

## Staging Beckett

### Performing *Not I*: A Practitioner's Perspective

Tricia Kelly

University of Chester, 12<sup>th</sup> September 2014

The actor Tricia Kelly delivered a public talk followed by Q & A as part of the second conference of the AHRC-funded Staging Beckett project, 'Staging Beckett at the Margins', which was held at the University of Chester, 11-12 September 2014. The talk was chaired by Dr Graham Saunders.<sup>1</sup>

**Graham Saunders:** It gives me great pleasure to introduce Tricia Kelly. Tricia is probably very well known to most of you even if you haven't seen her live; she has made an indelible impression on British theatre. For example, she was integral in arguably two of the most important British theatre companies to emerge after 1968, The Wrestling School and Joint Stock, then latterly Out of Joint. She is the subject of Howard Barker's essay in *Arguments for a Theatre*, on her performance in *Victory*, in the essay 'Two Bradshaws', she has appeared in some of Caryl Churchill's most well-known work – *Fen*, *Mouthful of Birds*. She has not only been involved though in the work of older dramatists, she is still working very much with contemporary British writers including Chloe Moss, Rory Mullarkey, and Nina Raine the writer and director. She has appeared in Out of Joint's revival of *Some Explicit Polaroids* – where I actually first saw you at Warwick Arts Centre. She also toured to America, she was recently in the National Theatre's fantastic revival of Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen*, as well as David Edgar's revival of *The Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*. She has done a great deal of work for television and film, including I still remember that final series of *In Sickness and in Health*, where you played Ken Campbell's wife, which must have been a really interesting experience. Yesterday Mark Taylor-Batty provided a very stimulating paper that provided the background of the production that you were involved in with *Not I*, as well as its function as a mini Beckett festival.<sup>2</sup> So in a way Mark has set the scene. Tricia has, unusually for a guest speaker, actually done her homework and produced a paper which she is going to read. So it's going to be less of a conversation but more of a paper. And also, Tricia has kindly agreed to provide a reading from *Not I* at the end. We have an audio recording of the original production but we felt that it was better to do it live. So without any more from me I would like to welcome Tricia Kelly.

**Tricia Kelly:** There will be time for conversation, it's not just me talking, and apologies because I am not an academic – I come from a different school which is performing. And it's from that perspective that this talk is written. It is about performing *Not I*.

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<sup>1</sup> This transcript has been lightly edited with additional notes by Dr Lucy Jeffery.

<sup>2</sup> See Mark Taylor-Batty, 'Beckett at the West Yorkshire Playhouse: *Happy Days*, *Not I* and *Krapp's Last Tape* (1993)' in *Staging Beckett in Great Britain*, eds. David Tucker and Trish McTighe (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), 57-72.

When asked in 1993 to go up to West Yorkshire Playhouse at six days' notice to take over from a much more well-known actor who had backed out after discovering she couldn't learn it, to take over in the part of Mouth in *Not I*, my initial reaction was a mix of being flattered to be asked and slightly frustrated that I hadn't been asked in the first place. Especially because I had actually worked before with the director Cathy Denford on a rather adventurous production of Jim Cartwright's *Two* earlier with no set whatsoever, and the two actors miming all activity to spot sound. It's a piece set in a pub where the two actors play all the parts – e.g. the landlord and landlady – it's a bit of a tour de force anyway but with our production we literally had a nasty pub carpet and two actors. So I thought I was pretty up for scary performances, and in fact that had been a great success. So Cathy knew I was an actor that wasn't afraid of a challenge. But of course Beckett is a very different beast to Cartwright. Anyway, the idea of working on *Not I* was too good a one to turn down, probably foolishly. I'd seen Billie Whitelaw do it at the Royal Court in the early 70s along with a brace of the other short Beckett pieces in that season – *Rockaby*, *Footfalls*, and Patrick Magee playing Krapp – so I sort of knew what I was in for.

I remembered experiencing *Not I* as more of a sensation than anything. It had been a long time ago and I don't think I'd registered really narrative meaning – it was more of a sort of existential and visual experience that I remembered, so to be asked to work on the text was very exciting, because I am an actor who is, as Graham has said, very well used to and relishes working on text. I have worked a lot with Caryl Churchill, Howard Barker, Peter Barnes. And I do like a good dig. So I caught the train to Leeds the next day to start work – I think was a Sunday. At that point I didn't even have a copy of the piece to hand. I knew it was going to have to be a quick learn but it wasn't till Cathy met me off the train and I got my first look at those densely packed nine pages of text that the terror set in for the first time – and we will come back to the terror.

The job was first of all just to work through the script – first thoughts, dig deeper, what decisions we needed to make, LEARN...and we had six days. So for an actor, working on any script is a matter of identifying several things that you have to make decisions about:

- \* Who is the person speaking?
- \* Who are they speaking to?
- \* What is the meaning of what they are saying, both literally – what does it mean – and is there a narrative, is a story being told?
- \* Why are they saying it? What is the imperative to speak?

So those decisions which you make on every play as an actor, are decisions that roughly centre round story and character. But there is also another set of decisions that are always also part of the mix, which might loosely be said to centre around style:

- \* The style demanded by the writing, either gleaned from the actual writing – the text – or from any strictures that the writer might lay down about how the piece should be performed.
- \* The style also sometimes decreed by the production – decisions made by the director, imposed by design, space, milieu, audience.

So all these are part of a mix on a piece of writing, that you as an actor start working on. So let's start with the style question first, since that's particularly pertinent in *Not I*.

There are obviously certain 'givens' with *Not I* which are part of the intrinsic structure of the piece and which dictate a lot of how the piece is going to be performed (unless you are really going away from what the author stipulated). We started with what Beckett had asked for, which is for Mouth to be seen, as the curtain goes up, eight feet above the stage which is otherwise in total darkness but for a shadowy figure in a black hooded djellaba-type garment placed across the stage diagonally, who at certain moments makes suggested movements of 'helpless compassion'.<sup>3</sup>

In fact the Auditor as they're called was later omitted from some subsequent productions with Beckett's acquiescence, in this case I understand, because when he actually directed it I believe he found that it was really difficult to work with and very difficult to light and it threw up all sorts of problems. Lisa Dwan's production doesn't have an Auditor. However, we did stick with what he'd written and we worked round the problems.

The demands of actually allowing only an actor's mouth to be seen in a pitch-black space means that there has to be a pinpoint sharp point of light – a beam of light – focused on that mouth with everything surrounding it blacked out. So, the actor needs to wear a black full robe and a sort of gimp mask. In my case, a very close-fitting balaclava made out of lycra with a hole for the mouth cut out and two holes for the eyes which were then covered with black gauze, so I could dimly see the cue light that I would need to see to tell me to start speaking. But the audience couldn't see my eyes. So that's the 'given'.

Because the pinpoint of light on the mouth is so critical, there can be no risk of the actor moving their head out of that light, so they need to have their head secured in one position with no possibility of the head turning or nodding out of the beam. So you are strapped in to a contraption in other words. It helps if the arms are pinned down too, so that any involuntary movement by the actor in full flow is further curtailed. It also means that the microphone is not picking up any extraneous physical movement.

So there you are, before any decisions about who is speaking these words have been made, you know that you will be speaking them eight feet up on a ladder/high-chair contraption, swathed in black, unable to see or hear very well, with your head and arms secured by straps and belts, unable to move. And the script also starts to dictate style, there's 'now this stream ... steady stream', 'can't stop the stream', 'begging the mouth to stop', 'couldn't pause a second'. It is fairly clear what sort of delivery the text demands. So, who is speaking these lines? Apart from a terrified female actor strapped immobile in a high-chair?

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<sup>3</sup> Enoch Brater recounts Beckett's recollection of a trip to Morocco where, sitting outside a café in El Jahida, which he visited in 1969 and again in February – March 1972, he noticed 'a solitary figure, completely covered in a djellaba, leaning against a wall. It seemed to him that the figure was in a position of intense longing and what could that lovely figure be listening to? Only later did Beckett learn that this figure leaning against the wall was an Arab woman waiting for her child who attended a nearby school.' Brater, *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theatre* (Oxford; NY: OUP, 1987), 24.

There are clues. Mouth tells the story of a woman, ‘tiny little girl’, ‘speechless infant’, ‘rare occasions’ she has spoken ‘in her life’, till suddenly at the age of sixty, ‘what? ... seventy? ... good God!’ – an event happens when she is walking in a field picking cowslips and she finds herself experiencing a strange phenomenon. She talks about being ‘[I]n the home’. It’s an ambiguous phrase about love usually vented or not and it could be a general observation but possibly indicates she was in an orphanage – ‘parents unknown’ – ‘he having vanished’ – ‘no sooner buttoned up his breeches’, ‘she similarly ... eight months later’, ‘no love’, brought up with waifs to believe in a merciful God. And she laughs at this each time she talks of a merciful God. So we can maybe start picturing the nuns in an orphanage: ‘no love ... spared that’, she says.

It all starts laying the ground of who this woman is that the story is about. ‘nothing of any note till coming up to sixty’ no, seventy, she is forced to acknowledge ‘the odd time’ when she was meant ‘to be having pleasure’, ‘the odd time’. A life unloved and unloved, the supermarket, banal details about shopping. Then she talks about times when she has experienced the urge to speak before, ‘once or twice a year ... always winter some strange reason’ – when she has rushed out and poured out a torrent of words with strange-sounding vowels to a bemused stranger, strange sounding because you assume that she is unused to speaking. She has experienced the stares of these strangers as she has poured out a torrent of words and crawled back in shame. There is mentioned a time in court, when she was required to plead guilty or not guilty. It’s only mentioned once and it’s not elaborated, it’s a mystery. Then the event she is describing, the torrent of words coming from her mouth, can’t feel the rest of her body, an unstoppable flow of words. Now it is the Mouth that is speaking this unstoppable flow of words so we would presume that the Mouth is telling her own story. However every time she seems to be pressed on whether it is herself she is speaking of, she is vehement that it is she; Not I in other words.

As an actor you have to go with the clues you are given, and we certainly made the decision that the biography of the woman described was also the biography of the Mouth talking and that her denials were not true. So in very naturalistic terms as an actor you are playing a seventy year-old woman brought up in an orphanage by nuns possibly we might surmise, who has lived a stunted and lonely existence, unloved, barely speaking all her days, until one day while walking in a field she is struck by something that causes her to lose all feeling in the rest of her body but her mouth is suddenly pouring out an unstoppable torrent of words. Is she struck by a stroke? By death? Is it something more supernatural? As an actor, does that matter? Intellectually, it is very interesting, but as a performer, your decisions really are purely about serving the text as it is laid out on the page; the Mouth doesn’t know what is happening to her so maybe the actor doesn’t need to either as long as you fulfil the saying of the words.

There are decisions to be made about the voice, the quality of the voice, Beckett obviously being an Irishman and writing I would say with the sense of an Irish cadence.<sup>4</sup> To my ears that’s what it sounds. We did play around with the idea of me doing it in

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<sup>4</sup> Beckett mentioned to Alan Schneider, Billie Whitelaw, and A. J. Leventhal, an early source for Mouth: ‘I knew that woman in Ireland . . . I knew who she was – not “she” specifically, one single woman, but there were so many old crones, stumbling down the lanes, in the ditches, beside the hedgerows. Ireland is full of them. And I heard “her” saying what I wrote in *Not I*. I actually heard it.’ Beckett in Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York; London: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 622; also quoted in James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 590.

an Irish accent but to be honest with about four days to go by that time and with the terror beginning to manifest itself, we abandoned that idea. I had enough on my plate without having to worry about sticking to a credible accent that wasn't my own. We did try northern Yorkshire, but it didn't seem to sit for me either. So in the end we sort of compromised and I used my own voice with slightly more of my own native Liverpool cadence – though I think hearing back on it I sound 'posher' than I would have wished to.

So, who is the Mouth speaking to?

We have the figure of the Auditor who makes a gesture of compassion each time she denies that she is the protagonist. Is it a merciful God? Is it her judge? Is it her confessor on her deathbed? Is it a dialogue between her consciousness and her unconsciousness? I don't know. You can speculate on all these things academically and if you don't have the figure there it is possible that you'd get a different answer but as an actor one of the things you need to observe is the frequent clues in the punctuation. Throughout the text the phrases are mostly broken up by three dots between each phrase but every now and again there is a dash. And it always indicates that she is being forced to amend something she has said or answer a question that we don't hear. So, Mouth is being interrogated in some way, or her story is, she is either correcting herself as she goes along or responding to unheard questions by the Auditor and each time she does there is a recalibration of her story.

So we have got quite far on with our actor's questions: Who? Who to? What is the meaning of what she is saying – in the smaller sense certainly. In the greater 'existential' meaning – we have looked at the questions, we know what the questions are, we know some of the possibilities but it's not necessarily particularly useful in the performing of the piece.

My final actor's question was why is she speaking. What is the imperative to speak? To tell her story? Because the event she describes tells of an unstoppable stream of words emerging from a Mouth that she realises must be her own. She has no choice. She can fight against the torrent of words but they come anyway. She has no control, as she describes.

So to go back to me, with six days to learn this fiendishly difficult piece. We tended to work on the piece in the mornings, asking these sort of questions, trying things out, me sort of reading some of it, going back if it didn't sound quite right, finding the rhythms that seemed to work and then I'd go away for a few hours to learn it and then come back in the evening to test out some of the learning and consolidate. It was actually completely hellish to learn; the repetitions, the loopings back on itself, the retellings of something but in a slightly different way. And most importantly the worst thing about trying to learn it is the fact that you are not supposed to stop. It is an unstoppable torrent of words. Which means that the actor must be so confident that they have the script in their bones, that it just is there.

In six days that was never ever going to be the case, but inch by inch and page by page of text I did gradually begin to get it under my belt though it would only take one mis-spoken word to make me break down again and again, because so much of it is about the rhythm, and if you hear it wrong you know that you've spoken something wrong

because the rhythm doesn't work. And then you're lost. So again and again I'd break down. Any actor will tell you that learning something like this is about knowing the shape of the story you are telling, feeling the rhythm correctly, and then actually visualising where you are on the page that you've learnt so you're sort of 'oh, I'm halfway down the third page' in your head. Then comes the next bit, trying it out, saying it in situ. Well the first time I put on the black robe, the balaclava mask and climbed up into my high-chair to be locked in place for the tech and dress rehearsals – terrifying. Lots of breaking down, forgetting lines, distress.

Fail again, as Sam would say, fail better.

And then the first performance. We were to be performing *Not I* as an early evening companion piece to *Happy Days* with Prunella Scales as Winnie at West Yorkshire Playhouse. There was another companion piece of *Krapp's Last Tape* done separately. This meant that we were on the fore stage in front of the *Happy Days* set but curtained around with black drapes. The Quarry Theatre at the West Yorkshire Playhouse is usually open to the audience but for us they had rigged an actual curtain, which enabled me to be sitting ready to go in position behind. The lights and the mic all had to be focused with minute accuracy and they had to be redone every night – they were doing *Happy Days* after us. So each night they had to refocus, they had to get that light absolutely accurate, and all that meant that I would have to be in position, strapped in for ten minutes as the audience came into the auditorium. Then the curtain would be slowly rolled up as I started speaking.

Any first performance of a play is nerve-racking. Actors will spend a good deal of the half hour before a first show – and indeed most shows – making frequent trips to the loo, feeling very sick. *Not I* was total terror. There is no other word for it. Not only was I about to perform this iconic and famous piece, an unstoppable torrent of words that I had barely had a chance to learn, but I was to be strapped in to a torture chamber fifteen minutes before for light to be focused and mic to be adjusted. Then I had to sit there listening as the audience filed in chattering, knowing that in a moment I would have to speak without stalling for nine pages of text.

I can honestly say that I have never experienced terror like it as a performer before or since. I did nine performances and each time I would sit waiting to begin physically retching with fear. I always felt I needed the loo and I couldn't go. I would go over the lines in my head but that almost made it worse. It was like waiting to throw yourself off a cliff every performance. In fact, I don't think I ever did break down. I can't remember breaking down anyway. I probably, and undoubtedly, missed bits out occasionally, but not huge chunks. I would occasionally remember that I hadn't said a little bit. But by and large it went okay. Until our eighth performance. I was into full swing - you have to start speaking, the audience hears unintelligible sounds of a voice before they see the mouth, so you have to start speaking, and he says 'ad-lib', and 'unintelligible', so 'thank you'. And I can't remember what I did. And in my case the curtain, I got this little light saying 'start' so I'd start [speaking unintelligibly] and the curtain would go up. I couldn't see so I think I must've got another light to tell me to start into the text as written. Anyway, on the eighth performance I was into full swing but noticing with that third ear that actors always have that the quality of the listening was different from the audience. And then I heard a voice saying 'Tricia, I'm very sorry we will have to stop.' The curtain had failed to rise so I had been speaking for 5 minutes

completely unseen, and to no avail. So they gave me five minutes to compose myself and I had start all over again. It was horrible. So that was the eighth performance, the ninth performance went fine. I used to come off after every performance stiff as though I'd gone ten rounds with Mike Tyson, with bruises on my forearms where I had strained against the straps that held me in place.

So there you are as an actor in Beckett's *Not I* – each time experiencing the dread, the darkness, the retching, the subjective violence as discussed in the previous session, the terror.

The wanting it to be over.  
The imperative to speak.  
And then it will be.  
Thank you.

## Q & A

**Mark Taylor-Batty:** I've been looking into the productions of *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Happy Days*, and *Not I*. I've spoken to Cathy [Denford] and to Robert [Bowerman] and to Pamela Howard and I'm just trying to piece together what was going on and what was the intention there in the West Yorkshire Playhouse which of course was only three years young at the time. One question is to clear up that issue of where *Not I* was presented. You just said it was presented in front of the set of *Happy Days* but then you said in the Quarry Theatre when *Happy Days* was in the Courtyard. And Cathy herself couldn't remember where it was located.

**Tricia Kelly:** Now that's very interesting. I think it was in the Quarry. It was in the Quarry which is the huge theatre.

**Anna McMullan:** I saw it and it was terrific – and it wasn't the eighth performance – it was perfect. And I remember a huge auditorium and I remember this tiny Mouth, it was extraordinary, this tiny image in this huge space.

**TK:** It was in the Quarry, so in which case we were obviously not in front of the *Happy Days* set we were in front of something else that was on and I can't remember what.

**MTB:** The O'Neill perhaps?

**TK:** Yes.

**MTB:** Anyway, at least I've finally got that bit sorted. I now know. The other thing was this issue of the regional accent. I know that Prunella [Scales] used a northern accent when she was doing *Happy Days*. And it was interesting to hear that you had considered that, that there was something about trying to get a local flavour, and given that we're talking here about Beckett at the margins – I'm a northerner, I'm from Leeds and I've kind of lost a lot of my accent and I continue with a bit of guilt about having done that. But it's interesting isn't it that you were trying to find a way of keeping it away from, and you say listening back you sound 'too posh' which is the word that we

northerners use to indicate a little bit too RP isn't it. And I just wonder what was the importance of considering it at the time, thinking about regional accents, what was the dialogue [dialect] that you had? Because clearly Prunella had done it, and Robert did it for Krapp.

**TK:** I think it's something to do with 'rooting'. When you're dealing with material like this which could seem very disembodied – literally – you feel that you want to kind of root the person speaking into something bedded in and real, for the audience and for yourself actually as the actor. And it's not naturalism, it is patently not naturalism, but you do feel you've got to, you want to sort of make it that this is a woman, who has a biography and obviously that woman is not a middle class woman, she's not lived a middle class life. She is one of the sort of marginal women on the edges of a community. Possibly a rural community actually. So that's the impulse, that you want to sort of bed it and make that more real. But, we couldn't find something quite worked in the time. And in the time really my main concern was just getting it on and being able to say it credibly.

**MTB:** It sounds like an incredibly challenging experience.

**TK:** Well I think Billie Whitelaw will concur with that.<sup>5</sup>

**MTB:** You were reliving your terror in front of us, thank you very much.

**Shimon Levy:** First of all thank you very much. Having directed it I think that you remind me how deeply thankful I was to those ladies who performed it.<sup>6</sup> And I think it has a lot to do with something that this role invites and obviously you've done it, I wonder how consciously. You do for the audience what they are afraid of or cannot or dare not do themselves. It's a great gift that you've given in doing this particular role, which is excruciating. And as a director you say well, I couldn't hold it together, I know how it should sound, I know how it should feel. I can't do it, and I'm only the director. And this is what you do in that role for the audience. And the other thing is that you describe the technical difficulties, which having thought about it quite intensively I think they come instead of at least some of those questions you asked in the beginning: why, how, which, what, who for, etc. etc. It's the physical conditions in many of Beckett's plays that are superb in extremely excruciatingly difficult stage instructions that produce the right tone, the right style, the right whatever you have. So thank you very much.

**David Pattie:** I have a very simple question, and it came from a memory that came through when you were talking of probably the most unhelpful thing I have ever said to any actor that I directed. I was in Ulster and a very good student actress wanted to do *Not I* and as the Beckett head I directed her. And she had the same problems that you're talking about obviously of learning the script and just dealing with the rhythm,

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<sup>5</sup> Whitelaw, explaining how she suffered from what she called 'raging Beckettius', told Linda Ben-Zvi: 'Every damn play of Beckett's that I do involves some sort of physically or mentally excruciating experience.' See 'Billie Whitelaw, interviewed by Linda Ben-Zvi' in *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives*, ed. Ben-Zvi (Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 3-11 (5).

<sup>6</sup> For a list of actors Levy worked with on *Not I* from 1976 to 1999, see Shimon Levy, 'Six She's, One *Not I*: Proxies of Beckettian Selves' in *Samuel Beckett: Endlessness in the Year 2000*, eds. Angela Moorjani and Carola Veit (Amsterdam; NY: Rodopi, 2001), 140-150 (140-1).



the pace and all of that. Trying to imagine and root this character, but also just dealing with the fear of it. And I said, and I could kill myself for saying it, is there a way that you could use the terror in your characterisation? And if she had a gun at that point she would have shot me. And I should have stood there and taken the bullet. So my question is actually really simple; it is terrifying to do, so when you're doing it, when you're in the midst of it, how do you actually deal with that fear? How much of that dealing with terror part of it or is it just head down and get through it?

**TK:** Well the fear of actually making an idiot of yourself and breaking down in front of a live audience is actually probably more of a fear than doing it. Well you've placed yourself in the position in the first place so that's where you are. It's interesting because I saw a Q&A with Lisa Dwan a few weeks ago where she was talking about – she's doing an evening with *Footfalls* and *Rockaby* obviously, and she's doing it all over the world – and someone asked her are you carrying on doing them all and she said yes I'm doing *Footfalls* and *Rockaby* but I'm going to stop doing *Not I* after next year because it takes too much out of you. And I'm amazed how much she can do it. Because it is a torture for an actress. It is really terror every time you do it. And how you deal with that terror is that you breathe and you say the words, and when they're finished you will have finished it. And then you can have a drink. That's as simple as that, it is.

**DP:** Just to emphasise something you said about the physical effort of it. For this particular student actor, we had her on a board, and I had to lift her down from the board at the end of every performance because physically she couldn't move.

**TK:** I was the same, I had to be unstrapped and helped down. You are completely trapped in the situation so other than saying I'm not doing it tonight you can't do anything. The only thing you can do is speak. Speak it fast, and then it'll be over. That's Beckettian isn't it.

**SL:** How long was yours?

**TK:** Well I can't remember. I think it was fifteen minutes, sixteen minutes, which is not the fastest, Lisa does it in nine. I think that's fast.

**Rodney Sharkey:** Was the payoff any different, in terms of the pleasure you get post-performance?

**TK:** From a normal play?

**RS:** Yes, so I saw an interview recently with Nick Cave and he was asked in it does he enjoy performing and straight off the bat he said I love it. No he said I live for it. So, presumably as an actor when you're having that drink in the post-performance moment there's a satisfaction?

**TK:** There is a very funny thing about doing *Not I* in that nobody knows it's you. So you don't get people coming up to you in the bar and saying that was amazing, marvellous, because nobody knows it's you. So you're a bit cheated that way.

**RS:** So by definition then it has to be a personal pleasure, satisfaction that you derive from your own performance?

**TK:** Yes. And the challenge of it. I'm about to do another one-woman play called *Man to Man*, by Manfred Karge, another one that was very famously done by Tilda Swinton, I'm about to do it for a month in London, and you've got to set yourself these challenges because that's what you're an actor for. I think.<sup>7</sup> Well that's what I'm an actor for.

**Graham Atkin:** I have a very simple question which is do you think that Samuel Beckett hated actors?

**TK:** No I can't say that because I think he gave them such extraordinary words to say. I should have said that amidst all that terror, working on that text was a privilege, actually. To see it, the words and how they interlock and how something there refers to something there and how they sort of, it's clever, it's funny, it's witty, there's puns. You can't always get it all in but it's immaculate writing and so that's a privilege. I don't think he hated actors.

**GA:** It was a bit of a silly question I know but you expressed frustration at the bits where he's asking you to ad-lib.

**TK:** Yes I think that's hard, I found that difficult because in such a very specific text where the words are so circumscribed you have to say what he has written, that is the whole point. Then to say 'ad-lib' is weird, because I'm not good enough to ad-lib Samuel Beckett, or I could ad-lib it wrong. It's an odd thing, so in the end you sort of do sounds because you don't want to trespass on his writing. I think that's what I did. So I think it's a strange one that.

**Ewa Brzeska:** I would ask what do you think about translations of this text, because you were speaking about some rhythm, melody of the text. What do you think about the idea?

**TK:** I don't know. I'm sorry, because I haven't – did he write it in French? No. I'm sorry I really don't know because I have never seen it in another language.

**EB:** Just the idea how the text could be translated and to pass the same emotion.

**TK:** Well I think the central things would be the same in any language because the central thing is the circumstances in which it is performed, physically, and the sequence of events that are described, and the rhythm. The phraseology you can do the same in any language, it might be slightly longer phrases or slightly shorter phrase but the chopping up into thought, presumably would translate in any language.

**SL:** Yes and no. We did it in three different languages, in Hebrew, in French. 'Out' is a word of birth and the birth of a word at the very same time. In other words, *Not I* is

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<sup>7</sup> Swinton played Max Gericke, a woman forced to adopt her dead husband's identity in order to survive Nazi Germany, at the Traverse theatre in Edinburgh in 1987 and at the Royal Court the following year, directed by Stephen Unwin. Kelly performed this role in 2014 at London's Park Theatre, directed by Tilly Branson.

not about something it is that something itself (as Beckett said of Joyce).<sup>8</sup> So the musicality does change some of it, of course not the initial impact. There is a very good Polish translation, by Antoni Libera. So the musicality, it's the same and it's not the same in a different language. It's difficult to explain. Well the obvious musicality and rhythms that each language has and if you try it in different English accents or dialects you sense it on a small scale but it does exist.

**AM:** You said that in some ways performing *Not I* was unlike anything else. I just wondered in your subsequent work did you ever draw on anything in *Not I* or does it sort of sit apart from other performance work that you've done?

**Graham Saunders:** I suppose Barker is someone who has a precision of language.

**TK:** Yes he [Beckett] has a very precise language where you have to observe every dot and comma. Yes with Howard Barker I suppose. There are other writers I have worked with where you have to observe a very rigorous obedience to what the text intends. I like that.

**Michael Howarth:** Hello Tricia my name's Michael I'm a fellow practitioner, I'm an actor. As close as I could get to the experience you had with *Not I* was really where the terror was shared with two other performers in *Play*. Which is similar, it's on the way to, it's part of the compression, the minimalisation, of moving towards *Not I* which is the single mouth. There the challenge was in fact holding the individual character's line through the piece because unlike a normal play where you're responding or reacting to dialogue from the other actors, here those three voices are holding their own story, but have to stop and allow space for the other stories to come in. So in some ways once you get started on *Not I*, it is your piece, there's no interruptions into it. I was interested to hear from you about how did you actually do that process of shaping, did you mark where you were taking the breaths and how you did that? And also, just the actual process of learning it – did you learn it a line at a time, a section at a time?

**TK:** It's a few years ago so I can't quite remember that. I think I tried to learn it in sections. With a lot of visualisation. Both visualisation of the words on the page but also visualisation of what she's experiencing, what she's talking about. I did break it down, I'm school of Royal Court, Max Stafford-Clark, so I do all my actioning and breaking down into little 'what am I doing' etc. It's a very hard one to do on this I think. Sometimes it's best to just leave that aside, but I do like to be, to make decisions about 'what' on everything. So I think I did break it down and I did obviously line some things in chunks with other things and see where they juxtaposed each other. It's a long time ago I can't remember really more than that, but learning was just, it was really almost down to a page – let's get that page done then another page. And it was just, it had to be done.

**MH:** I had an experience of having to learn *Richard II* in two days, and luckily I was still at school and I was shown a way of learning text as a mass which stood me in wonderful stead.

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<sup>8</sup>In *Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . Joyce*, Beckett states: 'Here form *is* content, content *is* form' and adds that Joyce's writing 'is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*.' Beckett, *Disjecta*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: Calder, 1983), 27.

*Graham Saunders brings the Q&A to a close. A reading from Not I follows.*