party*, Carey Perloff has an epiphanic moment: “the language and menace of his plays work best *if the characters do not walk and talk at the same time*”. Sometimes the simplest rules are the most important. That’s the overriding lesson from someone who knows.

*John Stokes is Emeritus Professor of Modern British Literature at King’s College London*