

Pinter's new companion

By Susannah Herbert

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The best thing about the honours system is that it isn't a system at all, but a very English satire on the idea of a system. The word suggests logic, reason, and an objective totting-up of scores on some great bureaucratic scoreboard. In practice, the awarding and accepting of gongs is as emotionally fraught as the exchange of engagement rings.

Look at the case of Harold Pinter, who noisily spurned a knighthood for political reasons when John Major was Prime Minister, but is now happy to become a Companion of Honour - a somewhat grander and rarer tribute given "for services of national importance". (Their numbers are limited to 65.) Pinter took pains to announce to the Guardian that he did not regard this gong as "having any political connotations at all" and assured his admirers that his radical firebrand spirit remains uncompromised in every way. Lest Tony Blair should derive any base gratification from his acceptance, Pinter spelt out its meaning several times in several different ways. "I will not be supporting the present Government." The tribute, he declared, was "an honour given to me by the country for a long haul".

Pinter is right - he has been in the writing game for half a century - and longevity is very important in the honours racket. Rather more significantly, he is, though he didn't say it, a grand master of language and of drama, the dominant British writer of the late 20th century.

Yet his words struck me as touchingly anxious, the words of someone who is trying to persuade not just his listeners but also himself. Is it really "the country" that is honouring him? Or is it the head of state, on the advice of her Government? And - apart from the Royal Victorian Order, which the Queen gives to her estate workers - can there be any such thing as an honour with "no political connotations"?

It is probably tactful not to go too deeply into the details, but his new gong is not as apolitical as Pinter thinks. He should look up the New Year's honours of 1999. Top of the list is John Major, CH. With any luck the two will be sitting together the next time the Companions meet. I do hope one of them takes notes.

The world is a duller place this weekend, following the resignation from the Italian government of Vittorio Sgarbi, junior culture minister. Mr Sgarbi - an exuberant 40-something television personality who thought nothing of posing naked on the cover of an Italian magazine - was a reliably manic comic turn, a kind of Ivan Massow with real power. Unlike Massow - who was booted from his post as chairman of the ICA after throwing a hissy fit about the state of contemporary art - Mr Sgarbi had real range as a cultural critic.

For him, abuse of contemporary art ("shitty" and a "dictatorship") was just a jumping-off point. He felt much the same about cinema and the theatre. "No one goes to see Italian films, because they stink," he said, congratulating Woody Allen for deserting the Venice Film Festival in favour of Cannes. "I do hope others follow his example and ensure that the Venice Film Festival fails altogether."

He was still more excitable abroad than at home: he rocked the Paris book fair by shouting "Nazis! Fascists! Communists!" at a group of demonstrators and traumatised the French culture minister, Catherine Tasca, by reminding his audience that her father had collaborated with the Vichy regime.

Consistency wasn't his strong point: he described the temporary loan of a handful of Italy's Masaccios to our own dear National Gallery as "sexual tourism" but he felt so patriotic about an exhibition of Italian old masters in Australia that he threatened to sue Rupert Murdoch when one of his newspapers cast doubt on their quality.

When the Ethiopian government asked for the return of a magnificent ancient obelisk looted by Mussolini in 1937 - a deal agreed with Italy five years earlier - Sgarbi reneged, declaring it had become "a naturalised citizen".

Two weeks ago, a lightening bolt reduced the tip of the obelisk to rubble - an omen that a less self-assured character might have taken as a cue for respectful silence. Not Sgarbi. He responded by inviting the Ethiopians to help themselves to the remains. "After all," he observed, "it has already been damaged, so we may as well give it back."

The heavy-smoking novelist Martin Amis has become an ambassador for Pilates, a boring-but-fashionable system of exercise that involves repeated tightening and relaxing of the pelvic floor muscles. This is good news. The masses have long lapped up exercise tips from celebrities whose glowing and healthy looks they admire. But Amis does not resemble Jane Fonda or Geri Halliwell. In fact, as the years pass, he looks more like W H Auden, who famously compared his creased and wrinkled face to "a wedding cake left out in the rain". My Pilates class may soon get less crowded.

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