

Staging Beckett

Dr Rosemary Pountney, actor and scholar

Interviewed by David Tucker, Oxford, 30th August 2015¹

David Tucker: Rosemary, I wonder if we could start with your discovery of the word ‘vaguen’ on the *Happy Days* manuscript when you were studying for your DPhil at Oxford.²

Rosemary Pountney: To find that word on the *Happy Days* manuscript was simply wonderful for me because it was a confirmation that I’d been on the right lines in choosing the topic of my thesis. I had, at the University of Reading, been looking at the manuscripts and I came across a manuscript of *Come and Go* which began with an extremely banal little scene.³ Gradually, Beckett was moving away towards ambiguity. I became so interested that I looked at the manuscript of *Play* for example, and the same thing happened: it moved through drafts towards a much more ambiguous, indeed, an extremely ambiguous situation with a good deal of change in the development.⁴ I began to wonder if that might make a topic for my thesis, it needed seeing the whole bulk of the manuscripts so I managed to collect them. I’ll tell you at some other stage exactly how that came about. I found that it was indeed the case. Beckett always began with something much more concrete and would peel away at it and end up with a much more ambiguous text. So when the manuscript of *Happy Days* turned up and I found ‘vaguen’ in the margin it was a complete delight. I felt clearly we are on the same track so that was the start of it. Then somewhere else, I can’t remember whether it was in the same manuscript or somewhere else, he’d written ‘less equals more’ and it was further justification.⁵

DT: A fascinating discovery. That book of yours which finds ways to speak very precisely about ambiguity is a pioneering study. As you were doing that work at Oxford you were studying with Francis Warner who is featured in another Staging Beckett publication, that project of his to build a Samuel Beckett theatre in Oxford.⁶ I’m interested in how Beckett was studied at the time at Oxford and how you felt he was received more broadly at universities.

¹ This interview was transcribed by Niamh Bowe and has been lightly edited with additional notes by Lucy Jeffery.

² For Pountney’s discussion of how ‘vaguen’ – from a manuscript note from the ‘first typescript of both acts’ of *Happy Days* – describes Beckett’s wider compositional process, see Pountney, *Theatre of Shadows: Samuel Beckett’s Drama, 1956-1976*, 149. See selected bibliography of Rosemary Pountney’s essays on Beckett at the end of this interview.

³ See ‘Good Heavens’, part of ‘Come and go/Va et vient sub-series BC MSS DRAMA/COM’, UoR BC MS1227/7/16/4.

⁴ See ‘Before Play’, part of ‘Play/Comédie sub series BC MSS DRAMA/PLA’, UoR BC MS1227/7/16/6.

⁵ At the head of a series of notes Beckett prepared for Donald McWinnie’s 1976 Royal Court production of *That Time*, Beckett wrote: ‘To the objection visual component too small, out of all proportion with aural, answer: make smaller on the principle that less is more.’ See S. E. Gontarski, *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett: The Shorter Plays*, Vol. 4 (New York: Grove Press, 1999), p. 437.

⁶ David Tucker, *A Dream and its Legacies: The Samuel Beckett Theatre Project, Oxford, c. 1967-76* (Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2013).

RP: As regards how he was studied at the time when I said I wanted to work on Beckett...you have to go through a preliminary examination in your first year, you have to do palaeography, bibliography and write a preliminary essay. So when I said I wanted to make my topic Beckett the faculty were horrified because they didn't like one to write theses on the living. (Laughs) They were afraid Beckett would sue. So it facilitated me getting into immediate touch with him in order to make sure that this would be sanctioned, that if I did get hold of the manuscripts, it would be with his sanction. He typed a letter which gave me that sanction and alerted me to other libraries, mostly in America, where manuscripts could be found. When I heard from Francis Warner that Beckett hadn't got a secretary I was really horrified that he laboriously had to write out this permission. I became very, very careful about what I wrote to him so that I wasn't inflicting myself too often.

In relation to Francis, he was an extremely generous supervisor and I would frequently find when I turned up with a chapter to discuss that he would have a table full of new books on Beckett. He would say 'Have you seen this, would you like that?' I would end up with a huge cache of books to take away and this would be accompanied by a huge brandy to the extent that I would wonder whether we would get through our discussion! He was extraordinarily kind and generous. He, of course, put me in touch with Beckett in order to get the sanction. After that, I was already anxious about disturbing Beckett. So what he did, usually at the last minute because his plans would be rather fluid he would say: 'I'm going to Paris this weekend, I'm going to see Beckett, is there anything you'd like me to ask him?' So I would jot down, there and then in his rooms, what I wanted to ask Beckett. Then Francis would have dinner with Beckett and he would say: 'I've got a few questions from my student.' Beckett would see this slip of paper and he wouldn't answer there and then but he would pocket it and write little remarks and comments, writing in the margin. I would then get this back when Francis returned. That kind of contact was excellent. I think Beckett realised that I wasn't wanting to intrude. He was always very, very helpful in replying. I then began to get letters but that was a bit later.

DT: Were you in touch with many peers at the time who were also studying Beckett? I know you were touch with John Pilling at Reading?

RP: Oh yes. For a while I was supervised by John because Francis was busy with so many other things. At the time I suggested that perhaps it would be sensible to move to Reading to get John's input. The problem was that John wasn't a theatre person, so this was an intermediate stage. I met Jim [James Knowlson] very early on because I was working on the manuscripts. In fact, John and I for a whole summer were working in the same room in the manuscript area. That was the lovely thing about doing research on Beckett because when it became known that one was doing so, I would continually get rung up by people who were in Oxford, they heard from Jim and John that I was doing this. The same thing through Francis, a lot of people would come, as I've said Francis was extremely busy too so they were usually shunted onto me. (Laughs) It was all really pleasant because you met very interesting people. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I was really very lucky. We were in the early stages of research. We were all very supportive of each other.

DT: Did you meet Martha Fehsenfeld around that time?

RP: Oh no! Martha came right at the beginning. Martha came as my student. I took my degree in the summer of '72 and I had already been asked by the Continuing Education department if I would do a theatre summer school for six weeks. I was doing that when my results came through and I cycled down to school to see what they were when we had a break in the morning. Martha was one of those students. I was deeply interested in Beckett by that time and though I was doing a whole theatre course it must obviously have been - I don't know how to put this - my enthusiasm must have been very clear to the students. So what happened was that they got very alive in the seminars, Martha got extremely interested. There was a practical session where they were going to do a performance and improvise work. They also had to produce an essay. Martha wrote an essay, I think it was on *Godot*, and I did notice when they did the practical section that clearly she had some theatre experience. Anyway at the end of this, I think she was in her mid-thirties at the time but she had decided that she was going to go on and do graduate work in America. In the end she said: 'Would I, if she came back to Oxford, would I in theory be her tutor?' I was a bit surprised but I said: 'Yes, but you realise I'm a new graduate myself and just embarking on a thesis on Beckett?' And she said: 'Oh yes. Anyway if I came would that be in order?' So I said yes but I didn't dream it would happen. I was on my way home from a palaeography class and there was Martha sitting on my garden wall, having already arrived in Oxford and got herself some digs, asking for tutorials. I had got a terribly full timetable because I was having to do these classes to get through my first year of graduate work and I was already teaching for numerous colleges. So I had to slot her in for an hour like everyone else and I found she was so demanding and full of questions I couldn't cope with that. So what I got used to doing was to put her at the end of the line which would branch into supper. So that was the beginning. She was in Oxford for a year. She was hoping to get taken on as a graduate. That didn't work out but she was still so interested in Beckett that she wanted to do graduate study of some kind or to become involved in the Beckett world in some way. She bought a Beckett manuscript that year at one of those London auctions and donated it to Reading.⁷ I think she wondered if she could stay on in Reading but those things didn't work out. She ended up, after the year, going back to America and meeting everybody because she's a wonderful 'meeter'. At that stage, literally, she would meet anyone who had got something or was doing something about Beckett, she would go and talk to them. She was probably in your role really for interviewing people. (Laughs) In the course of these interviews she met Dougald [MacMillan]. Dougald realised he had a Beckett addict there. So their collaborations started and Martha ran around doing the interviews while he was teaching at the university. That was how it all started and then it grew and grew and grew.

DT: As an academic you are in the rare position of studying Beckett's manuscript drafts, his working processes, as well as being a performer of the published plays. I'm wondering if you think that your work as a teacher of manuscript drafts and versions has informed your approach to performing Beckett's plays.

RP: It's a little bit difficult...of course it's hugely influenced my performance. It is a little bit difficult to describe how.... What I felt I was doing was peeling away how his creative process worked going through the manuscript drafts. I felt like I was getting into the core of Beckett's

⁷ See 'Unpublished rehearsal diary notes taken during May 1979 rehearsals of *Happy Days*, Royal Court Theatre, London. Directed by Samuel Beckett [manuscript]/Martha Fehsenfeld' UoR MS2102; 'Beckett's late works [manuscript]: echoes or innovations?/Martha Fehsenfeld' UoR MS2077.

creativity. You couldn't really feel otherwise, because as you went further and further on you were getting deeper and deeper in as the manuscripts developed. I felt like I was inside Beckett from the writing point of view, how he went about it. That meant I felt I was at the core of what he was trying to put over. That clearly transferred itself into how I approached the performance.

DT: I haven't thought of this before. The way you describe it now makes me think perhaps there is some comparison to be made between the academic work you were doing and bringing that to the stage. If there was a Stanislavskian method for Beckett it might be manuscript draft work, just the way you are talking about getting to the core of the work because there is no sociocultural background that the characters have so that we wonder about them being offstage.

RP: Quite, because he had taken that away.

DT: But there is an offstage life to the work which is a textual one.

RP: Simply the sense of how he was going about it?

DT: Yes, studying that compositional process. It has struck me that studying that compositional process is like getting to the core of the work for an actor. When you talk about getting to the core of the performance or character.

RP: With an actor it's a question of making an identification with the material, with Beckett this happens at a very deep level. It does for me. I think that's why actors, once they've got into Beckett, find it so exciting. It is hugely draining but at the same time they make themselves a kind of vehicle for the work. That's what I felt was happening, you're not adding anything, you're trying to open yourself to the text. I know I have said this before: You would have a building up of a character in a Stanislavski way with a lot of your roles, [George Bernard] Shaw for example. If you're going to be an old woman you would notice how old women walked, but I don't need to do that now (Laughs). When I started off in my thirties, you have your own idea of what is old age and you look and you try to incorporate that into your performance. With Beckett it is *totally* the opposite. You take everything like that, anything 'adding', away and try to absorb the text. People talk about meaning in Beckett and want you to ascribe meaning all the time and to say what things are about. I don't like working like that. Beckett was working towards ambiguity so he was trying to take away all the time. So basically what you are taking in is his endless preoccupation with a sense of 'womb tomb'. Life is the beginning of death. You are on a kind of wheel. Well, life as the beginning of death actually means you're on some kind of terminus but with Beckett the sense of endless cycling is what is so obvious. Somehow that you are on a kind of continuum, certainly if you look at *Play* you can't get off it. The thing is going on and on. After the grave the sense of the circularity, I suppose, the sense of endless reflection comes partly from the impossibility of human existence. The cards are stacked from the beginning, this is all you have. When you get to that situation, the sense of it is so preposterous, you can't get it out of your head. It goes on, it goes on... It never stops. (Laughs)

DT: In continuing to perform Beckett's plays, as you've travelled the world performing them, have you ever felt like your nationality has played a part in how your performances were

received and expected? I'm asking because of the context in which this interview is taking place under the auspices of the Staging Beckett project which looks at staging Beckett's plays in production in the UK and Ireland, so the project is interested in those kinds of international boundaries.

RP: Of course, English was his first language... I've been thinking this through, if I say that I felt I understood Beckett through the language it's difficult because obviously the native Irish has informed his whole background and upbringing. So I can absolutely see how the Irish would claim him as an Irish writer which of course he is. The French want to claim him as well because he then started writing in French and we do have the two languages in parallel sometimes the French comes first and sometimes the English and he always has the labour of working on the translation. I understand that. What I'm trying to say from a personal point of view is that Beckett's upbringing was very similar to mine. He went from a very religious Anglo-Irish household to Portora Royal public school and then went on to Trinity. To put my own experience very briefly: I come from a long line of Anglican vicars on my mother's side so that was in my bones from the beginning just as it must have been in Beckett's. Particularly via his mother, the language of the services and the bible, and that would have continued at Portora. Then of course at Trinity, I've forgotten at what stage Roman Catholics were allowed into Trinity, which was a very Protestant foundation. There was the difference of being an Irish man in an Irish community, of course, but the educational background was very similar. I went from that kind of home into an English public school which was a great deal of sport and chapel twice a day. (Laughs) So the language of the King James Bible, all of that, was ingrained. One reacts against this and you can see Beckett developing and changing. From that kind of education I could understand a good deal of where his experiences were coming from. That may be incoherent.

DT: No, that's perfectly coherent. You are talking about how the socio-cultural and religious context which informed much of Beckett's writing had parallels with your own upbringing.

RP: Yes. I didn't feel there was anything I was missing. That is a dangerous statement! I'm sure the Irish would leap on that! (Laughs)

DT: Do you ever feel that people bringing you to a production or taking you overseas to present a production wanted anything particular from somebody English performing Beckett?

RP: No, I don't think so, it had been a question of what one had been working on. I felt mostly, this is a little difficult to say...one of my first directors when I was working on *Footfalls* for example.⁸ We had got to the end of the third scene and you know in the fourth scene the light appears but the actor has gone. At the end of scene three he said 'Then you vanish that's it' and I said 'What about scene four?' It was completely unclear to him there was a scene four so I was trying to expand the mind of the director which could be quite difficult. I won't say any more than that. I frequently felt much more inside the text than the director had wormed before we started.

⁸ Pountney first played May in *Footfalls* at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1978, directed by Peter O'Shaughnessy with Rachel Burrows as V. See Pountney, 'Practitioner's Voices: Rosemary Pountney on Performing *Footfalls*', *JOBS*, 23.1 (2014), 107-113.

DT: Well, you did have a lot of experience.

RP: Yes. (Laughs)

DT: As a performer I'm interested in whether you feel you had a different sense of the musicality or rhythm of Beckett's drama to that which a reader/audience might have. I ask as a non-practitioner, I wonder how you and I might sense the rhythm of Beckett's texts differently.

RP: Yes, it is interesting. When I performed in English and French at Zurich they said what about German? I could expand into every language. I think what happened when I was performing *Rockaby* in English and French, which I did because I was invited to a translation conference at the University of East-Anglia organised by...oh, he died in a terrible car-crash with his daughter...

DT: [W. G.] Sebald?

RP: Sebald. Yes, that's right. He was head of modern languages at the time so he had organised this conference. As it was a translation conference it occurred to me that it might be interesting to do *Rockaby* not just in English but in French also, so that was where that recording was first made. I found the audience was very interested in that because they do sound completely different. I made other recordings and I incorporated it into my tours. What I think happened is that virtually all of the audiences that I've had spoke English and had English as their first language so when they heard the first burst of *Rockaby* they were orientating themselves and getting to grips with the text's meaning. When you came to the French it sounded completely different and a lot of them didn't have French. It was alright in Europe but when you went further afield they probably didn't speak French. What they said happened was that the French was very liquid and lyrical and they had already developed an understanding of the character. As the French developed they were having a deeper personal experience of identification with the figure. They were reflecting on it and going deeper into it. So when the light gradually faded out on the figure there was a tremendous silence and sense of reflection from the audience. They even said when the image faded out they were still seeing an afterimage. It gave them a very full theatrical experience. I was very pleased about that because I was even worried about them seeing a text through again that they couldn't understand. That seemingly is how it affected a lot of them. So not sure if that answers your question but that is all I can say about it.

DT: Let's ask, what have been your favourite performances to give and what are the best performances you've seen other people give of Beckett's plays? A two-part question!

RP: ...As far as the performances are concerned, the best performance of *Waiting for Godot* that I ever saw was the one Beckett did at the Schiller theatre in Berlin. I think they performed that in 1975 and it came to the Royal Court at 1976 as part of the seventieth birthday celebrations. What was so wonderful about it was the patterning, the way in which he'd got these two actors hugely differentiated as to size and the small one was wearing the tall one's

jacket. There was balance and there was incongruity at the same time. So you saw a humorous sense of the partnership visually but basically there was also a wonderful patterning of sound and silence. Sometimes, the performance would wind down and there would be the most wonderful silence and then it would start up again in a manic way. It all created a sense of rushing about, comic timing, and *longueurs* and so on. It created such an integrated sense of a whole. Like he'd brought the play fully to life. I found this very exciting and in the interval I saw very well-known directors and actors talking animatedly about this, hearing them as you pass in the corridor. It was very exciting and you realised, and the directors realised, there was something to Beckett that they had been missing... I suppose I could talk about individual actors and people who struck me as being wonderfully inside Beckett. Jack MacGowran's *Eh Joe* is superb, for example.⁹ Barry McGovern gets it all the time in the theatre, on film, whatever he is doing. He captures the wit and he captures the intelligence of Beckett. You get this marvellously in his solo performances of the prose. The lovely bite to his Irish voice when he's making some of Beckett's acid comments. (Laughs) He is absolutely in tune and that informs the way in which he plays the character. I think he is entirely superb. I'll stop there.

DT: How about your own performances, what have been your favourite ones that you've given, or ones that you have not enjoyed?

RP: There have been a lot of those. (Laughs) The late plays, which is what I do, depend so much on absolutely perfect technical integration. Doing *Rockaby* for example, if a person isn't moving a chair appropriately, timed so precisely, and the sound as well and the lighting... You're sitting in the chair and there's nothing you can do about it. Once I was sitting in the rocking chair in Wellington, New Zealand.¹⁰ We had one rehearsal and there was a stage manager operating the chair by rope. I was in front of a curtain in the chair. He had to wield the rope from behind which meant he was lying down in order to do it, it being attached to the bottom of the chair. We had rehearsed it at normal pace but as the performance started, he lost his head and began to rock me so energetically that I nearly fell out of the chair. (Laughs) I had to brace my feet hoping that the chair would withstand this against the two front legs. Otherwise I would have been shot out! My hands had to remain in a sort of curve but the chair didn't curve, so my elbows and forearms were pressing so heavily onto the arms of the chairs, it was unbelievable. That kind of thing happened because part of the experience of touring was that I would go to universities with drama departments and it would become a learning experience for the students. The drama students would be incorporated working on the sounds and the lights. It was a huge learning experience for them because they would look at the text, if they came new to Beckett, think it a dull tiny little play and think we won't have any trouble with this. Then they would see that the precision virtually made them characters in the action. It would be a huge learning experience. Usually in the end they would be very impressed by Beckett indeed! I have had that experience. Pleased to do it too because it would be combined with lectures and seminars with the students. As regards performances where I felt happy, when you feel you are achieving what you need to achieve as an actor is when you hear a pin drop silence from the audience. That is palpable. When it's happening you realise you have got them and the intensity grows. That is what I like to happen. Beckett describes the 'hooks going in'

⁹ *Eh Joe* was originally written for Jack MacGowran in 1965. Beckett helped Alan Gibson direct MacGowran and Sian Phillips in the first *Eh Joe* for the BBC in 1966.

¹⁰ Pountney performed *Rockaby* in New Zealand in 1990 and 1997 (English and French).

in a letter to Alan Schneider.¹¹ That is what one wants. This leaves the audience straining every now and then but there is a kind of an identification, a kind of empathy with the character which is developing. Particular occasions where that is happening in the way I want it to happen is certainly the last performance of *Footfalls* in Oxford playhouse in 1980, and some of my later performances of *Footfalls* when I did it at the National Theatre [Den National Scene] in Norway in Bergen in 2012. That production went on to the Samuel Beckett Centre that year in Dublin. I could feel that was happening. *Footfalls* was a very different performance from how it had been in 1980 because I had developed bone problems. So it necessitated changes in how we performed the text. Also, I had grown into age by that time. I had a different view so a very different performance but I could feel the hooks going in there. I've talked already about the technical team and in fact, the Norwegian director at Bergin [Tore Nysaether] said that when I started off, the technical team are often terribly bored when something is happening and they are not required to do anything. So he said 'I've never seen such an alert technical team.' He realised they were all caught up in it! (Laughs) They hadn't known anything about Beckett before so that was probably even better because there were students involved. This also went for *Rockaby* too. Both of those *Rockabys* are my most recent experiences apart from a reading of those two plays. I did a performance in the Cockpit theatre in London and that also got a very empathetic audience for *Rockaby*. As I've said, I think in doing Beckett that the backup is absolutely vital.

DT: This is something as a naïve audience member I don't have a sense of. If there is a single performer onstage I see them as all powerful and in control of the performance. Clearly if someone is going frantic with a rope...

RP: This can happen in so many different ways. A slight misalignment of light and sound for example. I say it's agonising for the actor because you are powerless and you have to go with whatever it is. With *Rockaby* your voice is there on the tape and that is it. I had an appallingly difficult time doing *Footfalls* at Ohio State University for the Beckett conference they had in 1980. I had first of all performed this in '78. I performed the Irish premiere of *Footfalls* in '78 at the Dublin Theatre Festival with Rachel Burrows, Beckett's student, playing the mother. That was fine and it was directed by Peter O'Shaughnessy, he was very pleased with the way our voices interacted. It all went very well. Then we were invited to perform it by Stanley Gontarski in America. Rachel had a heart problem and said she wouldn't fly, she couldn't fly. What we had to do was to rehearse at Trinity with her making her recording and that involved my footsteps. So you had to get the footsteps to start with. The timing of that first scene was unbelievably difficult. Anyhow we got it onto tape. Then I got it to America. I was by that time working at University College Dublin and rehearsing at Trinity. I got terrible jetlag on arrival because the plane changed at Shannon airport, terribly irrelevant story but very funny, we got on at Dublin and stopped at Shannon. At Dublin an absolutely enormous Irishman had sat on my right so that he was partly in the aisle. I was in the middle seat. When it stopped at Shannon and an even bigger man squeezed into the other side and I was trapped between them for the whole of the flight to New York! It was just dreadful. The stewardess saw I was like very thin

¹¹ In a letter dated 12 August 1959 to Alan Schneider, Beckett describes Roger Blin's performance of Hamm in France at the Studios des Champs-Élysées as 'superb' and says that 'the hooks went in', after a 'shaky start in London'. Beckett in *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, ed. Maurice Harmon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 14.

jam in a sandwich. (Laughs) I've never had jetlag like that before. I had a ringing head for all the rehearsals. What I found when I got to Ohio State to rehearse the next day, Stan had put me in touch with the head of Drama who was there with some students. As far as I can remember, it was all set up, they got all the cues, and I was doing that with the utter horror of a clanging head and dragging feet. Then Alan Schneider arrived and it was going to be the premiere of *Ohio Impromptu*.¹² The result was that he arrived with this entourage because the great 'Beckett man' was coming which meant I had no more access to the theatre. I had been invited a week early so that I could get my rehearsals in and then Schneider would come in. I hadn't expected to be literally banned from the theatre but I wasn't allowed back in. My performance was in the afternoon and I wasn't allowed in till noon on that day. When I got there the students that had done the recording had handed over to others. We'd never rehearsed at all, only a little bit of a chance at that stage. Then I found the cues had been altered as they had done the lights for Alan. So we were doing that until the time I had to put the costume on and get going. We were in for a very difficult performance. When I started off and had done the walk and said 'mother' and then, pause, 'mother', unfortunately, they hadn't timed it right and it felt like a five-minute pause before the recording came in and she replied. (Laughs) However, once she replied I knew we were on the right track. I couldn't bear the thought of what the audience would experience. There was another thing that made it even worse, I had been unable to test the voice's volume. I grabbed someone out of the conference, don't know who she was, and she came in and sat back of the theatre. She said she couldn't hear me, the acoustics are very low. So I was upping my volume when I wanted a low volume. So that was yet another horror. Anyway, let's say we had now got the recording aligned so I was building up that first scene and what happened was there were two doors at the back of the theatre obviously facing the stage and there is no one guarding the doors. One of the doors opened completely upsetting the lighting on the stage and was a huge interruption. So I had just begun and the door opens. The person looked for a bit, decided it wasn't interesting and closed the door. (Laughs) Then we went on and the hooks were beginning to go in on scene three. I could tell it was building up, perhaps, you can't really think these things logically. The other door opens with more light disturbance from a different angle and this person decided immediately it wasn't for them and let the door go and it swung back. I can't tell you! (Laughs) Really! I was so fed-up at that time I nearly walked off the stage. I know Albert Finney did it once and Nick Williamson, I trained with Nick. I know they have harangued the audience at some places but it wasn't the audiences fault. It was the theatre's fault, there should have been people posted at these doors so I nearly walked off. After it was all over Deirdre Bair had formed a panel and all the people involved in acting and the performances were part of the panel. She swept me into her arms and she said congratulations and I said it was a disaster. Then she came to talk to each of us individually and when she introduced me instead of saying: 'This is Rosemary Pountney you've just seen the performance and so on'. Instead she said: 'Rosemary just told me it was a disaster!' Now that was maddening because I wanted to say that to the audience myself and alert them to the difficulties that you can have with Beckett. To be pre-empted in that way, I was furious with the whole experience because with the right back-up it would have gone as well as over here. But there you are! This is what happens. The moral is don't put yourself at the mercy of unprofessional teams. They weren't offering the money to take anyone over with me except for Rachel.

DT: You can't always know in advance

¹² *Ohio Impromptu*, directed by Schneider, was first performed on 9 May 1981 at Ohio State University.

RP: No you can't, you can't. So you can have really horrendous experiences. At the same time I feel for everyone who has been at these performances, it's been a learning experience. (Laughs)

DT: I wonder if you might comment on performing in Beckett's plays as a woman. Were there other roles in Beckett's work you would like to play but felt excluded because they were male roles?

RP: Oh well. That's interesting in a way because people say Beckett doesn't write for women. That is absolutely untrue in the late plays. I would have liked to do *Happy Days* but my memory wouldn't take it now. I think as regards a role I would've liked to do, if it had been written for a woman, is *Eh Joe*. I think the way in which the camera comes up is very interesting. In fact, we used that with a rehearsal of *Rockaby*, I made a video, very early on. Nick Surberg, who I'd worked with in Oxford, he invited me to Griffith's in Australia [Griffith University, Brisbane] to talk about Beckett's theatre. He asked me to bring a production, but that shows you how little he knew about theatre. (Laughs) Then I realised I could make a video recording of *Rockaby*. I was in the early stages of working on the text. We had a very good recording department organised by Arthur Brooks who had worked in the BBC audio-visual department. I asked him to make a recording. Then it came to how we were going to film this because it would be very flat to have the chair all the time. I realised that we were getting deeper and deeper into the character in the way in which *Eh Joe* works. So I thought why don't we do that with the camera? So we did that with the camera getting closer and closer so it's just my face. That worked very well indeed. My performance isn't it at all what it became. I wasn't dressed; my head wasn't static I moved it here and here so there which I didn't do later on. There are things that one would have changed but the actual technique worked very well.

DT: Do you still have that?

RP: It was very interesting, it might help other recordings. People who are going to record it in the future, it's a good way of doing it. A good way, I've forgotten your original question?

DT: Whether you felt excluded from the male roles?

RP: I didn't really. When he deals with women he deals with them at a very deep level. Madeleine Renaud would say the same.¹³

DT: We started with you studying Beckett's manuscripts. Final question to bring us full circle. Could I ask you to comment on developments in current Beckett scholarship, the support that you had in Oxford, Reading and elsewhere. I wonder how you feel that might compare to now so many people are working on Beckett now, he is globally recognised as a playwright.

RP: I do feel very lucky to have been in on the beginning of it, what we were doing hadn't been done. The whole field was open to us. I felt like I was getting deeply to grips with Beckett

¹³ See Pierre Chabert's interview with the French actor Madeleine Renaud in *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 15-18.

through the manuscripts. So it all seemed totally relevant, if you see what I mean. Now, this is a danger area because I don't want to dampen enthusiasm for what is happening but things have inevitably become more and more obtuse. Seizing on one tiny point and blowing it much too far. This is an old lady talking. These things have to happen, there is huge technical development. We have also been through the critical theory that grabbed Beckett. There is a whole lot of work which doesn't really mean very much to me because I'm not sure if they've got deeply enough into Beckett. They may have from a particular angle and I'm not fit to judge that.

DT: You attend conferences, you are still interested in what people are doing?

RP: I am interested. If we are talking about something that is hugely theoretically interesting, I'll probably give up. It simply depends on what they are talking about and how they put it over if I can link with it. That is not my thing. Production is. If I'm going to something that is going to involve a lot of interaction with the screen there's something really interesting there. It's these sort of oblique ways into Beckett which I think can prove very fruitful. Almost like scholars are forced to find something new. I think I have probably said enough about it, it is just that instinctively what I go for is the texts themselves.

DT: It seems a suitable place for us to end so thank you very much Rosemary.

RP: Yes, and thank you.

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