

DRAMATURGS' NOTE

British playwright Harold Pinter wrote *Mountain Language* after interviewing Turkish dissident writers who had been tortured, hinting at the Turkish oppression of Kurdish languages and culture.

The play premiered at the National Theatre, London, on October 20, 1988. Directed by the playwright himself, the production was praised by critics for its exploration of language as a tool of oppression. Director Carey Perloff's 1989 American premiere with the Classic Stage Company featured Jean Stapleton's 1990 Obie Award-winning performance as the Elderly Woman. Jessica Higgs's 2000 Oval House Theatre's British Sign Language (BSL) production drew attention to the oppression of Deaf people who have been forced to assimilate to verbal communication.

Existing in a nameless present, *Mountain Language* suggests how adaptable, how reproducible the conditions of absolute power are. *This could happen anywhere.*

Indeed, the history of the twentieth century offers a grim register of genocidal principles of division: the racial registration and identity cards of South African Apartheid; the laws and practices of racial segregation of the Jim Crow-era United States; policies of enforced assimilation in European settler colonies, as throughout the Americas; the persecution and murder of Jews in Russia and, later, throughout Europe during the Holocaust.

How tempting it is to view these acts of categorization and division—with the atrocities they produce—in the rearview mirror of history. But they keep happening, again and again, in countless guises: “illegal” immigrants arrested at the border and media photographs of children in cages. They are civil wars and territorial denials of statehood that take place between and within established political borders: Northern Ireland; Syria; Palestine; Iraq; Kashmir; Tibet; Yugoslavia; Ethiopia. Today, this is also happening in Ukraine.

But Pinter's play finds its power, not as a history lesson, but as a drama of *language*. *Mountain Language* speaks in a variety of languages: through silence and stillness, through disembodied voices, through violent acts and violent words, and through haunting, haunted faces. And what is the titular “mountain language”? Perhaps it is another name for a language that can speak in *spite* of getting silenced by power.

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Mountain Language Production Dramaturgs