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The Performance of Beckett: An essay for the Staging Beckett website, 2015

The performance of Beckett's shorter plays for the theatre makes exceptional demands on the actor, audience, technicians and director alike. This lecture will discuss the stringency of Beckett's requirements in these areas and consider to what extent the exacting nature of such demands may present problems for the continuing life of the plays, both today and in the future.

To begin with the actor: Jack MacGowran described the camera narrowing steadily in on his face in Beckett's television play *Eh Joe*, exposing his haunted eyes, as 'the most gruelling 22 minutes I have ever had in my life', and Brenda Bruce described 'Beckett placing a metronome on the floor to keep me on the rhythm he wanted, which drove me into such a panic that I finally broke down'.¹ Billie Whitelaw similarly remarked that, when rehearsing *Not I* Beckett told her that she had 'paused for two dots instead of three'.² Whitelaw also describes in her autobiography losing self-confidence unexpectedly when rehearsing *Happy Days* with Beckett and asking advice from Dame Peggy Ashcroft, who said: 'He's impossible. Throw him out'.³ Dame Peggy herself appeared uncomfortable in her early performances as Winnie (at the Old Vic London in 1975) though she had grown into the role by the time *Happy Days* transferred to the Lyttelton in 1976, as the National Theatre's opening production.⁴ Albert Finney too appeared uneasy in *Krapp's Last Tape* in 1973, lacking his usual mastery of a role.⁵ Contemplating such uncharacteristic discomfort from both actors one wondered whether, in trying to achieve what Beckett wanted, they had found themselves acting against their own theatrical instincts and had thus not fully integrated into their roles.

Nonetheless many actors develop an extraordinary rapport with their roles when performing Beckett, an identification at an unusually profound level, resulting in a catharsis of equal depth. The very fact that Beckett denies them so much of their normal means of expression in the theatre seems to act as a stimulus, a challenge to creativity. They may be restricted in movement (trapped in urns or in mid-air itself, with their voices reduced to a monotone 'as low as compatible with audibility' or to speech so fast that it can hardly be registered by an audience; even to becoming mere listeners to their own recorded voices as in *That Time* and *Rockaby* (or to speechless virtual automatons, as in *Quad*), but such deprivation forces actors to dig deeper into themselves than is the norm in the theatre.⁶ Unable to build up a character in the usual way in *Not I* (when playing an old woman, for example, part of the process would involve close observation of how such women move and speak), there is no movement about

¹ Jack MacGowran, 'MacGowran on Beckett: Interview by Richard Toscan', *Theatre Quarterly*, 3.2 (1973), 15-22 (20); University of Reading Beckett Collection, MS 1227/1/2/14.

² Review of *Not I* at the Royal Court Theatre, *Observer*, 2 May 1976, 36.

³ Billie Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw ... Who He?* (London: Hodder&Stoughton, 1995), 152.

⁴ Preview in celebration of Beckett's seventieth birthday, 13 April 1976, director: Peter Hall.

⁵ Royal Court Theatre, January 1973, director: Donald McWhinnie.

⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 357. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

the stage, no opportunity for facial expression, just the mouth pouring out words at great speed, preventing even much variation of pace.

The actress is thus forced to go beyond the norms of performance. Rather than a process of accretion, of building *up* a character, she must try to strip her performance *down* to the inner core, creating an interior space, an emptiness, denuded of self, yet actively alert to the Beckett text. In effect she becomes a receptacle for the text and it is the challenge of going beyond the normal boundaries of performance that produces the depth of identification with the role that actors find so exhilarating and brings about their close rapport with Beckett.

It is with the performance of Beckett's plays for women that I am principally concerned. The earliest plays (*Godot* being the obvious example) are notable for the absence of women. Mme Piouk and Mme Krap in *Eleutheria* are clearly in the realm of caricature, while Nell in *Endgame* is outnumbered by three to one and apparently expires during the performance, ceding the stage to the male.⁷ It is in *Happy Days* that Beckett, having experimented successfully with monologue in *Krapp's Last Tape*, introduces a female monologue, broken only by the rare interruptions (so avidly courted by Winnie) from her exiguous husband. Madeleine Renaud, who played Winnie in the first French production, remarked on the depth of Beckett's understanding of women.⁸ It is in *Happy Days* that the sardonic, generally grotesque portrayals of women from the prose and early plays give place in Winnie to a distinct personality, in a searing account of marriage from both the female and the male perspectives.

After *Happy Days*, which is at least recognisably concerned with *terra firma*, Beckett's plays become shorter and increasingly experimental, tending to move towards limbo in terms of staging. Performing the short plays for women is, as already indicated, hugely demanding. Billie Whitelaw, when rehearsing *Not I* for the first London production,⁹ her head enclosed in a Klu Klux Klan-type hood, developed such a sense of disorientation that, as described by Brian Miller who played the auditor, she had to stop.¹⁰ A different method was therefore devised in which she sat, face blacked out, in a dentist's chair, her head positioned so that the narrow light beam would illuminate her mouth alone. After a time, however, it became possible for audiences of this production to distinguish black from black, so that the faint outline of a solid figure behind the mouth became apparent in the surrounding darkness.

In order to prevent this happening again for the play's second English production (at Oxford Playhouse in 1976) a radical solution was proposed by the lighting director.¹¹ A blackout curtain was let down upstage, covering the entire stage area. The actress was placed on a scaffold just behind the curtain, positioned so that her mouth was the precise eight feet above stage level prescribed by Beckett. At this point a hole was cut in the curtain at mouth level, so that her mouth could protrude through the curtain. In order that the image should remain constant, however, and not move in and out of the hole when taking a breath, the most fiendish part of the procedure was devised. A piece of elasticated material with strings

⁷ Performing rights for Beckett's first full-length play, *Eleutheria* (the Greek word for 'freedom'), written in 1947, remain unavailable.

⁸ Paris, October 1963, director: Roger Blin.

⁹ Royal Court Theatre, January 1973. *Not I* played on a double bill with *Krapp's Last Tape* featuring Albert Finney, see <https://www.reading.ac.uk/staging-beckett/Productions.aspx?p=production-644226808> [accessed 1 August 2018]

¹⁰ Letter to the author, 26 January 1973.

¹¹ March 1976, director: Francis Warner, lighting: David Colmer, Mouth: Rosemary Pountney.

attached was sewn to the inside of the curtain, surrounding the hole. Into this the actress was tied before the start of the performance; (having been that actress I recall with feeling the extreme sense of isolation experienced, on hearing the Assistant Stage Manager's footsteps retreating down the scaffolding after tying me in!). Discussing this with Beckett some time later, he described the play as 'a horror' for the actress.¹²

It is evident that the technical input is crucial when performing Beckett's shorter female roles. Much of the action is initiated by lighting and recorded sound interacting with the performer, who therefore relies on the skills of the technical staff to a much greater extent than is usual in the theatre. The synchronisation of light, sound and silence must operate in precise conjunction with the performer, which requires great sensitivity of technical direction. Indeed the performance may stand or fall on the seamless integration of the technical effects.

To begin with stage lighting, *Play* is an obvious example, since all utterance from the three urns is controlled by light, which becomes in effect a fourth character. When all three heads are illuminated, they speak as a chorus; if a single head is isolated, that actor speaks alone. In *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Come and Go* deep surrounding darkness is eerily emphasised by only the centre of the stage being lit. In these shadows (as Beckett once remarked) 'old Nick' awaits Krapp and the fate of Flo Vi, and Ru appears to be similar.¹³ In *Not I* and *That Time* the protagonist is partially illuminated, suspended in a limbo of darkness; in *Footfalls* May literally walks up and down a strip of light on the stage floor that dims from scene to scene, but remains vestigially present at the end of the play, thus registering her absence. In *Rockaby* light also dims from scene to scene, finally revealing W's head falling slowly to rest, after the rocking chair has 'rock[ed] her off.' (442)

In terms of sound, Beckett's revolutionary use of the actor's voice has been noted; its tonal reduction to a monotone, or paced to a gallop in *Not I*, where the voice is literally torn from the mouth like the scream of pain it utters at one stage. It is with the use of the recorded voice that the actor's reliance on technical support becomes total. In *Rockaby* for example, most of the play is spent with W listening to her recorded voice, until the end of each scene, where W joins in with the recording to repeat the concluding phrase. Initial rehearsals must therefore begin with a recording being made and it is advisable at this stage simply to make a workable tape, which can be improved on at a later date, after the performance has developed.

Several of Beckett's short plays operate on diminishing effects between scenes. The technique is first used in *Play* where both light and voice levels are reduced after the first scene, following a blackout, but are restored to their original state when the play is repeated. 'Exact repeat preferable' Beckett wrote when I enquired about this (since, in a Paris production, he had once experimented with light dwindling further in the repeat, towards a possible extinction).¹⁴ In *Footfalls* and *Rockaby* a gradual diminuendo is allowed to develop throughout both plays. In *Footfalls* Beckett worked with the idea of diminution on several levels. At the beginning of the play the light is already 'dim' and the single chime 'faint' and both are reduced further at each blackout between scenes. The actors' voices remain 'low and slow' (399) throughout, but the number of lengths paced by May and the speed at which she does so reduces between scenes and her body becomes more hunched over as her energy fails. Discussing this with Beckett, he pointed out that on her last walk along the strip of light, her energy runs out after three paces and she has to wait there until enough vitality returns to drag

¹² Conversation with Samuel Beckett, Paris, March 1980.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Response to author's Questionnaire, 1976.

herself to the end of the light.¹⁵ This clearly links with the final scene, where the very faintest light and chime reveal an empty stage, with ‘No trace of May.’ (403)

In *Rockaby* the light level is reduced after every scene, though a subdued spotlight on W’s face remains ‘constant throughout.’ (433) The recorded voice also remains constant until the last twelve lines, where it softens to a whisper; but W’s request to hear ‘More’ of the recording does lessen from scene to scene. In both these plays Beckett makes technical use of echo effects. In *Footfalls* the echoes of the single chime herald the start of every scene, reducing each time until the very shadow of a chime sounds at the end of the play. In *Rockaby* the final lines of every scene are echoed, so that, as the play ends, the last sibilant whispered line ‘rock her off’ (442) echoes around the theatre. In *Rockaby* also Beckett gives an extraordinarily daring stage direction, challenging for both actor and audience, regarding the opening and closing of the protagonist’s eyes. Beckett had first tried this out in *That Time* where the brief opening of Listener’s eyes between scenes registers his extreme interest in the silence, the cessation of the three voices that assail him in each scene. In *Rockaby* Scene One, W’s eyes are either ‘open in unblinking gaze’ (433) or closed in ‘about equal proportions,’ but become increasingly closed in Scenes Two and Three until, halfway through the final scene, they are (as Beckett tersely notes) ‘closed for good.’

There is of course no way of covering up a technical hitch in minimalist drama. Performing *Rockaby* in French in Strasbourg, for instance, the sound level of the recorded tape had been set too high in error and there was nothing to be done but sit in the rocking chair and suffer!¹⁶ Theatre conditions on tour can be particularly problematic. I recall, for example, finding my mouth full of knitting when playing Mouth in *Not I* at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1978. In the very limited set-up time allowed in festival conditions, the hole in the blackout curtain was only cut at the last minute and, there being no suitable material at hand for the mask, the Stage Manager cut a sleeve from his jersey, made a hole in it and tacked it to the inside of the curtain. In the ensuing performance, on inserting my mouth through the hole, tendrils of wool began to descend, tickling both mouth and nostrils, so that choking, or at least a gigantic sneeze, became genuine possibilities! Again, when playing W in *Rockaby* in Wellington, New Zealand, in 1990, I was almost thrown from the rocking chair when an Assistant Stage Manager suddenly became over-zealous in operating the pulley that controlled the chair. W cannot rock the chair herself, since Beckett specifies that it only moves involuntarily.

Unusual problems largely peculiar to Beckett’s theatre may also arise. There is, for example, the difficulty of obtaining the complete darkness often required in the short plays. A total blackout is naturally affected by the glow from the Exit lights, which, for legal reasons must be illuminated throughout a performance. Similarly a long pause in mainstream theatre is quite different from the order of silence that can build up in a Beckett play. When, for example, one of the late plays is working as it should, audiences become rapt, indeed almost hypnotised, so that any extraneous noise, even from outside the theatre, can become audible and intrusive, in a way that would not be noticeable on the mainstream stage.

Beckett’s short plays present particular challenges to audiences, not least in coming to recognise that the staging and technical effects are being stretched beyond their usual function in the theatre and are an integral part of the performance (such as the use of mid-air as the stage space in *Not I* and the personification of the light in *Play*). There was, of course an

¹⁵ Conversation with Samuel Beckett, Paris, March 1980.

¹⁶ Théâtre Jeune Publique, Strasbourg, April 1996.

initial lack of comprehension from public and press alike of the ‘whatever next?’ variety: characters in dustbins, a woman stuck in a mound of earth, heads sprouting from urns, a mouth gabbling in mid-air – ‘what’s it meant to mean?’ (156) (as Beckett himself slyly asks in *Happy Days*). As soon as audiences relax, however, and allow the plays to work on them in their own terms, they find such considerations unimportant and that the plays do communicate with them directly; all the more so for making them concentrate by not dotting all the *i*’s and crossing all the *t*’s. The concentration indeed can become so intense that it is almost palpable, as though the audience were holding its breath.

Naturally with the very short plays a programme must be devised to provide an evening’s theatre. At least two plays will be performed, and their grouping can be illuminating. Staging *Footfalls* and *Rockaby* together for instance, both plays concerned with mother/daughter relationships, or combining *Not I* with *That Time* which Beckett called: ‘a brother to *Not I*’.¹⁷ The thirty second *Breath* has even been performed several times in an evening, virtually as punctuation between a group of short plays! The plays work best in smaller theatres, where such minimalist but crucial action as the opening of Listener’s eyes in *That Time* can be registered clearly by audiences.

Another method of devising a Beckett evening arose for myself, following an invitation to perform a programme of short plays during a conference of European translators of Beckett’s work at the University of East Anglia.¹⁸ In that context it seemed appropriate to experiment by playing *Rockaby* in English, followed by *berceuse*, the French version. Having found that the contrasts inherent in seeing a play in two languages interested the audience, I devised a programme which has subsequently toured worldwide, largely to University theatres. This consists of performing the play first in English, followed (after a short break) by the French version. There is then an interval (during which it is advisable to remove the heavy makeup) before returning to the stage to give those among the audience who wish to remain, an opportunity to ask questions, or comment on Beckett’s theatrical methods. This tends to produce a very lively debate, in that just after the performance of unusual material proves to be an optimum time to engage audiences in discussion, which ranges widely from personal insights to close intellectual enquiry. In Szeged (South Hungary) a student said she had begun to understand her grandmother’s gradual withdrawal from the world for the first time; in Strasbourg an Austrian University Lecturer felt that the poetic nature of Beckett’s language had helped him to come to terms with the recent death of his mother, while several members of the audience in Zurich’s Teater Neumarkt, having discussed the linguistic differences between the two languages, were particularly anxious to hear the play again – in German!

The aural contrast between the English version, followed by the more liquid-sounding French one also works on another level. Having followed the plot of the English version, the repeat of the play allows even non-French speaking audiences to reflect on it; this has the effect of deepening their experience of the play, much as Beckett intended the *da capo* of *Play* to work on audiences; to let the ‘hooks’ go in, as he wrote of a production of *Fin de partie*.¹⁹

¹⁷ See James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull* (London: Calder, 1979), 206.

¹⁸ December 1995; organised by WG Sebald.

¹⁹ Letter to Alan Schneider, Paris, 12 August 1957 in *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, ed. Maurice Harmon (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 15.

On tour the experience of putting on the plays often provided a steep learning curve for the University Drama students who assisted me. If they were unfamiliar with Beckett's later plays they tended to expect such short texts to present few problems, only to find themselves confronted by the niceties of technical synchronisation, which they found exceptionally demanding; particularly the extent to which their own technical input interacting with the performer, constituted the performance. In subsequent discussion, it was always rewarding to see their minds opening to the possibilities of minimalist theatre and their developing appreciation of Beckett's dramatic methods.

It may have become apparent that, while discussion so far has centred on the actor, audience and technical aspects of a Beckett performance, there has been little mention of overall direction. This is because I have been positing a director who would follow Beckett's stage directions closely, in order to bring out the nuances of performance and subtlety of suggestion inherent in his stage notes (for example in the passage of time suggested by the faded primary colours worn by the three women in *Come and Go*).

Today, as the legend of Beckett's own productions begins to dissipate through time, directors become less likely to consult his production notebooks and increasingly anxious to 'do their own thing' with Beckett.²⁰ It is here that a complex dilemma opens up for both current and future performances of the plays and is the subject of continual debate. It is a theatrical commonplace that without change and experiment theatre becomes static and mummified. Once a play is published it ceases to be the author's property, in that he can no longer exercise full control over it. Shakespeare lives today because he is constantly re-invented. Each generation uses the plays to reflect their own concerns and, though each new emphasis or re-shaping will have its critics, new light is often shed on aspects of a Shakespearean text that deepens and enriches audience experience of the plays.

Shakespeare's five acts can accommodate such a translation in terms, but experiment with Beckett's plays is much more problematic. Beckett did his best in his lifetime to control productions of his plays via his agents. Today the Beckett Estate has an invidious task in deciding whether a performance flouting Beckett's production intentions can go ahead; the notorious removal of Deborah Warner's *Footfalls* from the London stage being a case in point.²¹ Two 'camps' exist today: those who think Beckett is best served by close attention to his stage directions and those who feel that experimenting with new ways of performing his plays is the only way to keep them alive. Among the latter is Jonathan Miller, who feels that the Estate's attempts to protect Beckett from experiment will inevitably result in 'dead theatre' – in effect taxing the Estate with murdering the future of Beckett production.²² Clearly, attempting to replicate Beckett's own productions exactly is an arid enterprise, leading to stultified theatre. It is impossible in any case, due to different personnel, theatre spaces and the dating effects of time. Nonetheless a production that follows Beckett's stage directions does not have to be a sterile parroting of the past. Provided that the director respects the text and can pass on his enthusiasm to the cast, the chosen play will take life as their own creation, while still keeping close to Beckett's intentions.

²⁰ See the University of Reading's Beckett Collection. The notebooks are published as *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*, 4 Vols, gen. ed. James Knowlson (London: Faber and Faber)

²¹ Garrick Theatre, London, 14-19 March 1994.

²² Conversation with Jonathan Miller, Oxford, 22 June 2005.

In my view, while it may be possible with the longer plays to introduce flexibility into production methods, in the short minimalist plays experimentation generally proves undesirable. Beckett's concern for the human situation is so clearly apparent in the later plays that a director determined to imprint them with his own 'stamp' is likely to arrive at something much *less* than what is already present in the text. In the late plays the text is narrowed down to reflect the bleakest realities of human existence. The protagonist is presented with all choices made, no opportunity for change and nowhere to go but on, as in the last words of the *trilogy*: 'you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.'²³ In *Quad II*, where all colour has drained from the players' costumes and their brisk movement has slowed to a shuffle about the stage, Beckett remarked: 'Good. That's a hundred thousand years later'.²⁴ The ghostly players are still in progress, still going on.

If a director subverts the minimalist plays (attempting a contemporary relevance, perhaps) it reduces their pre-existing depth and the impact of the plays is lessened. When rehearsing *Footfalls* in 1976, Beckett remarked: 'It's Chamber Theatre and it must be perfect'.²⁵ As with Beethoven's *Late String Quartets*, the late plays are Beckett's final contribution to the theatre, and who would attempt to change a note of the *Quartets*?

²³ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1970), 179.

²⁴ Conversation with Martin Esslin, Strasbourg, 4 April 1996.

²⁵ I am indebted to Martha Fehsenfeld for this information.