

Staging Beckett

**Garry Hynes, artistic director of Druid Theatre Company,
Galway.**

Interviewed by Trish McTighe, 19th December 2013¹

(Please note that this interview was conducted over the phone)

Druid was founded in Galway by graduates of the National University of Ireland, Galway, Garry Hynes, Mick Lally (1945 – 2010) and Marie Mullen. It became the first professional theatre company in Ireland to be based outside Dublin. The company has had two artistic directors: Garry Hynes (1975–91 and 1995 to date) and Maeliosa Stafford (1991–94).²

The internationally acclaimed company became best known for its productions of the work of J.M. Synge, Tom Murphy, and Martin McDonagh. At the time of the interview the company was touring their production of the Dion Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn*.

The company presented Beckett only four times, culminating in 1987 with a production of *Waiting for Godot*. In this interview Garry Hynes reflects on those early days and the place of Beckett's drama within them.

Trish McTighe: Firstly, Garry, thank you very much for agreeing to take time out of your busy schedule to speak with me today. I want to begin by referencing some of the Beckett productions that you did in the early days of Druid Theatre Company. You did *Act Without Words* in 1975, *Happy Days* in 1976 – if my dates are all correct?

Garry Hynes: Yes, I think they are.

TT: *Endgame* in 1981 and *Waiting for Godot* in 1988 [correction, interviewer's error: this production took place in 1987] and I suppose my first question is regarding what it was that drew you to Beckett at that time, as a pioneering west of Ireland theatre company. I'm acknowledging of course that you were doing a very diverse range of work at the time including Synge, Tennessee Williams, Friel, Yeats, as well as original work of your own and I suppose, I would like to hear some characterisation of what it was that drew you to Beckett, and some characterisation of you and the company's relationship to that author.

GH: Well, first of all I would say, quite bluntly, that one of the reasons we did Beckett early on was that we were trying to attract an audience and one of the ways we were doing that was through lunchtime theatre. These short pieces of Beckett fitted absolutely into that context. You

¹ This transcript has been lightly edited by Lucy Jeffery.

² More information can be found about the history of the company and its current work at <http://www.druid.ie/about/about-druid>

can just see from the eclecticism of the repertoire of the early years that we were stabbing around in the dark, trying to find our feet, trying to find our voice. And obviously one of the places to look was to Beckett. I would say that, in that context, Beckett has been, from my point of view as a director, as much as an artistic director, hugely influential in terms of the inner life of the work we do. But I would say that my ability to actually directly do his work has not been as happy. So, that's sort of where it is.

TT: Okay, I suppose if I'm characterising it correctly, it was an initial stage in the company; you were attempting to find your voice and experimenting with a wide range of things, including Beckett.

GH: Yes, exactly.

TT: Were there any specific writings either by practitioners or by critics that influenced your approach to Beckett?

GH: There was something about Beckett. It was something about the emotional landscape, the visual landscape. It seemed that if you looked at all Irish work that Beckett was there, and if you looked at Beckett, all Irish work was there, in this extraordinarily condensed form. You know, the part he played in, for instance, our production of *The Colleen Bawn* and looking at the comedy of it, the vaudeville of it, the nature of the character(s). When I look at how we have Rory Nolan, who is playing Miles na gCopaleen, costumed, he could walk straight onto the set of *Waiting for Godot*. One of the things that came up when we were talking about *The Colleen Bawn*, and even just about the possibility of doing it, was *how* we would do it, because you know you just simply cannot do a Boucicault production *now*; it just doesn't make any sense anymore. And I thought that it would be fantastic to do *The Colleen Bawn* and *Waiting for Godot* on the same set. These were part of the initial creative confrontations and consultations, rather than an idea that gained any real purchase. But his name is constantly spoken of in that context; he is constantly there, despite the fact that we have no real regular history of doing his work.

TT: What I've come across in the course of this project is the extent to which there is an Irish theatrical landscape at work in Beckett. Vivian Mercier, for example, talks about the stage Englishman of Irish melodrama, so that's quite present in Beckett's work.³

GH: Absolutely.

TT: Obviously there are connections and threads that are not always visible unless you're practising in theatre, unless you doing something in the theatre, perhaps.

GH: Yes. I would love to do some more Beckett, and in fact I've been at the starting gate to do a production of *Godot* and to do other productions and for a variety of reasons it hasn't translated, or I've said no or whatever. So he continues to be a kind of, I don't know, a conundrum...

³ See Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (Oxford: OUP, 1962)

TT: Not something that is easily approached?

GH: Yes, exactly.

TT: My next question goes back into the history of Druid and I'd like to pick up on what you said about the lunchtime theatre, and the venue because you did *Act Without Words* in 1975 with a Fernando Arrabal play – is that correct?

GH: *Orison*, yes.

TT: And I was interested in, on the one hand, the fact of putting these two plays together but also, on the other, in the venue itself, because you were still at that time at the Fo'castle Inn...

GH: Yes, that's right we were. Well, we hadn't even moved into it fully at that time. We were doing lunchtime theatre there, but we didn't take it over as our own space until 1977 and moved out in 1979 into Chapel Lane where we are now.

TT: So I suppose you've really answered my question in that those little short pieces were very good theatre products to attract attention.

GH: Absolutely. I can tell you as well that in our naiveté we thought *Happy Days* was a shorter play than it is and originally scheduled it for lunchtime, and then did a first run and found it to be however long it is. I can't tell you how much it was a group of young people stumbling about trying to find something.

TT: When it came to doing *Endgame* and *Godot*, however, there was considerable success with those productions, particularly the *Godot*.

GH: Yes, *Godot* was very successful. Paul Brennan did the production of *Endgame*. I think, if I remember correctly, that's where Sean McGinley began to find his feet as the lead actor that he undoubtedly is. In particular, I remember him being absolutely outstanding. And Ray McBride and himself and Mick Lally did *Waiting for Godot*, I think it was 1982. I remember struggling with it and thinking that I hadn't got at it at all...

TT: Really?

GH: But it was very successful for us.

TT: And I suppose when *Endgame* came, you had moved into Chapel Lane at that point...

GH: Yes we had.

TT: So you had moved into Chapel Lane and that was really the point at which the company's reputation was starting to grow, if I am correct?

GH: Yes, in the early 1980s the visit to Edinburgh and the production of *Playboy* brought the public eye and we began to be regularly mentioned in dispatches and various things like that.

TT: And that was really an opening moment for the company. I have a question about how Beckett fitted with this growing profile. You were finding your artistic voices at that point...

GH: I think he – that’s the funny thing about it. There is nothing then after that. However, one of the things I’ve always said about *Well of the Saints* was that it was a post-Beckettian play. And so, doing Synge felt like you were doing Beckett. It felt like Beckett influenced Synge rather than the other way around. It just felt as though you were in the same world. I found that extraordinary because it’s like a ghost world. So, if it doesn’t sound terribly pretentious – which it does – we’re sort of doing Beckett’s by not doing him, if you know what I mean.

TT: Which is interesting in itself because, obviously our project is looking specifically at Beckett, but it is looking at Beckett within the context of Irish theatre culture(s), a much wider context, and in the context of looking at specific companies that have touched on Beckett and I think it’s fascinating that this playwright, among others, has played a role. Yet exactly as you articulate, it’s almost by not doing this work, its presence is maintained.

And maybe I will draw you on a few comments about that very successful production of *Godot* because you seem a little bit negative about it yourself...

GH: Well, I always say that it would be very interesting to go back and look at productions from the early years. I don’t know what I would think but I do remember my struggle with it. I felt like I was flying too near the sun with it, if you know what I mean.

TT: I was fascinated by that production of *Godot*. I read a lot of the critics at the time who felt that there was an awful lot of the Irish accent, in particular the west of Ireland accent, being used. And a few critics at the time suggested that the play couldn’t have the voice of ‘Everyman’, because it sounds far too rooted, vocally, in the west of Ireland. I’m from the west of Ireland myself, so it leads us to wonder what ‘Everyman’ is supposed to sound like. I was fascinated by this response to your production. So, I suppose, a decision to permit the actors to use their own regional accents...

GH: Well, that would have been very much part of what we were, artistically, in any case. If it was felt that there was some kind of tension between Beckett’s language and those accents, I would have heard that straight away. But the fact is that there isn’t; none whatsoever. And if I were doing it in the morning, of course it would be the same, I mean the dialogue. I’ve always marvelled at the fact that he wrote it first in French and then wrote it in English and yet it feels as idiomatic to my ear as Murphy does or as Synge does, without the bells and whistles, if you like, in the case of Synge.

TT: That makes perfect sense. The rhythms are quite identifiable there.

GH: Completely.

TT: I had a look at some of the production notes in the Hardiman [Library, at NUI, Galway]. You seem to be very attentive, at least in the notes I was able to view, to the rhythms, the physical and kinetic rhythms of the play. I suppose my take on it was that there are a lot of expectations people have when they go to see Beckett and the almost a Beckett style perhaps that is expected.

GH: To me anyhow, you're locked into that war with the Beckett style and with Beckett himself because he passed so *ex cathedra* on the productions and on what could be done. I found it a struggle and, as I said, to produce the work of somebody who is so influential. I find it still a struggle and I hope sometime maybe to go away and do a small, quiet production somewhere.

TT: That would be very exciting.

GH: At some point maybe. It's just I would dread getting into any type of clichés about it at this point, if you know what I mean.

TT: For sure, obviously your company has not done Beckett's since the 1980s...

GH: No.

TT: Would it be that you found those very exacting instructions, both from Beckett himself and especially from the Estate, to be somewhat off-putting?

GH: I would have found it a bit off-putting, yes. Eventually that will fall away. I think it's entirely Beckett's right. Tom Murphy won't allow the words of his plays to be changed. Nor will most playwrights. I think it's entirely right that Beckett will not allow what he has built in as a strict rhythm to the piece to be changed either. But at some point work has to be flung around and subjected to all sorts of interpretations. That time will come with Beckett and it needs to, I think.

TT: Yes, time perhaps for a new creative energy.

GH: Exactly.

TT: I have some sort of summing up questions but I suppose the main thing is that, and I will try to characterise a little bit and maybe you can correct me, but it is the case that Beckett emerged in the early days of the company finding its voice and it's clear that the company had gone – I wouldn't say in a different way, I don't want to mischaracterise – but have found their voice and that voice did not include Beckett.

GH: I think it would be more correct to say that voice did not include Beckett directly, but always indirectly...

TT: Okay, that makes a lot of sense. It is fascinating to me that – and I don't want to overemphasise the place of a particular playwright within the early days of the company – but the extent to which this playwright's work is part of the creative arc, in a sense.

GH: It very much is. I'd say that Beckett allowed me to see Synge for the writer he was. I don't know if I would be as interested in Synge as I am, without the existence of Beckett in his work, in his dramaturgy.

TT: Very interesting, so it became a sort of prism or a frame through which to look and see something...

GH: Yes, and an inescapable frame. Not one that was intentionally applied or self-consciously applied, but an inescapable frame.

TT: I suppose, in that sense, if we think of dramaturgy as an act of reading, or interpretation, it is interesting that Beckett then becomes a sort of interpretive tool.

GH: Yes, absolutely. I think that's absolutely correct way to describe it.

TT: That's a very interesting perspective, thank you very much. I think you've been very succinct in what you have said and extremely clear, and I feel like I don't want to try and press anymore out of you, unless there's anything else you would like to add.

GH: No there isn't but it will be nice to see it in transcript and if there is something more that I think of in the meantime or respond to in the transcript I'm happy to do that.

TT: That would be wonderful, but as I said, you have made a very fascinating point about the place of Beckett in the work and I suppose the only other thing I would do is wish you the best for the run for *The Colleen Bawn* – I'll be looking forward to seeing it. I will let you go back to your busy schedule but thank you very much for your comments, I really appreciate it.

GH: Not at all, thank you.