

## Staging Beckett

**Niall Henry, artistic director and founder member of the Blue Raincoat Theatre Company, Sligo.**

<http://www.blueraincoat.com/>

Interviewed by Trish McTighe, 20<sup>th</sup> April 2013<sup>1</sup>

**Trish McTighe:** Niall, thank you very much for agreeing to talk with me today. The first thing I'll ask you to do is to talk a little bit about the Blue Raincoat Theatre Company, its origins, aesthetic practices, ethos, some of the outreach work that you do (the Theatre Academy for example); so just a general introduction, please.

**Niall Henry:** The Company was started in 1991 by Malcolm Hamilton, John Carty, Fionnuala Gallagher, and myself and based here in Sligo. We have done in and around one hundred productions in our twenty-two years of existence. I suppose the things that make the Blue Raincoat particular in an Irish context are that it's an ensemble; it's the only present-day functioning ensemble in Ireland. It is a company that runs a repertoire system, something unique in Ireland also. And both of those things are very old ideas, by no means inventions of the Blue Raincoat. They are structures that are more prevalent on the Continent, to do with financial reasons, because it's actually cheaper to run a company that way – although it can be run in other ways – and also for artistic reasons, in that that you can continue to develop work over longer timescales.

The Company has been strongly influenced in an indirect way by corporeal mime. I studied with [Marcel] Marceau but then I studied also with Corinne Soum and Steve Wasson, who were the last assistants of Étienne Decroux. Decroux was very influenced by Edward Gordon Craig, in the same way as Stanislavsky was influenced (or indeed Yeats) by Craig. A bit more like Meyerhold than Stanislavski, Decroux developed a technique, as opposed to let's say Marceau or Lecoq. A lot of other people like that developed a series of exercises, as opposed to a basic pedagogical technique. Decroux's pedagogical technique was a physical-based one called corporeal mime. I suppose there is a sort of a semantic difficulty with that, in that our general view of mime would be Marceau or Kenny Everett or some-such and Decroux's corporeal mime would have been closer to Martha Graham, who he was quite close to in terms of what she was inventing in dance. So where Graham's was a little more abstracted because hers was a dance-based form, corporeal mime is anything but abstract. I must go back in time to go forward: the basic thesis behind it came from Craig's greatest discovery (amongst many): the Über-marionette. What made this idea influential to someone like Decroux is that he understood it and bought into it fully. I'll say what the Über-marionette is: for theatre to revolutionise itself it depended on the ability of the actor to be able to multi-form, that is to be able to move well, speak well, have strong intellect, and be spiritual, although I don't think he meant it in terms of religion. It's important again to note at the time the curriculum of the schools. Decroux went to school with Charles Dullin at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; they

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<sup>1</sup> This interview has been lightly edited with additional notes by Professor Anna McMullan and Dr Lucy Jeffery.

would have studied the history of art, philosophy and things like that.<sup>2</sup> It wouldn't have been an academic theatre degree; it would have been a practical theatre degree. So their idea at the time on how to build actors had a lot of depth, much more depth than happens in a lot of schools in this day and age. Craig came up with the idea of the Über-marionette and someone like Decroux bought into it and he focused on a single aspect of that – the physical aspect. He dreamt up corporeal mime, which was basically a technique for the actor, as opposed to actually developing a form unto itself. It did actually become a form because it was successful in its day, and although it's a very beautiful form, it's still a minority form, albeit a very rigorous one, like ballet. Its fundamental strength though is that it is an extraordinary actor's technique. An actor's pedagogy.

**TM:** in terms of training...

**NH:** In terms of training, basic training.

**TM:** Physical precision, physical control...

**NH:** An actor's pedagogy, an actor's training. In our education system, which is the way I was taught, they deal in the abstract immediately. In Montessori, for example, they don't do that. They deal with the real first; they begin to teach you implicitly what it is to transpose an idea. To children that are doing Montessori, language is understood as a transposition as opposed to a real thing in itself. This was the basic thesis of people like Decroux. And it would have been the basic thesis of Craig. So that type of thinking, even though it's a thing I trained in, wasn't something I was interested in pursuing. However, that type of training would have been hugely influential in the manner in which the company developed. So the next part of our conversation might be – major mistakes aside – a rough track of the artistic decisions that we made over the last twenty-two years, based always on the Decrouxian way of looking at things. So even though there were four of us in it, three of us were the primary founders, one wanted to be a writer, one wanted to be a director, none of us had written or directed before, so the first sort of Decrouxian element is that you have to learn, and you have to learn the techniques. Therefore, for the first, five, six, seven years, all we did was classic plays. The only reason we did classic plays was, very simply, that if the productions were bad, it wasn't Peter Shaffer's fault or Tom Murphy's fault; it would have been our fault. There was no other reason other than that. Then we arrived at a period when, while one couldn't say we had learned to direct or write, we had got as much out of that approach as we could, and within that we explored loads of things. We did a year of what we thought was Grotowski and we did a year of what we thought was Stanislavski. And we went as far as we could for a year or eighteenth months; we would do three or four productions in a certain technique. That was all just an exploration into what theatre was, because we had been trained in – I had been trained in – a technique that was about self-education as opposed to actual production.

The next phase of what we did lasted about five years and involved applying physical or visual aspects to what was, traditionally speaking, dramatic theatre. Now therein lies a problem, and some failures, and I think what followed was a series of pieces where the company built a reputation, but did some bad work. There was a fundamental paradox, or contradiction, in trying to do two things at the same time. Decroux would have described that as a bit like trying to get Margot Fonteyn to say 'to be or not to be' while jumping in the air. There were too many

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Dullin (1885-1949) was a French actor, theatre manager, director and teacher. He was a student of Jacques Copeau.

things going on at the same time and something didn't give. And then we hit upon something else – a friend of mine, Jocelyn Clark, was key to this, in that he was a critic at the time and he was a budding dramaturg. And he adapted or dramatised the *Alice in Wonderland* pieces and although naïve in theme they were very instrumental in things coming together in the theatre company, in terms of how to find ways to get the best of both worlds – an attempt anyway. What I mean by that is, let's say for example one of my favourite plays is something like *The Playboy of the Western World* by J.M. Synge or some of Tom Murphy's plays. I really admire and love the drama of them. Having said that, my favourite theatre would be things like Pina Bausch or Ariane Mnouchkine – let's say Pina Bausch, that's a better example. So I was always interested in that aspect of the theatre (my background was physical), that sort of non-linear way with which to tell stories, yet at the same time there was something profoundly powerful in the old way of telling stories. So in the *Alice in Wonderlands*, at a very simple level, (through Jocelyn because he was not a writer, he was an adapter and a dramaturg), a happy medium was found, or a way was found, to be respectful of the tradition of speaking theatre and the rules that that involved, yet also find the freedom to do our own thing.<sup>3</sup>

**TM:** I suppose you're talking about the relationship between the text and performance, about respecting the text, the words on the page, at the same time as creating a much more visual experience for audiences?

**NH:** I have no respect for words at all, and the older I get the less respect I have for them. When we get on to Beckett, I couldn't give a fuck about what it means or what he says. I have no interest. I don't think he ever spoke about the meaning and I completely concur. I think that's a bit like postcolonial Ireland, a bit of an Elizabethan hang-up. It's an easy way in which to mediate theatre; theatre is not really about that at all. Theatre is about people on stage performing to, as Peter Brook says, someone in the audience, then what happens is somebody else comes along and something happens. Theatre is about that. Text is a metaphor. Text isn't real; this is not an opinion, it's a statement of fact. So whether you choose to believe that metaphor is real is completely up to you. There is a difference between that and tradition, which is a slightly different thing. We buy into tradition a lot and create an emphasis there that one can question. *Alice in Wonderland* was where we began to get the traditions of more traditional theatre and began to mix them with the stuff that we began to do. Now of course within that there has been zero to light political input because we were very form-involved. What followed then was the third phase, you could call it, which was a more pedantic approach in the sense that we very consciously balanced – you see it written down a lot, but we are doing it for very different reasons – classic pieces with new pieces. The reason for doing that was that we didn't know how to go forward, bar do more *Alice in Wonderlands*. So we knew we were in the right area and now had to start searching in this new area, as if in a cave and seeing which tunnel seems to have light coming through. So the basic structure of that was classic stuff with new stuff and trying to learn from classic stuff what you could apply to new stuff, and trying to do new things with the classic stuff. And that had a lot of failings. And then the last, sort of, five years, six years, seven years, got us into a lot of trouble as well...

**TM:** May I have an example of a specific play that you're thinking of as 'classic'?

**NH:** Anything that's classic, a Shakespeare play. Anything that people would agree is a great play; as opposed to a completely new idea. And then the last phase, the last six or seven years,

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<sup>3</sup> Since recording this interview the Blue Raincoats revived their production of *Alice in Wonderland* in 2016/17. See <https://www.blueraincoat.com/alice-in-wonderland/2qv63uhjs51bgfqjnki6cdfi5ug5d6> [accessed 03/08/2018].

which was the most successful period in terms of whether people liked or disliked the plays, was when we began to hone the technique of balancing the pieces. So we were thinking all the time of how to choose work and connect work to end up with the best possible theatre you want to do. So it's always pedagogical; it's always chosen to learn. My partner is a sculptor. Sculptors always play with their material and then they go and make a sculpture, or a painter will line-draw to practice things, then do the painting or play with colour etc. In theatre it's a little bit more complicated in that you have seven weeks or five weeks or whatever to rehearse and then you have to show it, you can't throw it in the bin. So where does the learning happen? The learning happens in theatre usually through experience and of course experience can only teach so much. Sometimes you just go away and learn. Therefore we were picking plays that had things at the heart of them that were useful for us to learn, to be able to then go and do more of our new stuff, the way *we* wanted to do our new stuff. So by pure accident seven years ago as we were ready to do a new play on this classic/new play phase – 'phase three' let's call it – and one of the new plays wasn't ready. Jocelyn again intervened and said, have a look at this fellow called Ionesco (and I had never liked Ionesco). I looked at *The Bald Soprano* and read it and thought that he was completely fucking insane. And then looked to something else and then returned to it, at which point we were panicking! We had to do the play so I just trusted Jocelyn. We did it and then the most interesting thing that happened in the twenty-two years occurred (and this is very interesting when it comes to Beckett also, as Ionesco and Beckett are brothers really): in *The Bald Soprano* – do you know the play?

**TM:** I do yes, and I saw your production of it.

**NH:** So it was a good production of it, good in a classic sense. Not necessarily good in an entertainment sense. I mean it more in the sense of this: we were doing it and the italics would say something like 'Trish is sitting there and I'm sitting there and she goes [*clears throat*] and he goes [*clears throat*] long pause etc.' And we ignored all of this and were in rehearsal doing our own thing and we were getting fucking nowhere. And it was a fucking disaster. We were about four weeks into rehearsal and we were looking at getting closed down if we presented this. We were at that level where nothing was working, and then something happened; you wouldn't call it an epiphany, unless maybe an epiphany of common sense. We thought that we should try to do what Ionesco said, as in what is in his stage directions. So we came in and in a week redid the play. The play worked fine and then it grew and grew and grew and became a really successful piece of theatre for us. But what was hugely influential in that was to realise that authors like Ionesco and of course Beckett were doing the same thing we were: writing plays in a different way, with a very visual aspect to it, wanting to tell stories in a different way and writing with those types of things in mind, how it should be presented. Ionesco's better plays obviously because there are many bad plays, as he himself would have admitted. The way he directed those plays was hugely important to the actual making of the words work, because there weren't linear structures in it. Am I making sense?

**TM:** Yes.

**NH:** It's an important thing, but you don't know what it is you've learned. So I can safely say with ease, for the last seven years we've been reacting to that show. And completely unimaginatively and completely on purpose, again in a similar type of not readiness, we ended up doing Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*. Because there was nearly a lack of interest on my behalf for whatever we are doing. But we kept going with the Ionesco, Flann O'Brien, Ionesco, Flann O'Brien. Because the Flann O'Brien offered just bloody good material and lots of it, so it was like a bucket of stuff. But the Ionesco offered huge rigorous challenges. We

made one mistake in O'Brien's *At Swim Two Birds*, which was a mistake I made with the writer, in terms of the way we structured it. We made a bollocks of the *Rhinoceros* because I chose the wrong translation. But other than that everything has worked really well, without exception. Yet it is exactly the same structure as we've been working on for the last fifteen years. Ionesco brings so much to the table in terms of how to do theatre in a non-linear way, how to make a small idea, how to play with metaphor, how to do all of these types of things. Corinne [Soum] banged on about Ionesco for about fifteen years, when we were young. It taught us rules. So with O'Brien's *Poor Mouth*, Jocelyn gave us the structure and then you need the metaphor, and it taught you then the deep things that you needed to know to actually do this. We ran out of good Ionesco ones, so we moved on to Beckett.

**TM:** This was going to be my next question, why Beckett? You ran out of Ionesco?

**NH:** Yes we ran out of Ionesco.

**TM:** It's very clear what you've just said but if I may: you found a text that fitted to your practice rather than a kind of veneration of the text, where the text comes first and performance comes after.

**NH:** Can I answer that separately?

**TM:** Of course.

**NH:** The thing I'm interested in is theatre. And I'm from Sligo. And I'm trying to make a living in theatre in Sligo. But it's an intention which I might never achieve, or might achieve once. We definitely achieved it the odd time. The best thing we've ever done was *The Chairs* in Edinburgh, which would have been week seven of *The Chairs*. There was a lot of *Endgame* that was very strong; fifteen minute sections of it that were exceptional but there were gaps in it. So I'd say in more recent times, the fundamental bottom line is getting slightly higher and higher. So to answer your question: the objective is to find the best way of doing the theatre we can do. Which based on two basic things really: on being able to do it, which is really a technical thing and on intuitiveness, which is basically political objectivity, as in what do you want to say? There are only two things in art. Can you paint the chair and what type of chair do you want to paint? People like Picasso are graced with natural technique while very young, but it wasn't until he was in the Musée d'Homme, when he saw the African stuff, that he found his point of view, let's call it, where all of a sudden the he decided not to paint a chair the way a chair looked anymore. He decided to go somewhere else with the idea. In terms of development then, when you look, for example, at how Pina Bausch's work grew, it's clear that the challenge is not about survival. The challenge is about learning more and making the art better and then whatever happens, happens. Now again that's my opinion.

Show me where the progression is in the art, you know what I mean? And that leads one to the political discussion; Michael D. Higgins talks a lot about how you change social structures or society itself.<sup>4</sup> Noam Chomsky suggested two ways: you can take a gun and you shoot someone or, the other way involves not underestimating changing one person's point of view, just never underestimate the power in one woman or a man's mind. Never underestimate the individual essentially. So the only way we belong to our society is by doing what we do as well as we

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<sup>4</sup> Michael D. Higgins, at the time of recording, has served as President of Ireland since November 2011. A Labour politician and poet, he served as (the first) Minister for the Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht from 1993 – 1997.

can. Our objective would be to try to go beyond where we are capable of going in this small town in the little west of Ireland. We probably will never get there. When you look at the extraordinary work people like Pina Bausch did and think, well, why can't we do that? That's the type of thing that's never happened in this country. Ireland has never produced a world standard theatre company and I don't mean to arrogantly say that Blue Raincoat will become that world standard theatre company. I'm just saying that that would be the objective, which is a slightly different thing. A difference between reputation and actuality; we've never produced a Peter Brook, we've never produced an Ariane Mnouchkine, we've never produced a Decroux, we've never produced any of these people. In the writing field we have, that's a separate thing.

**TM:** We're talking about theatre and performance and performance as a language. We have our wonderful writers who do everything through the medium of text, but this development of performance as language is something that is quite new, to some extent, in Ireland.

**NH:** It's hugely new in Ireland. We talk a great deal about all the great playwrights we have. Well, I have to question that. We have John Millington Synge, we have Tom Murphy, I'm going to bounce my finger off Brian Friel a few times because we had a couple of his – there are a couple of his that are terrible, and people say they're grand and they really are fucking terrible. Who else have we got now?

**TM:** Well, Beckett and O'Casey.

**NH:** That's a bit like the Irish soccer team; you're pulling in an Irish French man.

**TM:** Well yes, part of my project is to write about this issue. It's a complicated relationship.

**NH:** Okay that's four. But it's very hard to go to twenty, twenty-five, is my point. You can do that with novelists, there are an awful lot. We have an amazing culture of writing here; I have no idea why that is. Has it got to do with how we are all individuals and people went away into a corner and wrote, or is it a tradition? It's not something I know anything about. But, in terms of brilliant, brilliant theatre we are in a ha'penny place. Like none of these theatre companies go over to the Bouffes du Nord and play for a month or go over to the Schaubühne and play. We have an extraordinary opinion of ourselves.

**TM:** On that, I'm looking at the last twenty to twenty-five years, and the kind of theatre companies that have emerged – for example, I talked to Gavin Quinn of Pan Pan a few weeks ago about their *All That Fall*. It's interesting the extent to which there are theatre companies like yourself, like Pan Pan who have a sense of accessing...

**NH:** They'd be the exception now, I genuinely say.

**TM:** A European tradition?

**NH:** Which is actually just doing your own thing. In a funny way, it's just doing your own thing. It's just doing theatre. It is a European tradition but you could nearly argue that it's just theatre. Ireland got independence from England yet took on their tradition of doing plays. We took on their judiciary, we took on everything. We took on the way that they do plays.

**TM:** Yes we can talk about an Anglophone tradition in a sense.

**NH:** I don't mean to sound like a nationalist. I just mean that that is the historical or the prosaic reality. We're hugely influenced by that, massively influenced. We didn't have a tradition of theatre in this country. Theatre is very young in this country. A tradition of loads of other things, but definitely not theatre. We're tied into what we believe is a long tradition of theatre, which isn't our tradition of theatre. And all you have to do is scratch the surface, or even, if you don't believe an eejit like me, you believe Peter Brook who isn't an eejit, who is the first fellow to tell you that words are metaphors, that theatre is really not about that, yet, like myself or yourself, of course you love words, of course you love the story of the thing. It's not against text or anything; it's a contextual conversation, if that makes sense.

**TM:** I think on that note maybe we will have a chat about *Endgame*. Because, just to reiterate your comment about 'running out of Ionesco', you've done Ionesco...

**NH:** We've run out of Ionesco so we can afford to, financially.

**TM:** So the decision to do Beckett is rooted in that. Particularly *Endgame*?

**NH:** Well, *Endgame* and *The Chairs* are two plays that I've always liked. The deep reason is the one I explained earlier on, the more I suppose personal and superficial reasons are that I wanted to be older before I did Beckett. So I'm glad, for this reason, in that by the time you get as far as Beckett, you realise – and we've learned this from Ionesco – that the fundamental trick here is to do what it says on the tin. He is actually the master of the theatre here. I would be completely okay with discussions in existentialism, but having existential discussions in a roomful of people, you can get lost quite quickly. So, I was quite reductive as a director. Beckett's work is extraordinarily playful in terms of the fact that you're playing, you're in theatre, the fact that he's talking about the idea of meaning. So therefore it would be paradoxical to discuss what something means, when he's actually talking about meaning itself.

We are confident enough. John and Ciaran have worked together for a long time so the key technique in it is – again, I'm sounding reductive but I suppose one has to remember that a myth grows around these things a little bit – a vaudevillian technique between the two. However you want to interpret that, whether it is sad or happy or angry or whatever interpretation you create is another thing.

**TM:** As in the double act.

**NH:** It's a double act, with two characters in a bin that pop up every so often and that's a baby double act. In a very short space of time, two days, three days, four days, they had what I would consider sixty to seventy per cent of what they needed to do it – in terms of the double act. That would have taken two people that didn't work together a long time to get, or very adept actors might be able to drop into that type of thing. And then there was an awful lot of just doing it, doing it, doing it. With some successes, and then there would be places where it still had to go further, where it didn't show the appropriate depth. The performers themselves have to be able to go to the places you're asking them to go, because Beckett is asking you to go to complicated places. And that complicated place isn't a place you can direct somebody into; that complicated place has got an awful lot to do with how you or your soul links with your head and hence, very older, experienced actors who've been through the mill a few times, life has taught them a thing or two. So they have an articulation of certain emotions and ideas that younger actors will be looking towards. It might be going up to the Happy Days Festival and, if it is going, a

second run of it will knock another twenty per cent out of it because younger actors need to go through it once to understand it, feel it, so they can begin to pull what they can out of it.<sup>5</sup>

**TM:** I suppose the one thing that struck me as you were talking about the connection with training and your pedagogical style, is the physicality. When I saw *Endgame* I had a very strong sense of a visual language, also a very precise physicality.

**NH:** What's interesting about that is that we've never spoken about that in rehearsal.

**TM:** Would you say that that is something that is, I don't want to use the word natural but something that the company accesses...

**NH:** Naturally, yes. What Ciaran [McCauley] did most of the time and what Johnny [John Carty] did all of the time is very difficult to do. What is very difficult to do is to be precise physically nearly without thinking about it. Without filling it full of the type of tics that you'd see in some places and is just a nightmare. What happens in that scenario is that you tend to draw attention. Attention should be drawn to the play, or to the story, the act of theatre in the moment. So everyone has got a little part to play in that and nobody has got the main part. And I know that is a cliché but at the same time that's a fundamental truism of the whole thing. There would of course have been a little bit of toying, let's say, but it would happen in a way that would be shockingly reductive. We move things around because it looks a bit prettier, and composition is very easy. You just keep moving shit until it looks pretty, and the only thing that you have to be careful of is that you don't move into a place (and I can speak from having made this mistake so many times and continue to make this mistake) and become rooted there where it might look pretty but it makes it difficult to act from.

**TM:** It's a balance...?

**NH:** It's a balance, so you have to have the place that sort of feels okay for the actor, that they're free in their little world, but at the same time looks pretty. You need to be consistent with that idea then, on a smaller scale. So my example was basic positioning on the stage and then the next stage of that was everything from how you move your arm and so on. If you start talking to an actor about how they move their arm in the middle of an hour and a half on a play with five weeks rehearsal, you're gone, because you're going to make their little world feel very awkward. So, how do you do that type of thing without ever naming it? I think a lot of that comes from experience; a lot of it comes from how you get the actor to explore. You can never do that, particularly with physical things, particularly in a short space of time, and particularly if you are speaking a slightly different language to someone, i.e. if their training is different from yours. By way of analogy, if someone is a very good academic but dyslexic, you're not going to be giving out to them about the fact that they can't spell. The good academic side is going to suffer because now they are going to be worried about how to spell. You avoid all of this type of stuff and you keep working with the positive all the time so people can find a language that is their own, that they are very, very comfortable with, and it's your job then to find a sort of consistency with that. A bit like if the two of us were writing a paper together, that someone has to come in and go, okay, well we don't have to have the same style, but we are going to have to have a cogency. One argues a bit heavily and the other a bit more cleverly, somehow we will have to do something with that. And theatre is a lot like that. Getting a

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<sup>5</sup> The Blue Raincoats performed *Endgame* at the 2013 Happy Days International Samuel Beckett Festival in Enniskillen see <https://www.blueraincoat.com/endgame-gallery/> [accessed 03/08/2018]

cogency between styles – at least the type of theatre we are trying to do. So, somehow it has to happen from the individual first and then, you know it's a bit like a thread that you are trying to untangle. You find anything that's most consistent in everybody and then you go that way... I'm being a bit vague now...

**TM:** I think I understand, really it's about working as an ensemble; the extent to which you have this kind of coherence between actors.

**NH:** It is, but you can't drop people into that. Like, Peter Davey who played Nagg. That was his first professional show. He's been production manager round here. You know, he's an amateur actor but he was very good in that show. And he was beside Sandra O'Malley, who's been our lead actor for a long, long time.

**TM:** He achieved a certain – and I think the costuming helped as well – statuesque quality, sculptural even.

**NH:** Yes, but to find the right physicality without him completely freaking out was the challenge. Because, you'd be saying 'hold still', and he would be still, but you have to say your lines as well. So you need to get people into that state.

**TM:** In a sense, when you draw attention to something, you force people to think about it, when it should appear natural.

**NH:** So you can bring people into the system easily enough. Not totally easily but you can bring them into the system and achieve what's necessary for the audience not to know any different. With the same approach, because you have to find the physicality that's natural to him and then start getting him to realise that, getting him to be more articulate with what he's good at and then begin to use that. Rather than imposing something on him.

**TM:** A negotiation in a sense...?

**NH:** Exactly, yes. It would first be a coaxing, then a negotiation, then it would be fascism probably – you know what I mean! A negotiation would be that we are agreeing to do this, fine. Well now we have to *do* it. Because that's very important too. You have to realise that there are another three actors on stage and I agreed to do *this* bit and now I'm going to do it. That's really difficult for some actors, you know, to trust the form because they often trust themselves more than the form. They might say that they felt differently, but nobody cares how you feel. It's what the audience feels. And getting people out of that frame is very, very hard.

**TM:** That makes sense. There is a history of actors who either embrace Beckett fully or are made very uncomfortable by that type of theatre, perhaps not really understanding how to function within this very formalist and very concrete structure.

**NH:** Well formalist is an excellent word and if you run with the formalism it's a very safe world. But if you don't respect the form, and you focus too much on how to say a word, or how to make a particular gesture then you're in trouble. It's not that one shouldn't do that, that's hugely a part of it, but that comes after a respect for the form. An experienced actor like John Hurt will have a naturally formalist approach. There is a huge classicism at play in his performance. That gets taken for granted and people think that the interpretation is correct. But you have to remember that Michael Gambon or people like him are also very good classical

actors and they are very good in that formal way. So if you're coming at that for the first time, the formal is the foundation. A bit like the Ionesco example, it won't work unless you do a few of the basic things he is saying because that's why he wrote it that way. Because it's not a Brian Friel, it's not a linear story; there are no three piggies and a wolf. Beckett is looping back all of the time and the audience have to have something to hold onto. They really need the actors to be very *in* their world (it's a very poor way of saying this), for them to stay in the world they need something to hold onto. And the basic rule is the form. That's just the basic rule, you know, that's so Decroux: you get the basic elements and then you can talk about your individual interpretation and things like that. You can make it work if you get the form right.

**TM:** You get the structure and then you add the colour.

**NH:** The marvellous example of this is *The Chairs*. It's exemplary of all of those things.

**TM:** That was with Mikel Murfi, if I'm right?

**NH:** Originally with Mikel Murfi and Ruth Lehane, then with John Carty and Sandra O'Malley. So let's say Murfi hit the mark quicker than John hit the mark and Sandra hit the mark at pretty much the same speed as Ruth hit the mark, but Sandra and John went much further than the other two went. And that's because of their ability to buy into the idea of focusing on what gesture goes where, not quite that literally, but nearly that literally. So therefore they were incessant at developing the form. They got so bloody good at it that they were able to be free in it; it really was very beautiful when it got as far as Edinburgh. Because you were watching two people that had mastered something. And then of course you had this brilliantly written idea about the fact that there is no meaning; it's perfect.

**TM:** The other thing that I wanted to check with you was about visual referencing in *Endgame*. I'm just curious about that. Because it was the first time that I've seen Hamm as very Francis Bacon, visually, and I wondered if there was any intentional visual referencing there or if that's just how it looked...

**NH:** None. It would always be very literal.

**TM:** It's not how you work...

**NH:** No, not at all. When I was younger there'd be lots of that type of stuff going on. Now I trust how things evolve more. The bloody hankie for example, we must have done it one hundred different ways with the make-up. And he's good at make-up, so you'd be starting early with a bit of this and a bit of that. And then you end at a place and decide that looks good. It looks five percent comic and ninety-five percent strange, or ten percent comic. You just trust in what you come up with. But there wouldn't be a lead reference point. We weren't going towards something.

**TM:** So something organic...

**NH:** Very much so, very much so.

**TM:** And leave the rest to critics and audiences.

**NH:** If you like the play and you're good at your job, they'll like the play. Because as a director, you are the audience; your job is to recognise if it's not working or when it is working. You're just in that place. If I had more power, or more time – this is just to show you how something worked out that we didn't envisage – I would have envisaged a much darker world, not in terms of the interpretation of the actors, but in terms of the overall set and lighting and things like that. But that's the way it went and it didn't annoy me, and we just kept going. Then it was fine, then it was good, then it worked really well and turned out to be a very good idea.

**TM:** Visually, it was very rich, with these flaking walls...

**NH:** Yes but it sort of ended up that way against what we started with. Even if we are being organic here, we are being organic with the idea that we are going to have dark walls all around it. That was in the back of our minds. Where are the dark walls? But we kept going and then yes, that's the way it ended up.

**TM:** The other thing I enjoyed was the sense of claustrophobia, achieved by the fact that it fills the theatre completely. We are looking at the back window, it is embedded in the set, and there is absolutely no outside except for a brick wall.

The other thing I might ask you, and it comes up a lot, is really maybe tangential to the kind of work that you do, and goes back to the issue of how we deal with Beckett's Irishness, or how critics and practitioners have historically coped with Beckett's Irishness or lack of Irishness and the identification often of a sense of Irishness within the text. I'm currently having a lot of conversations about accent choice in Beckett's drama in Ireland. What I think was happening there and you may correct me if I'm wrong, is that there was no specific choice made with accents in your production. Those accents were the cast's accents. Am I correct in that? It was not a particular concern to have a west of Ireland Beckett. It's not a located play...

**NH:** As a general rule, with the odd exception, I have never directed anything that I've seen before. So, I've never seen an *Endgame*. And that's because it confuses me visually if I've seen something, if that makes sense. And that's a visual thing, now we're talking about an aural thing.

Patrick Lonergan, in the *Irish Theatre Magazine*, wrote a review and discussed this, and that's the first time I thought of it, when I read that review.<sup>6</sup> Apparently in the Gate ones, Pozzo or somebody comes in and speaks in a "West Brit" accent and there are Irish accents and there are Dublin accents. So you mightn't believe me but this is all news to me. I had never heard of that before. At times when Ciaran was speaking in rehearsal, it began to get slightly 'Dublinese', and it's obviously in the writing. It's obviously in the cadence of the play. And I just had to say stop, don't do that, soften that, because all of a sudden I began to hear James Joyce, funnily enough, I didn't begin to hear Beckett when he started doing that. I can't honestly say what James Joyce sounds like, but that's what it began to sound like to me.

**TM:** Which is a problem because that skews and starts to locate your play...

**NH:** Yes and again, if we link that back to our discussion about theatre, well it's not in Connemara. I am back to what we are talking about with Ionesco. And then Peter is from

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<sup>6</sup> Patrick Lonergan, 'Endgame produced by Blue Raincoat', *Irish Theatre Magazine*, 14 March 2013 <http://itmarchive.ie/web/Reviews/Current/Endgame.aspx.html> [accessed 03/08/2018]

Tubbercurry [Sligo] and he might now and again say ‘Be-Jaysus’ [word pronounced with heavy west of Ireland accent]. And it’s fine to have a country accent. But you’d soften it because it stood out. Sandra would point that out to me with Peter. I kept missing that. I could hear it with the lads, particularly with Ciaran. So it was de-located not because we didn’t want to locate it, but because it felt intuitively wrong to locate it.

When I subsequently read Patrick Lonergan’s piece on it, I felt I could completely agree with him, because if all of a sudden someone had a Dublin accent in *Waiting for Godot* and someone had a “West Brit” accent or an English accent (I don’t know how he described it), straightaway that’s going to draw some comparison, maybe deliberately even, to Ireland, England, things like that. And I’m just not interested. Now as I’m saying it I sound arrogant but I mean just genuinely not interested. I don’t mean that I don’t care. It’s just not the concern. The concern is to do that piece of theatre. I’ve done *Playboy* a few times, and with *Playboy*, we had this conversation with actors Olwen Fouéré and Mikel Murfi. It was the same thing: if we can just soften the location. And I’m not really sure where that comes from. Somehow it’s quite comforting when located but somehow that limits it as well, I think. It’s like someone making a decision for me. So if that’s the type of thing you are trying to sell, fine, but I think we have other challenges. We’d find it difficult enough to do the play well without locating it in a strange human way.

**TM:** Your focus is to go back to the language of theatre, and what happens in the theatre space, let that dim down those interpretive moments...

**NH:** Exactly. It’s debatable whether things like that are useful. I can see why people would do it because when you locate something it makes it much easier, straightaway, to see and digest, there’s no question about that. And also it makes it more comic at times. Ciaran wasn’t doing it on purpose, when it would slightly get Dublin-ey, but then the frightening story that is at the heart of the thing would get lost.

**TM:** That makes sense. Some of the problems that I’ve seen in various productions lie in this impulse to draw out the comedy often dampening down the horror.

**NH:** The horror exactly: the very serious thing about being alive.

**TM:** So there is a careful balance to be struck between humour (and horror) in the play; that humour is always balanced.

**NH:** And the humour is the same as Ionesco. This is where they are identical. It’s absurd, it’s not humour. It’s slightly different. It has to be humoristic from the point of view of circumstance. He even says it in the play, we laugh at tragedy.

**TM:** ‘Nothing is funnier than unhappiness.’

**NH:** Nell says it herself. There’s no gag in it, that’s why you have the banana in *Krapp’s Last Tape*. That’s real faux theatre.

**TM:** And interesting that John Hurt chose not to do the banana gag, he deliberately stepped over the banana and then did this business of going in and out all the sides of the darkness beside the stage, deliberately playing with the space.

**NH:** There's probably something very clever in that. Because to do the banana thing properly you'd have to be Buster Keaton. That's genuinely the problem with the banana thing. If you're Harold Lloyd or Buster Keaton then it's a great idea. It's just a very difficult thing to do. But Beckett wanted it done like Buster Keaton because if you were able to do what Buster Keaton could do, then you were on to a huge winner. Because then you have this completely irreverent banana gag as Krapp is going to talk about the horror of his memory. Brilliant. What I mean is, dramaturgically what's fascinating is that he chooses to give the gag its own scene. That's a very sophisticated play. So in relation to comedy and Beckett, there is a strong difference between the absurdist humour and a vaudevillian humour.

**TM:** Somehow he is accessing those vaudevillian traditions in a very different form...

**NH:** Yes that's his mechanism.

**TM:** I have just one more question and it is to do with innovation and experimentation. It's very interesting to hear you talk about the way that you worked on this play as not necessarily a veneration of the text but a very practical sort of idea. It works because Beckett was doing something similar to what you are attempting to do in the theatre. Those two things work together...

**NH:** Say that once more again now...

**TM:** If you follow the text then the results can come from that. There is so much debate – particularly in relation to the Beckett Estate – about what can be done with the text, what kind of experimentation. Clearly you had no problems with the Estate, getting permission to do the play; that was not a concern...

**NH:** Meaning that I had no concern about not being able to do anything other than what was said on the tin, basically.

**TM:** On the one hand yes, but you also, on the other hand, are clearly not making any dramatic or a drastic changes that the Estate would have been uncomfortable with.

**NH:** That we weren't going to anyway.

**TM:** Yes, you had no problems with that.

**NH:** We had a question and answer session here one night. A big crowd stayed and I was asked that question in different ways a few times. There were a couple of students there that night and they were asking if I found it restrictive? Is that what you mean?

**TM:** Yes. That what gets discussed a lot because people are aware that very little can be done with Beckett because the Estate can be quite restrictive about what is done to the text...

**NH:** As with the Ionesco Estate.

**TM:** So you've been in this territory before.

**NH:** The reasons are understandable. It's easy to make a bollocks of it if somebody starts doing it all over. My opinion is that people have to understand that what is written and what is directed

are both the same thing in Beckett and Ionesco. I mean, you take a Shakespeare and the bear exits stage left or right. If you think about it, big deal that a guy slips on a banana skin. But people make a big deal of it. People might take four and a half hours of *Hamlet* and present it as an hour mime; they'll do crazy things with it. And someone changes one small little thing in Beckett or Ionesco! If we accept a couple of things that we know to be true: that Beckett knew what he was doing. I am correct in saying he translated his own work into German, he did it into English anyway, and directed in German.

**TM:** Yes, he directed in German and also worked with a German translator.

**NH:** So he was heavily involved in the production of his plays. The thing that we discovered when doing *The Bald Soprano* was that things are happening and the pause is done in such a place because this is where the meaning starts if I do it this way. And if that's respected, it allows him to write in a certain way. So if you did, say, a comparative thesis between *Endgame* and *The Chairs* it would be fascinating, because they both mean the same thing and they both don't mean the same thing. And you give it to any sentient actor and they think, 'what does that mean? I don't understand what that text means, what does he mean talking about the garden, and Paris, and where does that lead?' The normal little things you are taught in a bad school about 'my motivation', and the development of character don't apply here. It doesn't happen in those plays. So you've a huge problem then. You have to have outrageous technique to be able to hang on to the formality in the play, just to have the *cojones* to stay on stage long enough to try and make some sense of the bloody thing. So I can't honestly say I felt more liberated than I felt doing *The Chairs* or *Endgame*. Twenty-two years of doing plays, and not having to worry about anything bar how good these guys are at this job: I found that really liberating. Now we did, a bit like Gavin Quinn of Pan Pan has done, just what we wanted to do for a long, long time. And [we did] an awful lot of rubbish because we were doing what we wanted to do and hadn't a clue what we were talking about. Not that we have a clue anymore, plenty of mistakes to come. That's the nature of a theatre company, that's the nature of what we want to do. There are not many plays or writers that can present a piece of theatre like that, where you like the idea and get the idea. And in both cases they were chosen for pedagogical reasons, in order to drive Blue Raincoat to a place. So we can do our play on Gagarin that we are doing later on in the year.<sup>7</sup> That's why we are doing them. We're not doing them because we think it would be great to do Beckett; we are doing it for much more boring reasons. It doesn't diminish the respect that is there for the work. But the unartistic admission is that as my partner Bettina can work on the material she uses as a sculptor, I equate doing *Endgame* or *The Chairs* with that. I think the writing and the cleverness of the thing are so much better than any Irish writer – if we say Beckett's not Irish for a second. When we talk about wanting to be a theatre company, or trying to be a theatre company, as in the tradition of theatre companies on the continent, this is the front door. They have so much to teach you and you have to try to learn as much as you can. Because together with the little bit that you think you know, plus the little bit that might rub off as you learn, you add in your own little idea, and maybe that might become something original.

**TM:** That makes sense. So again to go back to the pedagogical approach that you take, that it is all part of the learning curve, the continual learning exploration of the material, the material of language, the material of theatre, if I have phrased that correctly.

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<sup>7</sup> *The First Cosmonaut* premiered at Blue Raincoat's The Factory Performing Space, Sligo, in October 2013. See <https://www.blueraincoat.com/first-cosmonaut-1/> [accessed 03/08/2018]

**NH:** It's exactly that. There is probably a much better way to do this, but it's the way we were taught: to do it through corporeal mime, and in sections. Plenty of sections we were just following our tails. In broad strokes it would be conscious enough. But it's just constant research into the form of theatre. The big thing is the point of view, what we are trying to say. And of course, beneath it all there is something being said. That's not for interview, that's what happens on the stage. The point of view is always there, and it's been the same point of view for the last twenty years. And it's a point of view that tries to hone itself repeatedly; the other side then is the manipulation of theatre, and learning. And all you are trying to do is do it well enough.

**TM:** And, on that note, the production was successful aesthetically, but in box office terms? [NH affirms]. You mentioned that you might take it to Happy Days Beckett Festival in Enniskillen.

**NH:** Sean Doran said he wants it, so they're looking at specs. It looks like that, yes.

**TM:** Do you see in the future that another Beckett might become a useful piece for you?

**NH:** Yes, I would love to do a *Happy Days* with Sandra. I think she needs to be a bit older. I think she would do it; she does nonlinear very well. She is a better non-linear actor than she is a linear actor. I think that she would do that better than she would Pegeen Mike of Synge's *Playboy*. She would be pretty miserable as Pegeen Mike, but she would do a great job of the *Happy Days*. I think she needs to be a little bit older, not because she couldn't do it now but so the audience accept her. She doesn't have to be sixty. Just another couple of years older, so that when you make her up, she would be close enough.

**TM:** It's good to hear that there are future Beckett productions down the line.

**NH:** I would be interested in the small obscure ones. That would be interesting because I've seen a lot of those. *Play* is amazing and not obscure at all. But one of the ones that are more obscure would be interesting to do; they could be done better than I've seen them, if you are a little bit more sensitive to what he was exploring form-wise. They are really form pieces.

**TM:** And out of curiosity, the question that occurs to me and hadn't occurred to me before: the Yeats plays that you've done, I suppose on the one hand...

**NH:** That's all Craig. That's why we're doing that.

**TM:** But also the issue of programming those short plays. I think you've done the Yeats at lunchtime. But there is an issue with those little 'dramaticules' of Beckett's that is quite difficult to programme, do you do three on one night?

**NH:** Of the Beckett? No, because it's a commercial thing you'd have to do those as lunchtime event or you'd have to do them in a festival. I could go to Sean Doran and say I wanted to do five of those, and he would be fine with that. And they would sit fine beside the Yeats plays. I also think the daytime is a really good time to see really obscure, strange things. You know, you come from work and you have your soup and you sit down. You get spooked for half an hour and it's much better than the situation where you have time to put on the glad rags and stand in a foyer and sip a glass of wine and then go in and put on your thinking head. People don't have barriers at lunchtime. It's interesting, they just don't. And the foyer for some reason

is a problem also. The way to revolutionise theatre would be to get rid of foyers, in my opinion. Were you ever in the Bouffes du Nord in Paris?

**TM:** No.

**NH:** Well that's worth a visit, you should really go. It's in the African quarter in Barbès with a little old miserable old door and you have to go down a miserable little corridor to get into the main thing – the magnificent Bouffes du Nord! And there is no foyer or anything. They are the ruination of theatre. Lunchtimes work for some reason. I don't know why exactly; maybe it's because people come in and they have to eat a sandwich, they have a thing to do. I mean this in all seriousness. They have an action, there's no waiting; it's not a waiting room anymore. They have lunch, and then they go in, and it's not that long, and everybody's grand and happy. And people don't get dragged to lunchtime performances, which is interesting. You get dragged to an evening show, for whatever reason. But lunchtimes, people can say to the partner, I'm not going. It's lunchtime and there is never any aggro. Lunchtime is the easy one. They go with their friends and people just love them. It's amazing.

**TM:** That's very interesting; we can forget sometimes to think about the pragmatics of space and organisation. That gets overlooked a lot.

I would love to come back and have a chat with you if you do any more Beckett productions. I suppose the other question I have and you've already answered it to some extent, but it is my final question. As a theatre practitioner who has been working in Ireland over the last twenty years or more, what is your assessment of the place of Beckett in Irish theatre? You've talked in a very clear way about your own practice but have you any thoughts perhaps on the place that Beckett plays in a wider sense in Irish theatre at the moment.

**NH:** I don't know; Irish theatre is so fucked. The only sad thing I suppose is that someone like Beckett isn't sitting in the centre of it, a bit like John Millington Synge. Druid Theatre Company sort of commandeered Synge. Fair deuce to the Gate, they took Beckett on and it was incredible that no one would touch it. Not to the extent that they did. The same with Garry Hynes. It's funny but probably the two greatest successes you could argue in the last twenty-five to thirty years are Druid-Murphy, Druid-Synge or the Gate-Beckett in Ireland and in both cases you had independent companies reclaiming something that was being ignored. Also Tom Murphy was being ignored. So what does that say about Irish theatre, a country that is forever talking about all the great writers that it has and then proceeds to ignore them? And it takes an independent company to present them, a bit like Sean Doran. Because I remember seeing the advertisement last year and wondering why someone hadn't done this before. I couldn't believe it and he said to me that he had thought of it about five years prior to that and was afraid of his life that someone was going to start it. So it's an extraordinary thing that it's not dead centre in the same way as Shakespeare is in England – of course it can't be dead centre in exactly that way because he's not as entertaining as Shakespeare, but, at the same time, if you won four gold medals in the Olympics for some small little sport like the hundred metres, it's still four gold medals. It's an extraordinary achievement, the thing he achieved. He achieved what Ionesco achieved, but he is a sort of an obscure strange guy that lived in France and yet doesn't seem to be an active part of Irish theatre. And that's a reflection on Irish theatre, I think.

**TM:** Thank you very much and I will finish it there.