

## Staging Beckett

### Ronald Pickup and Anna McMullan ‘In Conversation’

University of Reading, Minghella Studios, 11<sup>th</sup> April, 2015<sup>1</sup>

**AM:** Welcome to our ‘In Conversation’ event today as part of the final conference of our Staging Beckett project.<sup>2</sup> We are recording this event and our guest Ronald Pickup and I will talk for about half an hour or thirty-five minutes, and then we will open it up to the floor. Ronald, I am absolutely delighted to be able to welcome you to Reading today.

**RP:** I’m delighted to be here. Thanks for having me.

[*Audience applause.*]

**AM:** Almost all of you will know Ronald Pickup either from his Beckett work, or, of course, from his television, stage, and film work. You might not know that Ronald Pickup was born in Chester, and Chester is a partner university in our Staging Beckett project. In fact, he recently received an honorary degree from the University there. So that’s a nice serendipitous bit of information.

**RP:** I’m very proud of it. And my father was a lecturer there when it was just a training college for teachers.

**AM:** Well, that’s a wonderful coincidence. Ronald trained at RADA, and, as you know, he’s a highly acclaimed film, television, and stage actor. He’s been seen recently on our small screens in *Lark Rise to Candleford*, *Holby City*, *Coronation Street*, and I just saw him a couple of weeks back on a rerun of *Foyles War*. He has featured in many films from *The Day of the Jackal* in the 1970s, or *The Mission* in the 1980s, to *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* where he plays one of the main characters, and the recent sequel as well. He’s played Orwell in *Orwell on Jura* and many other historical characters, including Verdi, Nietzsche [*laughter*], and Stravinsky.

**RP:** I worked a lot abroad.

[*Laughter.*]

**RP:** It’s true.

**AM:** In theatre Ronald worked with Laurence Olivier at the National Theatre and he’s spent a lot of time working at both the National Theatre and the Royal Court Theatre, and has appeared in many of our major theatres and roles. But, of course, he’s here today because of his work on and with Beckett, starting with his role as M in *Play* at the Royal Court in 1976. That was directed by Donald McWhinnie, and is, I believe, where he first met Beckett. He was then chosen to work with Beckett and Billie Whitelaw in the BBC version of Beckett’s haunting

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

<sup>2</sup> The Staging Beckett project was a collaboration between the Universities of Chester and Reading and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. It ran from 2012 to 2015. See <https://www.reading.ac.uk/staging-beckett/> [accessed 3 April 2018].

television play *Ghost Trio*, which was screened as *Shades with Not I and ...but the clouds...* as part of the *Lively Arts Programme* on the BBC in 1977. And, most recently, as you can see in the still behind us, Ronald played Lucky alongside Ian McKellen, Patrick Stewart and Simon Callow in *Waiting for Godot* directed by Sean Mathias at the Haymarket, which then went on international tour.

**RP:** I wasn't on that. I pulled out.

**AM:** Right, right. But you were in the Haymarket production....

**RP:** He nearly killed me that man, that creature there [Lucky].

[*Laughter.*]

**AM:** Yes, I'm sure. We look forward to hearing about that later, but we're going to start at the beginning.

**RP:** Yes.

**AM:** How did you first encounter Beckett's work?

**RP:** Well, it was when I was at university at Leeds, and I'd not seen *Waiting for Godot* on stage, because I was living up North and wasn't around London when it was first performed. But there was a television lounge in the hostel we stayed in and I saw a television recording of *Waiting for Godot* with the great Jack MacGowran, Peter Woodthorpe and I think Peter Hall was doing Pozzo, and I don't know who was playing Lucky to be honest.<sup>3</sup> But anyway, that was my first encounter with it and then really nothing much until later at the university there was a very fine student production from Birmingham at the NUS [National Union of Students] drama festival directed by Martin Jenkins.

**AM:** of *Godot*?

**RP:** Of *Godot*, yes, and then, nothing until I met him when we were rehearsing *Play*.

**AM:** In 1976.

**RP:** I did see him though when we were rehearsing something else at the Royal Court, not Beckett. But he sort of flitted across the back of the auditorium and we were rehearsing like here [*gestures*] and suddenly we stopped because this phenomenon appeared, but he wasn't stopping because he never showed off, as you know, he was just going from A to B to get out and go somewhere else. And, I suppose he does [*pause*] embody, did embody, still does, charisma – what that dreadfully overused word means – there was something shimmering about that thing that went across, like one of his own characters. And it was odd and I said: 'who's that?' and someone said: 'Samuel Beckett's here'. Somebody, I know, is going to ask me what was it like working with him, well you couldn't help going like that without being craven or silly because he didn't invite that, but he was magnificent.

**AM:** Let's pick up with *Play* then. How did you prepare and what was your first response to getting this script?

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<sup>3</sup> In the 1961 BBC recording of *Waiting for Godot*, directed by Donald McWhinnie, Peter Woodthorpe played Estragon, Jack MacGowran Vladimir, Felix Felton Pozzo, and Timothy Bateson was Lucky. The boy was played by Mark Mileham.

**RP:** Well I was young and you just feel joy. It is so exhilarating and when you start, the three of you start bouncing off one another - it is tremendous. But the great thing about that play, and this is what Sam, Samuel Beckett, used to say, I mean the most important character is that creature there with the light who was brilliant . . . Duncan, I've forgotten his surname, Jim - help...

**James Knowlson [JK]:** Scott.<sup>4</sup>

**RP:** Thank you. He knew the play, all of it, and he was magnificent, and if any of us – the great Anna Massey and the great Penelope Wilton on each side of me, me in the middle – if any of us went off script, he would just carry on [*makes four lighting sounds*] until we came back on, which happened very [*claps three times*] fast.

**AM:** Yes, because it's so repetitive, you could quite easily skip...

**RP:** Yes, and there are deliberate repeats, of course, in the whole reprise. So it was extremely exhilarating. He was there all the time with Donald, who was the perfect director for him, I think Jim would agree; he had this capacity just to let Sam filter in things that needed to be said to us. And one of the great things that happened for me, I just loved it, was this rhythmic thing, this almost – I don't want to call it a monotone – but that [*voices a series of rhythmical beats*] which, when you assimilate it, it so much like real speech, because he writes real speech. It is just that his centre of rhythm, and how rhythms then break up, is quite extraordinary and he used to imbue you with that feeling just by just a few little demonstrations, nothing much.

**AM:** He would speak the lines himself?

**RP:** Just a tiny bit of it, yes. I mean he wasn't a great demonstrator, but it was enough.

**AM:** How did you find that rhythm, that monotone?

**RP:** Well, when there's someone you trust, and there's no one you could trust more, just instinctively, and he was by then very famous – an acknowledged genius and he was celebrating his seventieth birthday – but, still, you have to have that trust and one trusted why he wanted it. And when you did it more and more to yourself at home it has complete reality. It's not like doing something just because he thought it should be like that, broken up there, and we'll come on to it in *Ghost Trio* as well where I didn't say anything: repetition done in a very rhythmic and precise way – one, two, three, beat [*claps*] / one, two, three, four, beat [*claps*] – I suppose you become a form of ballet dancer with both words and your body, but you are still living inside it so it becomes actually natural.

**AM:** Do you sort of internalise that rhythmical aspect?

**RP:** You do, yes, almost instinctively. You don't realise it's happening. He is an extraordinary hypnotist both physically, but also internally. *Ghost Trio* in particular, but all of his plays do that to you. My wife came to see that triple bill that we did to celebrate the seventieth [birthday].<sup>5</sup> The first play on the agenda that night was *That Time* with Patrick Magee, which is recorded [*and relayed to the lit head of Magee in stage darkness*] and she said, she'd never

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<sup>4</sup> Duncan Scott was the lighting engineer at the Royal Court theatre in London when Beckett directed several plays there in the 1970s.

<sup>5</sup> The Beckett Festival at the Royal Court celebrating Beckett's seventieth birthday featured a triple bill of *Play*, *That Time* (with Patrick Magee as Listener) and *Footfalls* (with Billie Whitelaw as May).

seen Beckett in the theatre, she [*hesitates*] what's the word, I can't think of it, when you – hallucinate.

**AM:** Hallucinate, yes. We were talking about this in relation to the mouth in *Not I*, actually.

**RP:** Really.

**AM:** Just that, you know, you almost seem to see that mouth moving.

**RP:** Right. Absolutely. And that is what I think he, well one of the many things he does is make you find and do things which perhaps you have no idea are happening until you think hold on, I think I've found something about what makes this exciting to do. Am I making any kind of sense?

[*Agreement from audience and AM.*]

**AM:** Indeed, absolutely.

**RP:** It's very difficult, you know, you have to sort of blather on a bit I'm afraid, I wish I were a good lecturer.

**AM:** Oh, blathering is a great Beckett word. One of the things that has come up at this conference over the last couple of days is the way in which Beckett often places his actors in quite uncomfortable positions [RP: Ah] – how important was that in *Play*? What effect do you think it had on you?

**RP:** I think it is *crucial* in *all* of his plays. That one, particularly (*Waiting for Godot*), I'm not being mock heroic, but it was particularly for me, though it's not the longest part and the two lads and, indeed, Pozzo, have a hell of a time. But I'm jumping the gun, yes, in *Play* it is hugely important, of course it is. But it's also hugely important for the comedy. I mean, you have these three urns with these heads frozen, dripping with muck, jabbering on. And occasionally the fellow goes [*exaggerated hiccup*] and carries on. And a friend of mine [*repeats exaggerated hiccup. Audience laughs*] came to see it [*repeats exaggerated hiccup*], I mean I'm over doing it far too much now compared to what it was, but a friend of mine, Oliver Cotton, who's a really good playwright now as well as actor, he came and he said he couldn't stop laughing and really was getting bad looks - because of the blackness of it - he has a wonderfully black sense of humour Ollie - the black humour of that play was startlingly wonderful. And it was partly because Sam, working with Donald, encouraged that, and partly because it comes out of this, this crazy rhythm again. Well, not crazy rhythm, very precise rhythm and the slight monotone, and the disjunction between these heads in urns talking about this rather sad, squalid, mundane affair.

**AM:** It's a wonderful contrast.

**RP:** Depending on your sense of humour, but it is very funny.

**AM:** Yes, absolutely. Let's move on to *Ghost Trio*. Once Beckett was really impressed by an actor's work, he wanted to work with that actor again, so you were working with him in *Ghost Trio* [RP: Yes] as that, just incredible Figure. Billie Whitelaw in her memoir *Billie Whitelaw... Who He?* talks wonderfully about working with you and the way that Sam worked

in such detail with you on *Ghost Trio* [RP: Yes]. And she said it reminded her of a sculptor or a painter working.<sup>6</sup> Can you remember being directed by Beckett?

**RP:** Yes, in many ways vividly, but I hope I can, in some way, convey what it was like. I mean, he was all of those things that the great Billie had said, but *for me*, as a frustrated musician who loves music and would go crazy without it, it was like working with a conductor as well. A great conductor. I would be in my little pallet, this guy was waiting for something, we don't know what, maybe his lost love, it doesn't matter, but there he is sitting there with his little tape recorder and he goes through certain motions of listening, but always on absolutely precise leads, which vary. And I would be here [*gestures*], and Sam was there. He didn't come in front, he was there, but I was *hugely* aware of him all the time. And I remember, there'd been a pause while he was working out something; he had the Beethoven *Ghost Trio* there and his script there and his concentration was just phenomenal.<sup>7</sup> He was completely in that world of the Beethoven and the Beckett which he was reminding himself of. Because what I felt with him, was that he would have almost forgotten what he had written, he needed to rediscover it, it wasn't blueprint, but he needed to remind himself.

**AM:** To inhabit it.

**RP:** Yes, exactly. To *re-inhabit* it and there was the wonderful Beethoven piece. And he said: 'And I want, I must have, on that fifth beat when the head goes down again on those *three tremendous chords* at the end of that phrase.' And I remember those 'three tremendous chords' being spoken like that by Samuel Beckett and one knew what this piece, this *Ghost Trio* meant to him. And, at least to me, to many of us, it's one of the great pieces. But, that feeling of being part of a musical event, I mean a real music event, part of being a trio, I mean I wish I was playing the cello - and I was part of that, and it was thrilling. I was also a puppet. But was I a puppet? No, after a while these wonderful [*gesture from Ghost Trio*], albeit with absolute precision, on the beat, what is it? It's completely real, this isn't Beckett being a clever clogs, this is just a man waiting, like we do. [*Repeats gesture.*] It's real.

**AM:** Jim Knowlson has written about Beckett mentioning Von Kleist and marionettes,<sup>8</sup> but I think you're absolutely right because if it were just a puppet, we wouldn't be so *moved* by it. It's that sort of tension between the human, the music and this very regular pattern or precision...

**RP:** Yes, exactly.

**AM:** [...] that is so haunting.

**RP:** Yes, interestingly that's why, in the end, he was very glad to have human beings do those parts because when you are filling that with, hopefully, your humanity it can just be, I know, something that's purely mechanical. The trick is for it not to be mechanical and that's where

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<sup>6</sup> Whitelaw writes: 'Sometimes I felt as if he were a sculptor and I a piece of clay [...]. Sometimes I felt as though I were modelling for a painter or working with a musician. The movements started to feel like dance'. Billie Whitelaw, *Who He? An Autobiography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), 144.

<sup>7</sup> Beckett's 'Ghost Trio' notebook, UoR MS 1519/1-2 illustrates how Beethoven's score is the structural backbone to the teleplay. See Michael Maier and Viola Scheffel, 'Geistertrio: Beethoven's Music in Samuel Beckett's *Ghost Trio*', *SBT*, 11, Samuel Beckett: Endless in the Year 2000 (2001), 267-278.

<sup>8</sup> See James Knowlson, 'Beckett and Kleist's Essay "On the Marionette Theatre"' in James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (London: Calder, 1979), 275-85.

his demand is formidable, it's ferocious and wonderful and joyous and challenging, and if you feel you've got it, boy it's terrific, but my God it comes at a price. I mean all acting, without getting sort of dramatic about it, should take a lot out of you, but in a joyous way, but he [Beckett] leaves you no option. That's the point, you can't cheat him at all.

**AM:** And just before we go on to think about *Waiting for Godot*, he also directed you very precisely in *Ghost Trio* terms of movement and the way that you moved across the set, when you got up and moved to the door.

**RP:** Well it was the same precision as with sitting there waiting and listening. In a way that was more, if you like, *normal*. That's what you do in the larger space on any stage or on any set. I can't elaborate any more than that.

**AM:** That's great. There was also anecdote about Beckett. Was it Donald McWhinnie who said, you know, 'what do you mean "slightly ajar"??', were you there when that anecdote happened?

**RP:** No, I wasn't for some reason. What was it?

**AM:** Apparently, Donald McWhinnie was trying to achieve the stage direction of the door being 'slightly ajar' and in the end I think Beckett said that it was just closed. It's *imperceptibly* ajar, that was the point. [*Laughter.*] So it's quite an interesting concept. You also did some readings of Beckett's work didn't you, on radio, and then how did the Mathias *Godot* come about?

**RP:** Well, [*pause*] I just got a phone call from my agent one day saying he was setting up this production with Ian and Patrick and was I interested in doing Lucky? I didn't hesitate. I mean it was a non-discussion and thank God - because, you know learning can be a nightmare nowadays for some of us - it was about three months before we started rehearsing, which was terrific.

**AM:** Because Lucky, learning Lucky's speech...

**RP:** Well, yes, but there's the problem that, in spite of yourself, you can unlearn it, dangerously. Not intentionally, it can just fly out the window, but the great thing about it is you can play with it without cheating too much, though that didn't happen too often. The great thing about Lucky is, and it's like an embodiment of any Beckett part I think, you suffer for it, I mean you really do. I'm not pretending I did great noble things, you know there are people genuinely suffering across the world which is partly what the part is about. But it's as if he said to himself: 'I'm not going to let an actor get away with just looking rather sad [*laughter*] being pulled around by a rope and then having a wonderful, crazy speech, having done a little dance and the audience all go "Ahhhh", which hopefully they do, but the great thing about it is, you do suffer. I'm afraid you do suffer. And a whole load of actors I've talked to of different ages have said 'how do you find Lucky'. David Neilson, a very fine actor, who is most famous now for being Roy in *Coronation Street* had time off to do it in Manchester about five years ago and he was working with my daughter and he said, cutting a long story short, he said 'how did your father find Lucky?'<sup>9</sup> Rachel [Pickup] said: 'He loved it, it was one of the greatest experiences of his

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<sup>9</sup> *Waiting for Godot* was directed by Chris Horner at the Manchester Library Theatre. It ran from 1 February to 8 March 2008. David Fielder played Vladimir, George Costigan played Estragon, with Russell Dixon as Pozzo, and David Nielson as Lucky.

life.’ Which is true, I mean, there’s no question about it. And he said: ‘Yes, it is a wonderful part.’ He said, ‘I only did it for three weeks’ he said, ‘but ohh, I was glad when it finished.’ [Laughter.] He said: ‘I think there should be a Lucky club [laughter] - all the actors who have ever played Lucky should band together every new year to make sure we’re all still alive.’ [Laughter.] It does, it does really take something out of you because you are in this cramped position, that’s the point, and you have to be cramped and you’re holding these two bags which can’t be cheated as being lightweight, they’ve got to have that weight for when you drop them, and all of those things. And immobility, as the man well knew, is the most painful thing. I mean, I don’t know how those guards outside Buckingham Palace do it, but that’s a sort of similar nightmare. With Lucky’s suffering, you live it, you *have to* live it.

**AM:** Yes.

**RP:** And maybe die with it. The moment when you collapse when Vladimir takes your hat off, is *wonderful*. It is glorious because then you are picked up, and you’re flung around a bit and then you go off. It is beautiful not just because you think thank God it’s over, well sometimes you do think that [laughs], but it’s because you know you have, if you feel it’s gone well, it doesn’t always, but you’ve done some justice to the role. And it’s a very special part, it is so easy to sound affected about parts like that, but you [pause], you’ve really got to go through it.

**AM:** It’s interesting coming back to that point that Beckett almost creates a stage situation for you, as that character, to inhabit and almost help you be that character through the physical situations he puts you in.

**RP:** Oh absolutely. And the one thing I always felt disappointed about, and I still do because I often think about it, well, there are two things: I wish I had played it once when I was much younger, but I also wish, it got a bit better, but I wish I had made the opening of it, the speech that is, more of a real attempt at making sense because he is wanting finally to prove to Pozzo – this is all very human, it’s not just out of the blue – and to these two old things there watching, that he can do it and there’s much more of an effort at being very clear [*speaks with a precise and clipped voice*] and doing this and making that point and that point and that point, until you start doing what I have been doing somewhat this afternoon: spiralling off and fragmenting until it becomes crazed...am I blabbering on too much?

**AM:** Not at all, no, it’s absolutely fascinating. I’m very interested in what you said about Lucky wanting to prove to the others because quite often we don’t really think about the play from Lucky’s perspective.

**RP:** No.

**AM:** We see Lucky in relation to Pozzo and we see him as this sort of suffering figure...

**RP:** Well one of the things I was pleased with, as opposed to the things that I would criticise myself for, is that a lot of people, a lot of the audience after it was over, said that, partly because of the way it was staged, and I hope because of the internalisation that I was able to bring to it – I hope – they did see, amidst all that was going on with the three people that were allowed to speak, occasionally there was that focus on this creature standing there like that, thinking and

you're not just thinking, you're also feeling, and that was one of the joys of doing it, truly. I mean that.

**AM:** Yes, absolutely. One of the things we said we might think about was whether – you know, as an actor you've worked on so many different plays with different playwrights, with classics, with contemporary plays, and so on – and whether working with Beckett, with Beckett's texts is different in some way, or whether you develop different skills in relation to Beckett texts, and whether you took anything, either from *Play* or from *Ghost Trio* that you then brought into other work.

**RP:** [*Pause*] Well, the answer is yes. I brought out, *he* brought out an awful lot for me. I mean, somebody was saying the other day that the English language – I've never heard it expressed like this – that the English language is the least inflected and I thought, no that's rubbish, but in a way, I suppose it's true. I'm trying to hear myself now thinking *if* that is true, but the monotone that he invited, I mean it wasn't a monotone for the sake of it, it is again like the precision of the timing; you start to inhabit it and within that steady line there are so many small things that happen, but the value of that kind of delivery, yes, stayed with me for one or two things, definitely.

**AM:** And was that about a clarity of delivery, a musicality of delivery, or rhythm, and articulating, sort of, the syllables almost...?

**RP:** Absolutely, I mean I have to say, I had always – and maybe that's why he liked me a bit – that was always something I always enjoyed doing about our language. As long as the lyrical side of it is there, the consonants, as one director said. We're wonderful on the consonants, not so much when they're lost (which I tend to do more now), but when they are there it's a fantastic language of ours.

**AM:** And you obviously brought your own musical interests to Beckett's work as well.

**RP:** Yes, absolutely, oh yes.

**AM:** We can hear that when you're talking about it, you're responding to his work musically.

**RP:** Yes.

**AM:** And one of the things we said, just before we open things up to some other questions, is how do you think Beckett has impacted on you personally, or on your work? Is that something that has really left a strong impact on you?

**RP:** Yes, I wish I'd done more of it. Quite simply, I really do. Well, I said that about Lucky, I wish I'd done that when I was still much more physically able, you know, if I'd been thirty-five, forty, or even fifty, so that some of the things that make those very particular demands physically had less of an effect by the time you come to the dance and the speech. But I wish I'd played one or two of the clowns, call them clowns, Vladimir or Didi, Didi or Gogo and I would've liked to have done *Endgame*...

**AM:** Which role?

**RP:** Pardon.

**AM:** Hamm or Clov?



**RP:** Well, both, actually. [*Laughter.*] Sadly, what's his name, that marvellous director, who's also an actor...Simon...

**JK:** McBurney.

**RP:** Thank you, Jim. He wanted me to do Nagg and I had to say no because it was right at the end of the run [of *Godot*]. And I was again, without sounding self-indulgent or self-pitying, I was exhausted and he understood. It was too much at the time and he had talked about doing Clov at some other time, but I'd have loved to have done both of those. And I would've loved to have done Hamm, but, you know, timing is sometimes everything and I couldn't do it.

**AM:** You've left some fantastic performances for us and luckily *Ghost Trio* is *there* for us to look at . . . that extraordinary moment when we see your face for the first time on screen, that's just amazing. Did you spend a long time on make up and costume for *Ghost Trio*?

**RP:** *Ohh yes.* Yes.

**AM:** Because that must be almost like a Noh play, you're actually getting into the spirit of the character.<sup>10</sup> [RP: absolutely]. Ok, we started a little bit late, so we've got a good twenty minutes for questions from the audience.

**RP:** I'm afraid I haven't been economical enough in my replies.

**AM:** You've been terrific, it's been absolutely fascinating. I think I see Jonny Heron at the back, so, our first question.

**Jonathan Heron [JH]:** I have a question about Lucky's tirade. There's this anecdote, isn't there of Beckett saying to Jack MacGowran about speaking, 'it's mostly iambic-pentameter, but with a few rhythms of my own' [*laughter*], so I wonder whether you could talk about performing Lucky in relation to your experience of the classical theatre and your experience of verse and that kind of iambic rhythm, but I also wonder if you could help us work out what he meant by 'with a few rhythms of my own'. What rhythms were you aware of in that speech?

**RP:** Well, it's all rhythmic, but I think that his remark about it being iambic-pentameter and then things of his own, I think that's a sort of mischief remark which I think we all know he enjoyed very much. I mean Billie told me once about her saying to him about some line in *Not I*: 'Sam, could you please, I'm really having difficulty with this line' already I've forgotten what the line was, but anyway, he read the line and then he said [*imitating Beckett's voice*]: 'Billie, I haven't the faintest idea'. [*Laughter.*] And, I'm not ducking your question, it's a very good one, I mean, I think what he was saying was, concentrate on the rhythm, whether you spot mine, you know, mine, Sam Beckett's, or Shakespeare's iambic-pentameter, or whatever, and it's so brilliant I suppose it is a mixture of the two. But what I find extraordinary is that there is such syncopation in the speech that when I was learning it and when I was playing it, and sometimes you do go AWOL, you can't help it if you're that worked up, the rhythms are so syncopated that you can actually play around with them - it is like jazz in that way. It is like a trumpet solo, or whatever solo, I'm not sure which instrument to pick. But you can play with

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<sup>10</sup> See Ronald Bogue, 'Deleuze and the Invention of Images: From Beckett's Television Plays to Noh Drama', *The Comparatist*, 26 (May 2002), 37-52; Mariko Hori Tanaka, 'The Body in Pain and Freedom of the Mind: Performing Beckett and Noh' in *Beckett and Pain*, eds. Tanaka, Yoshiki Tajiri, and Mihiko Tsushima (New York: Brill, 2012), 93-116.

the rhythms without destroying it. It's the thing of being able to throw away what you hope you've assimilated. You try to assimilate it when you're learning it and it's fairly clear, but then when you come to do it with the feeling, with all the other things I've tried to talk about, you play with it and it has its own very true, very raw humanity. There is a very interesting article about when he decided to direct it himself for the first time.<sup>11</sup> So, with Lucky, like with any great part, there comes a point where there is a terrible choice to make: you can make him *very* real, very much somebody you would want to treat in a hospital, or somebody who has just lost it, has been brilliant, which I personally believe Lucky has been, and articulate and wonderful in his youth, but has lost it and can't quite hang onto it, and that, you know, destroys him before the end of the speech. I don't know whether that has quite answered your question...

**JH:** Yes, I think you've partially answered my question.

**RP:** Because it's a very good point.

**JH:** I was aware, in your performance, of a staccato at the end. You really hammered [*claps to illustrate staccato notes*] towards the end the rhythm, so I did wonder whether you might comment on your crescendo at the end of the speech which seemed quite marked and quite staccato.

**RP:** Yes, I suppose it was my instinct really. It seemed absolutely the way to go and you could be very [*claps*] firm [*claps*] about those rhythms [*claps*] and the firmer you are [*claps*] the more it can often [*claps*] imply [*claps*] like we are in life [*claps*], the more you are like that, the more it is the moment that you are probably going to explode all over the place, you know. Which is what he does when the hat comes off. So I suppose, and this is why he's so extraordinary, it is how we all are *in extremis* [*laughs*]. I don't mean we all start behaving like Lucky, but it's so real, it's the reality of it that got to me I suppose is the best answer. And the help of Sean and all the people around me, it was a smashing ensemble deal, the whole evening.

**AM:** Yes, it was an extraordinary team there. Any other questions? Michael.

**Michael Haworth [MH]:** Thank you Ron, Michael Haworth, fellow actor.

**RP:** Hello.

**MH:** What I was really interested in and partly from the questions I've been looking at over the past couple of days, one of the things that Stanley Gontarski was talking about is what are the questions we ask ourselves that lead us to make those sorts of decisions that you're talking about. I'm just wondering whether, on two levels, one on the level of the production overall, how set was it before you all started? You know, the commitment to that set, it being inside the theatre, an abandoned theatre and the challenges that that set up, and how that was justified. But then also, personally, your personal approach to a role like Lucky; do you have any particular questions that you asked yourself with it, do you define what illness he is suffering from, and, you know, what's the shakes, what's the saliva, what's the instinct of Tourettes in the speech, you know, and things like that?<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See 'Beckett's *Godot*' in Dougald McMillan and Martha Fehsenfeld, *Beckett in the Theatre: From Waiting for Godot to Krapp's Last Tape* (London: Calder, 1988), 87-163; Ciaran Ross, 'Beckett's *Godot* in Berlin: New Coordinates of the Void', *SBTA*, 11, Samuel Beckett: Endlessness in the Year 2000 (2001), 64-73.

<sup>12</sup> Jess Thom performed as Mouth for a Touretteshero production of *Not I* at the Battersea Arts Centre from 28 February to 17 March 2018. 'The *Endgame* Project' was a production of *Endgame* staged in 2012 starring Dan

**RP:** That's huge.

**MH:** Sorry about that.

**RP:** No no no. The first question about the set, we all felt, all four of us, and it's not being disloyal to Sean, or to the wonderful designer because in so many ways he's a magnificent director and he's a magnificent set designer, but you can tell there is a but coming, I thought and we all felt it was a bit too...albeit a place that's been ruined, it gave you the feeling that any of those characters could hide somewhere, it was a bit Romantic, on the edge of being a bit Gothic, which was a pity. I mean, you could forget about it a lot of the time and the play transcends that, and the actors do, I think, and there was still the tree, but, for me, I think for all of us, that space which somehow has been given a locale with the tree so that you are somewhere specific where you can meet, you know, we'll meet by the tree, that's enough. God bless them both, the director and designer, because I hate sounding critical after the event, but, to be fair, we all, particularly me, loud mouth as I sometimes am, thought it was a bit too Romantic. Now, the second thing...what was the question?

**MH:** The personal questions you asked yourself preparing the role.

**RP:** Personal questions, yes, well, when I was really thinking about it and reading it, working on it, and reading a bit about how different productions had been, even the early one that Sam Beckett directed himself, there were lots of things floating around in my mind, but when I met Simon, lovely Simon Callow, who is *encyclopaedic* about everything, I mean *everything*, I love him, he didn't know any more about Beckett in some ways than I did, which was extraordinary. It was fun in a way, because we realised, and I only realised it instinctively, this relationship between Pozzo and Lucky, which is also what he felt about it, it's all to do with a collapsed relationship: way back, even if I'd been younger playing Lucky, we had this friendship, it could've been a gay friendship, it could've been master pupil, it could've been a partnership even in a business, but there was a huge togetherness about them. And this man, Lucky, was the brilliant one, he gave to Pozzo a kind of a life and an imagination because Pozzo talks a lot about that, sometimes he may be talking bull, but when he orders him to make the speech it's as if he – I think, anyway, I'm sure that some people may disagree – he's wanting Lucky, just *once* to do what he used to be able to do. So I think, one came to the conclusion that, despite thinking about certain illnesses where you lose your mental capacity to follow a thought through in a coherent way, or whatever else, it's much more a picture of *need*, which is how the other two also need each other. Even in this extreme stage of their life, they need one another. On purely practical terms, Lucky would die in a ditch if he didn't get the odd bone from Pozzo. Pozzo would die of boredom very rapidly, and laziness because he wouldn't have anything to kick and whip and call. So, he says that wonderful thing just before we both go off at the end in Act Two [*hesitates*]: '[Vladimir] What do you do when you fall far from help? [Pozzo] We wait till we can get up. Then we go on'.<sup>13</sup> It's something like that, and that's the

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Moran and Chris Jones, both actors who live with Parkinson's disease, see Patrick Bixby, "'this...this...thing': The *Endgame* Project, Corporeal Difference, and the Ethics of Witnessing', *JOBS*, 21.1 (2018), 112-127. For a discussion of Beckett and disability, see Michael Davidson, "'Every Man his Specialty': Beckett, Disability and Dependence' in *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama: Recasting Modernism*, ed. Kirsty Johnston (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 109-128.

<sup>13</sup> When Vladimir asks Pozzo: 'What do you do when you fall far from help?' Pozzo replies: 'We wait till we can get up. Then we go on. On!' Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 82.

story of their life and God knows it's the story of many people's lives, and it's the story of the two tramps. People are waiting, the word we have not used much. Every one of these plays, all of them, they wait. In *Ghost Trio* the man waits, in *Fin de Partie*, they wait; people are *waiting*. Why, for what, for something, for something to be re-consummated in the way that Lucky and Pozzo may have had at one time, spiritually, physically, whatever. So that's the route we went down in an attempt to answer your marvellous question. That we liked one another a lot but it's shattered, and it's become a habit, an awful habit.

**AM:** Rosemary Pountney.

**Rosemary Pountney [RPo]:** Yes, it's not a question, but I was reflecting on the wonderful experience that you've described when...

**RP:** Which experience, sorry?

**RPo:** Well I'm going on to tell you.

**RP:** Oh, I'm sorry.

**RPo:** [*Laughs*] It's alright. When you, growing into the role in *Ghost Trio* and you had Beckett there, and Beckett was sort of with you all the way and I was comparing that with Albert Finney's experience in the *Krapp's Last Tape* that preceded Billie Whitelaw's premiere of *Not I*.<sup>14</sup> And I'd known him slightly when he was at Birmingham Rep, and he'd always been very confident, you know, in himself, and no problems, and so it was astonishing to find with that *Krapp's Last Tape* that he was uneasy, he was clearly not happy in the role at all. And, I gather that that was because Beckett had sort of dotted in and out of rehearsals and Albert had been clear that he wasn't doing quite what Beckett wanted and the sort of uneasiness, the disjunction between that and how he was being directed. So I was just thinking how amazingly lucky you were to have Beckett with you sort of growing into the thing because otherwise, I mean if you just had him dotting in and out, you really could be very very uneasy.

**RP:** Absolutely. It's a fascinating story that. I didn't see that performance of *Krapp's Last Tape* – Finney was, and is, a great actor. I don't think he does much anymore, sadly. But I can understand too why he would've been uneasy. I mean, yes, you are absolutely right, I was very lucky, but I'm very much one of those actors honestly, if I trust somebody, as I said earlier on, and I don't trust everybody at all, but working with someone like Beckett, I mean it was the same working with Peter Brook on a translation of *Oedipus* that I did way back, a Ted Hughes translation, if I really know what a director is after and instinctively know, yes I can sense, I can smell it, it's not always rational, then I'm happy.<sup>15</sup> And I'm very lucky in that way because when I'm able to be fed and also hypnotised by someone like Beckett or Peter Brook, I'm happy. Albert is not. He's so much more, and he's a lovely, wonderful, generous man, and a generous actor, but I can see why he would pull back at some of the things that Samuel Beckett was encouraging or trying to have him do. It's very interesting that, and I didn't know about that at all.

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<sup>14</sup> Finney played Krapp at the Royal Court in 1973, directed by Anthony Page.

<sup>15</sup> The 1968 production of Seneca's *Oedipus* was adapted by Ted Hughes from a translation by David Anthony Turner. It was Peter Brook's debut as director for the National Theatre, and starred John Gielgud (*Oedipus*), Irene Worth (*Jocasta*), Colin Blakely (*Creon*), Frank Wylie (*Tiresias*), Ronald Pickup (*Messenger*), and Harry Lomax (*Shepherd*).

**AM:** We could possibly take just two questions more, so I'm going to take Jim and then Lisa. Ok, so Jim Knowlson first.

**JK:** Ok, yes. I'd like to prompt you to talk a little bit about that occasion where he was specifically talking about your movement. We passed over slightly the fact of movement, but you were moving when you were going to the door and opening the door. We were in the pub, you remember Ron, and he started to talk about Kleist and marionette theatre, [RP: Yes, yes] and I think what he said then, and then you told me just a few minutes before we started, that you'd also had another meeting with him on your own. And he said 'Grace. Maximum grace and economy of movement', that was it. In both *Ghost Trio* and *...but the clouds...*, but in *...but the clouds...* you're moving much more rapidly into the circle of light. Do you remember that occasion when he was talking to you about the way you actually move and things like that when you were going across towards the door in *Ghost Trio*.<sup>16</sup>

**RP:** It was done in a sense, again very mechanically, it's almost as if, I think I see what you mean, it's as if I haven't moved almost.

**JK:** Yes, that's what I mean.

**RP:** Yes, that was what he was after, and then that's up to you and your own technique. Fortunately, I was wearing a long coat which helps because you then don't see too much movement of the legs and the feet and you can almost glide with the grace of movement...

**JK:** Glide, that was the marionette bit, wasn't it, that he talked about.

**AM:** Let's take our final question from Lisa Dwan – because we're running out of time!

**RP:** I'll stay as long as you want!

**Lisa Dwan:** Hi, thanks Ron, very interesting. You touched a little bit on what it cost and I wondered if you could elaborate on that, I mean outside of the obvious physical discomfort, but work like that, that cost you so much and yet you're so drawn to the performance.

**RP:** Well, yes, I mean it does make it sound as if one's done something very noble and heroic, but what it costs you is what I tried to describe, with Lucky in particularly, which is the most obvious example – somebody who has made a decision to stay through thick and thin, through all the horrors with this man, this Pozzo. I always see him over there [*gestures*], it's like a sort of sense memory. [*Laughter*] It is and doing that every night, building up to do that dance which is hideous, which he can't do now and then a piece of articulation of whatever kind you want to call it that then explodes and falls apart. I use this word hypnotist again, he has somehow seduced you, the naughty man, [*Laughter*] into this state. You can't have waded, you can't cheat him. That's all I can say which sounds very, a bit Romantic, and I'm sure he's up there saying 'You're talking rubbish Ronald.' But that's what he does for me and I think for

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<sup>16</sup> Kleist states: 'We can see the degree to which contemplation becomes darker and weaker in the organic world, so that the grace that is there emerges all the more shining and triumphant. Just as the intersection of two lines from the same side of a point after passing through the infinite suddenly finds itself again on the other side – or as the image from a concave mirror, after having gone off into the infinite, suddenly appears before us again – so grace returns after knowledge has gone through the world of the infinite, in that it appears to best advantage in that human bodily structure that has no consciousness at all – or has infinite consciousness – that is, in the mechanical puppet, or in the God.' Heinrich von Kleist, 'On the Marionette Theatre', trans. Thomas G. Neumiller, *The Drama Review*, 16.3, The 'Puppet' Issue (September 1972), 22-26 (26).

anybody. I mean, Ian and Patrick, they felt exactly the same, as did Simon. You feel joyous at the end of the evening because you know it has cost something, that's the reward for the cost, so it doesn't matter, but it does, while it's happening, have a very visceral effect, there's no doubt about it, no question.

**JK:** Can I tell you something I don't think you may know. It's just to tell you that this week I was working on the Billie Whitelaw letters and I don't know whether you remember, but he wrote to Billie saying: 'Do you think Ron Pickup would agree to do Willie?'<sup>17</sup> In other words, you'd impressed him very much with those *Shades* programmes and he wanted you to do Willie in *Happy Days*. You weren't free. And I remember him telling me that. [RP: No I didn't know that] He wanted you for it, of course...

**RP:** I know, I know, it's another loss and there have been plenty of those in my case.

**JK:** But it's very flattering that you were his first thought. Would he do it, would he condescend, as it were, to do it?

**RP:** I hope he wasn't...

**JK:** No, no, no, no, he wasn't upset. No.

**RP:** Yes, that's very sad.

**AM:** Well we'd love to keep you longer, but we have a couple of other events happening this afternoon.

**RP:** Yes, I'm sure you do.

**AM:** And it's been just terrific. Thank you for a really wonderful discussion full of insights. It's been absolutely compelling listening to you, so thank you so much.

[*Applause.*]

**RP:** Thank you very very much, and I just wish I could've made the points I've made with that more condensation and we could've got through more, but thank you so much. It's been a big privilege for me, I can tell you. Thank you.

**AM:** And for us.

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<sup>17</sup> The Billie Whitelaw Collection is held at the University of Reading's Special Collections archive. It contains annotated scripts, notebooks, and correspondence: <https://www.reading.ac.uk/web/files/special-collections/BW.pdf> [accessed 31 July 2018]