

The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION

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NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR SHELL GAME

Kim Jong-un keeps building his arsenal. And President Trump keeps deceiving himself about it.

President Trump, who styles himself a master deal maker and reader of people, claimed to have put an end to the North Korean nuclear threat with his meeting in June with the North Korean dictator, Kim Jong-un. “We fell in love,” he swooned in September after an exchange of follow-up letters with Mr. Kim. Mr. Trump’s closest advisers remained dry-eyed, and the evidence is mounting that they had reason.

On Monday the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a respected Washington think tank, published a study by its “Beyond Parallel” program showing that even as North Korea was touting some half steps to dismantle a missile launching site, it was operating and improving at least 13, and possibly as many as 20, bases housing mobile ballistic missile launchers. One mountain base on which the study focused, just 84 miles from Seoul, was “active and being reasonably well maintained by North Korean standards.”

None of that was a surprise to American intelligence agencies, which have been reporting a continuing buildup of North Korea’s missile stockpile. Nor should it have surprised Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, until recently the director of the C.I.A., who acknowledged at a Senate hearing in July that North Koreans “continue to produce fissile material.”

For that matter, North Korea’s shell game is not even a violation of the agreement Mr. Trump signed with Mr. Kim, which proclaimed their meeting “an epochal event of great significance” but referred only to working toward a vague “denuclearization.” The skeletal agreement had no deadlines, no verification regime, no penalties for noncompliance.

North Korea has in fact halted missile flight tests for nearly a year. But it has continued to produce material for nuclear weapons and missiles that can be mounted on trucks and hidden in tunnels and mountains. Despite the continued weapons work, international sanctions are evaporating, in part because North Korea has taken advantage of its apparently friendlier relations with Washington to resume trade with Russia and China.

The State Department responded to the Center for Strategic and International Studies report in a statement that said the administration expected the sites to be dismantled. “President Trump has made clear that should Chairman Kim follow through on his commitments, including complete denuclearization and the elimination of ballistic missile programs, a much brighter future lies ahead for North Korea and its people,” the statement said. Just a small misunderstanding between friends, in other words.

The trouble is that Mr. Trump and Mr. Kim had totally opposite views of what the joint statement was supposed to mean. Mr. Trump apparently believed that American sanctions, plus his threats (“fire and fury”) and his irresistible persona, had driven Mr. Kim to abandon his nuclear aspirations. Mr. Kim apparently believed that approaching the capacity to strike the United States had compelled Mr. Trump to agree to lift sanctions in exchange for a gradual stand-down of the North’s program.

Pyeongyang now seems to have understood its error. Mr. Kim’s envoy skipped a scheduled meeting with Mr. Pompeo last week, and Mr. Trump’s special envoy for North Korea, Stephen Biegun, has yet to meet a North Korean official more than two months since his appointment. Recent statements from North Korea speak of resuming work on its nuclear program unless sanctions are lifted. The Trump administration continues to demand complete denuclearization before any sanctions are lifted. In other words, virtually nothing has changed.

And Mr. Trump? He appears still happily convinced that love had conquered all. “We fully know about the sites being discussed, nothing new — and nothing happening out of the normal,” he said on Twitter on Tuesday. “Just more Fake News. I will be the first to let you know if things go bad!”

How bad they have to go before Mr. Trump abandons his delusions of an epochal achievement is anybody’s guess. But once he does, it is easy to imagine him unleashing even more of the apocalyptic language that raised tensions in 2017. The difference is that this time he will probably not have the support of China, Russia or South Korea, which took the June summit meeting as a signal to improve relations with North Korea and are not likely to turn back.

The challenge for Mr. Pompeo and other sober hands in the administration is to prevent a slide back to fire and fury and to put the denuclearization talks on a more practical and realistic footing than love, which, as Erin Morgenstern noted in her novel “The Night Circus,” is “rarely a solid foundation for decisions to be made upon, in any game.” In the disarmament game, it can be deadly.

Seemingly trapped in a Pinter play

David Belcher

LONDON Ten years after Harold Pinter’s death, it almost feels as if we’re trapped in one of his furrowed-brow-inducing plays. What is real? What is untrue? Why is everyone so creepy and annoying?

And how frighteningly relevant the works of that most curmudgeonly of British playwrights suddenly feel given the state of the world, as evidenced by a celebration here of the more obscure works of Pinter, who could turn family dysfunction into squirm-in-your-seat hysteria, and loneliness and despair into the worst nightmare of a theater full of well-heeled couples.

All 20 of his one-acts, and a few poems and sketches thrown in to test your threshold for long and awkward pauses, are being performed through Feb. 23 under the title “Pinter at the Pinter” at the quaint West End theater renamed in 2011 for the playwright, who died in December 2008. Recent matinee viewings of the first two groupings — five more are being rolled out through Feb. 23 — reveal just how eerily applicable these pieces are to current news events and the general malaise that seems to have settled over the world. Pinter Land, which some of us enjoy regularly visiting, is a rather rough place to hang out these days.

But this isn’t just a case of art reflecting current political and humanitarian issues, which can be applied to virtually

any era as history keeps repeating itself. How often do we get the “Shakespeare is so contemporary” routine — 400 years later, yes, people fall in love and tyrants are jerks. But these Pinter morsels are not just pertinent. They almost feel like cries of desperation from beyond the grave about humanity’s immediate future.

A case in point is “The Pres and an Officer,” which Pinter apparently scribbled down on a notepad shortly before his death and which his widow, Lady

Antonina Fraser, discovered last year among her mementos. A mere six pages, it’s about a president obsessed with dropping a nuclear bomb on London (convinced it’s the capital of France). It almost feels like a before-I-die slap to President Trump, yet written at the time when “The Apprentice” was as far as any of us ever imagined he would ascend.

As presented in its world premiere in the first batch of one-acts, “Pinter One” was hysterically funny but shockingly real — a spot-on depiction by a playwright who seemed to foretell the rise of a geographically challenged loose cannon of a president. Jon Culshaw plays the president as a Trump look-alike (perhaps too obvious a choice by the director Jamie Lloyd). Even creepier was “One for the

Road,” with Antony Sher as a state functionary careering between charm and brutality as he interrogates three tortured members of a family. But the truly skin-crawling offering was “The New World Order,” in which two tormentors crack jokes about their strategy as a trembling prisoner sits blindfolded, awaiting torture. Theater suddenly became all too real the same week as the news broke about Jamal Khoshoggi last month.

“Pinter Three” and “Pinter Four” (opening this week and running through Dec. 8) include such gems as the monologue “Tess,” performed by Penelope Wilton, for whom Pinter wrote the piece in 2002, and the London stage favorite Tamsin Greig in “Landscape,” as well as “A Kind of Alaska,” in which a woman awakens from a 29-year sleep (envious, anyone?). “Moonlight,” which was one of Jason Robards’s final New York stage appearances, explores regret and loneliness from an elderly man’s deathbed.

“Pinter Five” and “Pinter Six” (running mid-December through Jan. 26) features rarely performed works like “Family Voices” and “Party Time” and include the actors Martin Freeman and Jane Horrocks, and “Pinter Seven” (Jan. 31 to Feb. 23) pair “The Dumb Waiter” and “A Slight Ache,” two of Pinter’s better known one-acts.

One highlight of the season thus far has been two benefit performances by the Oscar-winning actor Mark Rylance reciting the Nobel Prize acceptance speech that Pinter delivered in 2005, which is one of the most brilliant and

bitter offerings on YouTube. Pinter’s evisceration of George W. Bush and Tony Blair for mixing truths and untruths during the Iraq war almost feels like gee-whiz acknowledgment of a more innocent time.

Ah, to be back in the aughts (or whatever the heck we’re supposed to call that lost decade), when all we had to worry about was the Iraq war and little George and Tony.

Thirteen years after Pinter’s videotaped speech from Britain (he was too ill to attend the Nobel ceremony in Stockholm) and 10 years after his death from cancer, it’s astonishing to watch his acceptance speech. He begins with the words he wrote in 1958: “There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal. Nor between what is true and what is false.”

Pinter clarifies that as an artist, he stands by his assertion. But as a citizen, he cannot.

“Truth in drama is forever elusive. You never quite find it. But the search for it is compulsive,” he said. “The search is clearly what drives the endeavor. The search is your task.”

With these words, and this ambitious staging of his shockingly relevant body of one-acts as 2018 nears its finale, the search for truth feels more immediate — and harder to grasp — than ever. It’s a clear indication that this fiendishly existential playwright’s works couldn’t be more fresh or timely. Or more terrifying.

DAVID BELCHER is an editor in the Hong Kong office of the Opinion section.



Paapa Essiedu in “The New World Order” at the Harold Pinter Theater in London this fall. All of Harold Pinter’s 20 one-acts are being performed through Feb. 23.

Why Michelle Obama is ‘everything’

Stacia Brown

A few days before the release of Michelle Obama’s memoir, “Becoming,” I went to look at her portrait at the National Portrait Gallery to reflect on her evolving role in public life, and to talk to other women who were doing the same.

The book, published on Tuesday, has been described as offering a more personal invitation into her life than any she’s previously extended. Early reviews praise her discussion of her miscarriage and of her use of in vitro fertilization for its potential to fight stigma about reproductive problems that go under-discussed especially among black women.

As I approached the image of Mrs. Obama as Amy Sberalid has rendered her, she stared right back at me, her hand propped under her chin, wry but not quite inviting. In a stark contrast to the memoir, this is not an image of the former first lady at her most accessible.

But that’s no bar to the strong connection that the women I met gathering around her portrait feel. Here, with her hand just over their shoulder, they echo one another’s unreserved awe, calling Mrs. Obama “beautiful,” “inspiring,” and “so important.” I hear similar refrains again and again: “I love her,” “She’s stunning,” or “We miss her.”

The brand of transparency offered in the book — the kind Mrs. Obama often had to temper during her time as first lady — is a reminder of what made

women like us feel so deeply endeared to her in the first place.

Long before the publication of “Becoming,” she’d sometimes hint at the friction just under her surface.

In the earliest days of Barack Obama’s first term, she seemed deeply in love yet vaguely dissatisfied, subjected to a public gaze she’d never courted, in a position that may have felt, at times, constrictive for someone with a Princeton and Harvard Law pedigree.

Though she appeared to have it all, she seemed uninterested in perpetuating that myth that such a thing is possible. Bringing her own mother into the White House to help care for her daughters was a very public confession that she would not only be needing assistance, but she would prefer if that help came from someone she trusted to keep her recognizable to herself. This was even as she was transforming into the kind of figure whose official portrait would draw hordes of admirers to an alcove on the Portrait Gallery’s third floor.

All of this is subtext as a group of girlfriends point at Mrs. Obama’s portrait and say teasingly, “There goes your queen!” All of this is part of what fuels middle-aged sisters and mothers of young daughters to art-direct smart-phone photos in front of the painting until each has their own perfect image.

Fourteen-year-old Camryn Redding of Baltimore told me she felt inspired that “somebody like me can be in a museum like this, showing that it’s not just for people with a lighter skin color, it’s for me, too. I think she’s empow-

ering. I think that she’s a really great example for black women everywhere. And I think she did amazing things in the White House while she was there.”

Visitors described her to me in the familiar terms that pepper social media posts about her: “regal,” “elegant,” and “just . . . perfection.” As Debra Storm of Lehigh, Pa, said, no matter what Mrs. Obama had to endure, “she was always elegant, perfect, intelligent.”

She earned the astral interpretation we see on that wall over the course of a decade spent rising above the racist, sexist political fray. She — through her openness as well as her achievements — has earned the adoration of these women, too.

“First, I love me some Michelle Obama. She’s such an inspiration to womanhood. She’s smart. She’s classy. She’s everything I want to emulate and aspire to be,” said Margaret Garcia, who had traveled from the Bronx. A few beats later, the coda: “She’s everything.”

“Everything” — as the new book reminds us — has many parts. Yes, it includes role model behavior and a flawless image.

But Mrs. Obama wouldn’t be “everything” without a long history of the kind of transparency about the less-perfect parts of her life that’s earned the mem-

oir such high praise.

I love Ms. Sberalid’s Vogue-cover-worthy vision, as lofty and queenly and pensive. I also love the early-era first lady who was unguarded and a little gaffe-prone, once Freudian-slipping in a CBS News interview that she was a “busy single mom” before quickly adding, “Sometimes, when you’ve got the husband who’s president, it can feel a little single, but he’s there!” I love today’s version: the woman who reveals — not in a slip-up but intentionally in writing — that becoming a mother isn’t always easy.

In fact, nothing has come to Michelle Obama easily. She’s just maintained enough grace under pressure to make it appear so. During her first four years in Washington, she would occasionally signal that the role of a first lady, when performed regally, elegantly and perfectly, could be exhausting, exasperating and lonely.

By the end of her husband’s second term, she was gliding across the stage at Hillary Clinton campaign rallies, uttering what would become one of the most ubiquitous catchphrases of 2016, “When they go low, we go high,” wearing the first lady mantle as comfortably as a second skin.

She’s grown into her role so beautifully that it’s easy to forget — or perhaps, it’s easy to need a revealing memoir to remember — that there were any growing pains at all.

STACIA BROWN is a writer and the creator and host of the podcasts *The Rise of Charm City* and *Hope Check*.