

Staging Beckett

‘It’s all poetic, Walter...’

A public talk with one of Beckett’s most trusted directors, Walter Asmus.

Moderated by Nicholas Johnson. A collaboration between the Samuel Beckett Summer School, Trinity College Dublin, and the AHRC funded Staging Beckett project (University of Reading, University of Chester, and the Victoria & Albert Museum, London).

Samuel Beckett Summer School, Neill/Hoey Lecture Theatre, Trinity Long Room Hub,
Trinity College Dublin, 14th August 2014¹

Nicholas Johnson: Good afternoon everyone, you’re all very welcome to one of the events that we are absolutely most excited about in the Beckett Summer School 2014, and I have a few words of welcome just to say to members of the public who are here as part of our public programme and who have the opportunity to hear from the German director, Walter D. Asmus. I would like to thank our host in general as well, which is the venue here, the Trinity Long Room Hub. This is the research centre here at Trinity College for the arts and humanities and this research centre has been an indispensable part of the life of the Summer School since its founding in 2011, without which we could not proceed – they have been hugely supportive. So I would like first to thank them. I would also like to say that Walter Asmus is appearing here courtesy of the AHRC funded research project which you see listed here and this is the Staging Beckett project which is a three-year international project to cover the impact of productions of Samuel Beckett’s drama on theatre practices and cultures in the United Kingdom and Ireland. It’s a very exciting project that you would’ve heard a little bit about at our roundtable, ‘Beckett beyond the humanities’ and I’d like to welcome from the University of Reading Anna McMullan and Matthew McFrederick, both of whom are in attendance and are part of that research team. They’re over here especially for that, and also involved in the AHRC project are the Universities of Chester and Reading, and the V&A in London. So it’s a very exciting contribution that they were able to make to help us to bring Walter over here, to speak with him.

I suppose that many of you will have seen in your programmes an introduction, some of you were here at 11.30 this morning to see *What Where* directed by Walter Asmus, I would just like to say first, because we’re going to have this hour to hear from his own mouth about his experiences with Beckett, that Walter Asmus has been for many people a kind of living representative of the practice and process of Samuel Beckett. This arises from their

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

collaboration very early on in the 1970s and he has now directed all of Beckett's plays, I believe on every inhabited continent, all through the world. He's very well known to us in Dublin for a series of very important productions at the Gate Theatre.² So, we are welcoming some who will have seen the film beforehand and might have questions about that. The format of this hour and the hope that we have is to give you a little taste first of hearing Walter in his own voice describe what his practice has been, but more than half of the time we would like to give over to your own questions. So you have a rare opportunity here. Because this will be recorded for archival purposes, I would just ask that our volunteers will have a microphone here and once we switch over to question and answer, it would be great if you could use the microphone so that we could all hear the questions that you have, particularly Walter as well. So, I'm going to sit down with Walter.

Welcome Walter first. Do you have anything to say initially by way of welcome?

Walter Asmus: Thank you for your welcome, thank you. I feel very honoured, I have a long relationship to Dublin/Ireland since 1988 and it's a real joy to be here again and to talk to you.

NJ: Thank you, can everyone hear him at the back, or do we need to be a little closer?

WA: Too close, okay.

NJ: Okay, so I think that for a lot of the people here one of our first curiosities is about your meeting with Beckett first, and how it was you came to work in person with him. So if you could perhaps relate just that story of Berlin and how this first encounter came about as a way to get into the relationship thinking about you and Beckett.

WA: May I first for this machine here, for this recording machine make a little correction, I never touched *Play* and I never touched *Catastrophe* or *Catastrophe* [French], so I didn't direct *all* of them, I only directed fourteen out of sixteen, I guess.

I met Samuel Beckett in 1974 on the 27 December and I was assistant director at the Schiller Theater in the then West Berlin, and Beckett had directed in Berlin a couple of times before since 1967. The first time he went there was in 1965 to take part as a supervisor, sort of supervisor, in a production of *Waiting for Godot*, and then he directed *Endgame* in 1967, and *Krapp's Last Tape* in '69, and then he directed *Happy Days* in '71, and then I joined the company in '73. I heard he would come to direct *Waiting for Godot*, so I got sort of excited and I did everything I could, being very charming to every secretary in the building to get the

² Walter D. Asmus worked as an assistant director to Samuel Beckett on a total of nine shows and television productions between 1975 and 1986, and he has directed all of Samuel Beckett's plays in productions that have toured the world. Asmus first directed *Waiting for Godot* at the Gate Theatre Dublin in October 1988 with set design by Louis le Brocquy. Tom Hickey played Vladimir, Barry McGovern Estragon, Alan Stanford Pozzo, and Stephen Brennan Lucky. See <https://www.reading.ac.uk/staging-beckett/Productions.aspx?p=production-1414157358> [accessed 8 August 2018]. Asmus directed *Godot* at the Gate Theatre again in 1991 where it was the cornerstone of the Gate's Beckett Festival with Barry McGovern playing Vladimir, Johnny Murphy Estragon, Alan Stanford Pozzo, and Stephen Brennan Lucky: <https://www.reading.ac.uk/staging-beckett/Productions.aspx?p=production-1201829204> [accessed 8 August 2018]. This iconic production toured globally for many years, and in 2008 *Godot* toured to all 32 counties in the island of Ireland.

job, and I was not the youngest assistant director at the time (I directed myself a couple of times, ten times before or so) and my English was okay for that so I got the job somehow.

NJ: Yes. And what were your first impressions of him in rehearsal? How was he in terms of the work space and the relationship with actors and technicians?

WA: He avoided small talk, he never went into small talk. He started very professionally straight away. I think the first rehearsal day started with Lucky's monologue, and he outlined the narrative in Lucky's monologue, the different chapters in Lucky's monologue, and it was very matter of fact and friendly, and sober. For me at the time, though I had a tendency of course to be slightly overawed and it was after, I don't know half an hour, it was quite a normal working atmosphere and procedure and the actors knew him, they had worked with him before and everybody was friendly. It was later commented on, this sort of I called it 'human theatre work' or something in contrast to theatre work in general. You see for me it had a human touch which in the theatre business is rather rare, I would say. It's all phoney and it's all ridiculous stuff going on there and lots of lies and Barry [McGovern] will forgive me, he has his own experiences, and Samuel Beckett was sort of a central figure from the very first moment on because he was, he had these vibrations around him of kindness, of caring, of empathy with other people, with technicians, with everybody, and amazingly he was fluent, his German was fabulous and yet he would talk in a very considerate way and everybody started to imitate this considerate diction you know... the diction and the language changed, and the overall tone changed in the rehearsal phase. It was very very impressive for me at the time. If there were misunderstandings, everybody tried, not like the Chinese talk altogether, but, it was not a cacophony, but everybody tried to help and work out where the misunderstanding might be and it was wonderful, yes.

NJ: And through what process in your relationship with Beckett did you shift from being a kind of assistant director figure to a trusted director who was actually taking the work forward on your own, and I suppose in what ways did you carry that in your own practice when you began to do it more independently without him?

WA: He and me shared a sort of naivety, he was the naivety genius and I was the naive assistant director you know, so he trusted me, I was the naive greenhorn I would say. He trusted me to direct *Waiting for Godot* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music [New York] in 1978. I didn't think twice to say yes. They wanted him of course, and he suggested me and said things like Walter Asmus knows it better than me and so on and it was very kind of him. I didn't know anything you see... in New York, I didn't know the business very well, and not at all in a foreign country, and so on. I arrived there and had no cast because they had all run away before I came; not because of me, but because of a production that had failed before. But from then on, I didn't even dare to send him reports. I thought it might be better that he doesn't know anything about it. I know Tom Bishop would be spying around and so on.³ People like him and Barney Rosset and everybody would know about the production, but we hardly had any contact because I had assisted him with *Godot* and I knew all the letters and descriptions and all the problems – I thought I knew them – and I didn't want to impose on him and start all over again. But it turned out that it was more or less, very often, quite often the other way around. Not that he would impose on me, but whenever we talked about *Godot* later on – and I did it eight times after that,

³ Tom Bishop at the time of transcription is Professor of French Literature, Thought and Culture at New York University. He is an eminent Beckett scholar.

I think – and we used to talk about it all over again and he would scribble on a little receipt in the PML, the café [Le Petit Café in the Hôtel PLM, Boulevard Saint-Jacques], and he'd say: 'Walter, here is the tree, and here is the stone.' I didn't say 'Yes, Sam.'⁴ I didn't say 'Oh, I know Sam, I know the tree, I know the stone.' But that was so moving because he was so engaged in it. He started from scratch, all over again, every time.

NJ: And I suppose many of the Irish audiences will be familiar with your very recent work because just a few weeks ago Walter had a production in Galway at the Galway Festival which is a production that started at the Royal Court with Lisa Dwan.⁵ This has been the recent work that you've been doing over the past year and I know that you have many touring plans for this year. I'm very curious to hear, after so much past experience, what has this recent project been like and how has it been to approach Beckett in our contemporary moment with these plays that you know so well and have directed before?

WA: Oh, there are lots of implications in this question. The contemporary moment, I'm very sceptical of the contemporary moment. That is a thing which actually tortures me because for me there's always the hidden reproach that I will reproduce Beckett's plays, Beckett's visions, which to a certain extent is true as far as the overall design is concerned, as far as the preciseness of the plays is concerned. But on the other hand, it is not true because it is me doing them, and me being this stupid German guy doing them it is in every way different from what he did in 1974 for example, *Waiting for Godot*, or what he did with *Footfalls*, in which I assisted him at the Schiller Theater.⁶ It is even different with himself. When he directed *Waiting for Godot* in 1974 it was a great production at the time, but when he did it again in '84, ten years later at the Riverside Studios in London, a production which I had prepared a San Quentin drama workshop in Chicago, it was the same production and yet it was not the same production. He was ten years older and Jim Knowlson called it at the time the 'sunshine production' because it was softer, the music was more subdued, it was minor not so much major as in the Berlin production. So there are big differences without changing anything and this production of the three plays – *Not I*, *Footfalls*, and *Rockaby* – the shorter plays more and more intrigued me as I went along – it has to do perhaps, with the old age. I can't cope with the long plays any longer. I knew them by heart already, Barry [McGovern] can confirm that. The poetic aspect of the shorter plays, so called shorter plays, is the thing which intrigues me very much. From this point I expect to come back to the longer plays, to the earlier plays but I suggest for this talk 'It's all poetic, Walter. All poetic.' The balance between realistic, let us say invention while working on the plays, and the poetic text and aspect of the plays as they are written has become essential for me.

May I entertain you, you seem to be very bored and it's very confusing what I'm saying? [Laughter.] I'll tell you a little story to entertain you. He directed *Play* in Berlin and I assisted him, and I directed *Come and Go* for the same bill.⁷ You can imagine me sitting there, and he

⁴ The Hotel PLM is now the Paris Marriott Rive Gauche Hotel and Conference Centre.

⁵ From 22 – 26 July, *Not I*, *Footfalls* and *Rockaby* was staged at An Taibhdhearc theatre. This production, directed by Asmus and with Lisa Dwan as Mouth, May and W began at London's Royal Court theatre on 9 January 2014. This production also transferred to the Duchess Theatre for a two-week run from 3 – 15 February 2014.

⁶ *Warten auf Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*) was first produced at the Schiller Theater Werkstatt, Berlin in 1965. Beckett's own production opened at the Schiller Theatre on 3 August 1975. This was when Beckett started writing *Footfalls*.

⁷ *Kommen und Gehen* (*Come and Go*) directed by Walter Asmus, advised by Beckett, was premiered with Beckett's own production of *Spiel* (*Play*) at the Schiller Theater on 6 October 1978. See Ruby Cohn, *Just Play:*

suggesting at dinner: ‘Walter, I’ve thought about it, would you direct *Come and Go* and I direct *Play*? Would that be okay for you?’ [Laughter.] I was sitting there and said: ‘Yes, Sam.’ You can imagine at the time...and he came to attend rehearsal once and there were these three women on the bench and we had the spotlight on the stage, and we had discussions:

*where do these women come from?

*what are they doing?

*why are they here?

These are, for actors, the famous ‘W’ questions, and I had a costume designer and a set designer, she was very ambitious and very realistic, and [she said] ‘We must find where they come from,’ ‘We must know what they do,’ ‘You must help the actors’. [Laughter.] And I was standing there saying yes, I’ll help the actors, so I said ‘you need a tautness, you have to focus straight front’. ‘Walter that doesn’t help us, we can’t focus straight front, we can’t sit there not knowing what we are doing, where we come from, why we are here, and so on and so on.’ It was *agony*. [Laughter.] So they climbed ladders up and down and during this rehearsal we had wonderful photographs of elderly ladies in Atlantic City, East Coast retired people – ‘Blue Wave’ you may have heard of the term. I think it’s ‘Blue Wave Ladies’ with their silk, beautiful flowered dresses. Beckett’s dresses were all, as you will remember, very straight. We had shopping bags at the side of the bench. So obviously they had been shopping and bumped into each other by accident: ‘Hi. Oh yes Flo, how are you doing? Let’s sit down...’ and so on. And Sam Beckett in his old parker, he came to the rehearsal and the auditorium was dark and he looked, peered at the three women on the bench and they had their dialogue and one went out, and he followed the one as she disappeared into the dark and then he looked down at the bench, he saw the bags, he looked up again, the woman came back, followed them, followed the dialogue, looked down at the bench again. That he repeated three or four times and then he heaved an ‘Ahh’, a deep sigh. I whispered ‘Sam, don’t worry, all this will disappear.’ [Laughter.] And he whispered back ‘Walter, I trust you.’

You can’t explain it, it’s just the situation and I’m being asked about trust and things like that, I don’t know where it comes from but, of course, all of this disappeared. Later on, I asked him and Lois [Overbeck] reminded me with a remark: ‘His plays must be connected to something outside of them’, or something as she mentioned in her lecture this morning.⁸ I said, ‘Sam, there must be some...the actors need this, and I must do it for the actors.’ ‘Okay’ he said. Then I said, ‘There must be some real background, something realistic where it comes from, I’m after this.’ Then he said ‘It’s all poetic, Walter. All poetic.’ Okay, that was my starting point with discussing it with myself over the years: where is the poetic side of it, and where do I give in to a realistic idea which one might imply, might impose on it? You might have heard of...am I talking too much?

Audience: No.

Beckett’s Theater (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 235-6. For a discussion of Beckett work as a director see James Knowlson, ‘Beckett as Director: The Manuscript Production Notebooks and Critical Reception’, *Modern Drama*, 30.4 (Winter 1987), 451-465.

⁸ Lois More Overbeck gave a lecture entitled, ‘The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Letters as Narrative’ at the 2014 Samuel Beckett Summer School.

WA: You might have heard about a little booklet, it's in German and French (I don't think in English)...Temkine...

Audience: *Des Absurde und die Geschichte*.⁹

WA: Yes!

Audience: 'The Absurd and the History', and it's yes...you talk more.

WA: 'The Absurd and the History', and they have found proof, they're academics and theatre practitioners – it's a grandfather and his grandson I think, the grandson interviewing his grandfather – and he has found proof about *Waiting for Godot* set in the south of France in 1943. That was after the Nazis went south and they were threatened and they were waiting for somebody to bring them over the Italian border, Northern Italy was at the time still free, more or less, of the Nazis and so that is the basic political background. Of course, in early drafts as you may know there are these names, Levi and so on referring to Jews and Beckett's experience with the Resistance and all of this comes together.¹⁰ They found proof that the Eifel Tower, we could've jumped down *von Hand in Hand* from the Eifel Tower, now it's too late. They found out in 1943 that the Eifel Tower was closed to Jews which is, others say it is not true, it was generally closed not only to Jews, so it's very complicated.¹¹ But it is somewhat intriguing to read, to learn about and yet for me it can be the basis of reminding actors that this is not a clown's play, that this is not a funny play, only a funny play, but deep down you have to be connected to something really existential. This existential may be that you are waiting for somebody to free you, to save you, the crave for salvation, all this is in *Godot* of course, immanent.¹² But perhaps you want to escape because you have killed your father, you know. That is just as valuable to me as a starting point, for me it doesn't make much difference. I never would set this explicitly as a political piece in the south of France, it has been done in Germany with costumes referring to concentration camps, and things like that. It has been done. If I use this background I think it's great and yet I wouldn't change the overall music of the play. It can be harder, it can be existential, I don't like the laughs in *Godot* any longer – 'I hate the laughs' Beckett would say, but I enjoy the laughs at the same time, because I'm vain and I need the laughs to be confirmed in what I do – so it's such a mix of things coming together when you do theatre. And that is similar with the balance of these little short poetic plays, *Footfalls* for example. For me *Footfalls* is such a wonderful play. Nobody knows what it is about and nobody understands the play. For me, the play is so clear having known Beckett, knowing a little bit about his mother, knowing a little bit about his camouflage things: Krapp has a clown's nose; 'No, it's not me' Beckett says, 'It's a clown. His boots are like this...'. He's done away with this after a while, but in the beginning it's so, I wouldn't say autobiographical, so personal, Beckett's plays are so personal. They're so personally connected to his biography, his life, it has nothing to do with autobiography, it's existential for him, for his creating and I think that's rare. He may forgive me up there, we meet somehow the personal

⁹ Pierre Temkine, *Warten auf Godot. Das Absurde und die Geschichte*, trans. from the French by Tim Trzaskalik (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2009).

¹⁰ For an outline of Beckett's involvement in the Resistance, see James Knowlson, 'Exodus, Occupation and Resistance 1940-2' in *Damned to Fame* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 297-318.

¹¹ For a discussion of *Godot* in the context of Jewish history, see Shimon Levy, 'Godot, an Israeli Critic', *SBTA*, 29 (2017), 312-324 (322-24).

¹² See Lawrence E. Harvey, 'Art and the Existential in *En Attendant Godot*', *PMLA*, 75.1 (March 1960), 137-146.

aspect of the thing which matters when I reproduce these plays, you see. And that has to do with me when I expose myself in the way he exposed himself, is that right?

NJ: Yes.

WA: Is it indecent to use the word? [Laughter.] That's what keeps me going over and over again and that's why I am so fascinated and excited by this work with Lisa Dwan. This actress was recommended to me, with whom I met and who has a very very very personal, in *Not I* a very Irish, approach to the pieces, she's personally very much connected with these plays. I wouldn't say in which way, I even don't want to hear from her in which way. She loves to tell me, I say: 'Lisa, don't tell me, I don't want to know. Show it to me.' For example, the mother/daughter relationship in *Footfalls*, there's a very cruel business going on there and you can read it as a sort of liberation and you can read it as a sort of...for me it is a *murder* piece.¹³ May is killing her mother by inventing the Mrs Winter story, if it is present to you, the play, I don't know. She invents a story in the run of the play and that is a creation process which Beckett has gone through, liberating him from something and definitely not from his dog in Foxrock. There was somebody else he had to get over. These are the aspects of reality where it is connected, for me, as a real background and yet we kept it in twenty-nine minutes of the most subtle lighting and darkness and movement-thing, which is all poetic. I repeat again, you feel underneath in a really good evening – it changes, every theatre evening changes – you feel this connection of Lisa Dwan with her own stories, with her own sufferings, with her own anguished anxieties, everything is in there, everything in this 'muckball world'.¹⁴ Does it make sense? These are new creations and new inventions and not just 'Oh it says here turn left, and then walk over there', you have to fill it. By accident I read an interview with Daniel Barenboim the conductor, do you know Daniel Barenboim?

NJ: Yes.

WA: Berlin Philharmonic. He said you have to think with emotions and you have to analyse your emotions at the same time by rationalising them.¹⁵ And that's the secret of it. When I read my notes about *Footfalls*, for example, Beckett had such an insight into what good acting, for me good acting, requires. For example, he said to the German actress [Hildegard Schmahl]: 'You have to look at it from the sideline.'¹⁶ That is, she stands at the sideline and that has to do

¹³ See Mary Bryden 'Otherhood/Motherhood/Smotherhood: The Mother in Beckett's Writing' in *Women in Samuel Beckett's Prose and Drama: Her Own Other* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), 160-194.

¹⁴ Asmus is recalling Krapp's description of the planet as 'this old muckball'. The full quote reads: 'Everything there, everything on this old muckball, all the light and dark and famine and feasting of...*(hesitates)*...the ages!' Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape* in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 222.

¹⁵ Referring to Spinoza's comments in *Ethics* that we cannot be in complete control over our emotions (see proposition 7, part 4), Barenboim states: 'The ability to create emotional balance, though, is dependent upon the intellectual awareness of the problem. In this way Spinoza demands the integration of all human aspects in order to attain true freedom. In music, too, intellect and emotion go hand in hand, both for the composer and for the performer. Rational and emotional perception are not only not in conflict with one another; rather, each guides the other in order to achieve an equilibrium of understanding in which the intellect determines the validity of the intuitive reaction, and the emotional element provides the rational with a dimension of feeling that renders the whole human. Some musicians fall prey to the superstitious belief that too thorough an analysis of a piece of music will destroy the intuitive quality and freedom of their performance, mistaking knowledge for rigidity and forgetting that rational understanding is not only possible but absolutely necessary in order for the imagination to have free reign.' Daniel Barenboim, *Music Quickens Time* (London; New York: Verso, 2008), 38.

¹⁶ See Walter D. Asmus, 'Rehearsal Notes for the German Premiere of Beckett's *That Time* and *Footfalls*', trans. Helen Watanabe in *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (London; New York: Anthem Press, 2014), 253-264.

with all the Beckett stuff of reflection and self-reflection, and look upon your head as Büchner's Woyzech says: 'If I could once see/look upon my own head, what a gift that would be.' So that's my wish, to look once on your own head. But the sideline aspect has to do with the emotional, don't get carried away emotionally altogether at the same time you have to, you could say control it, but it's more than control, you have to observe yourself while you're doing it. That is what really good acting for me implies. It's not only these plays and there Beckett was fabulous... 'Oh,' he said 'I'm not a theatre man, I'm not a theatre director. I have to prepare for half a year.' That has to do with non-acting, with truth. Deep down it has to do with finding some sort of true value, not phoney acting, you see. At the same time as you are deeply emotionally involved you can, I wouldn't say control, you have it in your hand to play the music, to play your emotions, yes, to steer your emotions. The sideline image, I think it's fabulous.

NJ: I think for our audience there's so much here already discussed to begin to seed the ground for questions you might have. This audience is both public and expert. Some of them you will know already, but we have a microphone here, so I'm happy to open the floor to questions that you have for Walter or anything you'd like him to speak about next. This is very much, the rest of it is yours... And I have one to start us off. So while you're thinking of what you'd like to ask, I think in that last comment you started to make some thoughts more towards acting and directing generally, also beyond Beckett, what these forms mean to you and I would love to know if your work on Beckett has generated thought on what it is to direct, or what it is to act.

WA: Yes, I'm constantly, I mean not in concrete terms, but I've been teaching for example acting for quite some time and I think looking back I was horrible, not in terms of good teaching but in terms of...I tortured them, I think. But simply because of these reasons because I can't stand on the stage acting and overacting. I am not interested in acting any longer. Audiences, 'Oh they acted very well, yes it was good acting.' They don't have a clue of what the play is about. The actor loves this, 'Great, yes.' [Laughter.] So it has to do with a yes, reduction, simplicity, and so on, but it has been my cup of tea from the very beginning when I started to take an interest in theatre and accidentally, for example I'm interested in plays like Sophocles' *Oedipus* to crack the nut. *Oedipus* is even more difficult than to crack the nut of *Endgame*. *Endgame* is an impossible play. Beckett said himself you can't direct it he said it's impossible because it's so complex. You can only tackle this by *daring* to be simple, by daring to not force it, by daring to find out what it's all about. It needs courage to touch it and to be confronted with the complexity of a play like *Endgame*. Really, I mean it, it needs courage. You can't just do it as a theatre piece. Yes it's funny, there's Clov, we know him, there's Hamm, we know him and so on and so on. For me it's not possible any longer, so that's the torturing aspect...and to come back to your question, yes it is this honesty, this integrity of let us say the profession of acting which it needs for me nowadays. I know all the tricks, I know everything actors do in the theatre. I don't want to see this any longer. I want to see the real connection of these, not characters, of these persons, these personalities. I want to look into their heart. As Pinter said, Beckett 'hasn't got his hand [over] his heart.'¹⁷ I think there's this sort of purity that comes

¹⁷ The full quote reads: 'He is the most courageous, remorseless writer going, and the more he grinds my nose in the shit the more I am grateful to him. He's not fucking me about, he's not leading me up any garden, he's not slipping me any wink, he's not flogging me a remedy or a path or a revelation or a basinful of breadcrumbs. He is not selling me anything I don't want to buy, he doesn't give a bollock whether I buy or not. *He hasn't got his hand over his heart*. Well, I'll buy his goods, hook, line and sinker, because he leaves no stone unturned and no

across when you do it. And that is the magic thing with Lisa Dwan's performance, it comes across this honesty and purity.

NJ: Thank you. I think there's a first question here in front.

Audience: The simplicity that you mention is very interesting. We heard the other day, Alfred Brendel talk about music and we know that Sam Beckett was very in tune with music, he played himself the piano. He [Brendel] made an interesting analogy of playing not on top of the keys, but playing into the music as it were. In acting might there be a similar approach and how would you explain this, perhaps?

WA: I think there is an analogy, there is a connection with what I said earlier of this sideline thing and what Barenboim said, there's emotional thinking and at the same time there's analysing. I think that's a quality of Brendel's way to play the piano. Brendel is my favourite in this respect, for example, he does exactly this that is not bombastic, that is not baroque, that is never overdone. It is calculated and yet it is not calculated, it is done in a very subtle way and I don't know, you can give advice, whether you can really teach it or not I don't know, either you have it or you don't have it. That's difficult, it's difficult. You can't make a school of it, you can't teach it. That's what I meant, for me in my life I tried to teach it too much and tortured the poor creatures by telling them to do less and do away, do away, do away, and they didn't know what to do at all because they only could scream and shout and 'Raahhh' and bark...[Laughter.]

NJ: Okay, we have a question from Laura Salisbury at the back and then I'll take Jonny [Jonathan Heron] and then Mary [O'Byrne]. Thank you.

Laura Salisbury: I was just thinking about Samuel Beckett's piano playing and apparently he had the really infuriating habit of playing with the sustaining pedal depressed all the time, you'd expect him to have the mute pedal depressed. Apparently it was always the sustaining pedal which used to drive people he played with bananas, crazy. I was thinking about this in relation to something that you said in the documentary about *What Where*, about the difference between analogue recording technologies where you can get sustaining effects and fuzziness and noise and quite a kind of sliding effect, and digital technologies which of course are much more on/off, they're either there or not.¹⁸ I wondered – it seemed to me this capacity in Beckett's work to want to open up things, to not necessarily want to say it's this or it's that, but to open up the space in-between – whether you can say something about how you worked with those digital technologies to produce the effect that was much more, as you said, poetic and open I think than one might expect from a digital image.

WA: Does that refer to *What Where* now?

NJ: Yes.

WA: Yes. I'll try to explain. For example, we dulled the images, the brightness of the images, the precision of the images. We tried to reverse it a little bit, but the other thing for me at the same time is a sort of timing. Timing was torture and timing is of course crucial and timing in

maggot lonely.' Harold Pinter, *Various Voices: Prose, Poetry, Politics (1948-2005)* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 58.

¹⁸ The *What Where* film and documentary with Walter Asmus can be found here: <https://vimeo.com/152509694> [accessed 26 July 2018]

music, as you all know, is crucial. To find this split second slower or longer, we did the editing over months via internet we didn't do it in a studio. Ben [Denham] sent me a version and I was sitting there for hours watching it, looking at it and I had to make the decision after weeks sometimes, oh let them fade in, you know, a split second, two frames or five frames earlier or later and so on. Then, you look at it again the next day and you say, no this is not right. It depends so much, I'm going back to Barenboim and the interview, it depends so much on your own state of mind in these things that it really drives you mad to make up your mind, to make a decision at times. You're tired in the evening, you look at it and you think it's wonderful, it's melancholic, you indulge in it. The next morning you look at it wide awake and say: 'Oh God is this boring, we have to have it twice as fast.' [Laughter.] This is, I think, where you need time for it, you need time. If you can do it at home over weeks it may drive you mad, but it is exciting to do it. This is demanding and if I may come back to the theatre, the theatre nowadays doesn't give you...you have four weeks for a Shakespeare production or for a *Waiting for Godot* production, you are supposed not to make errors, you are supposed to be in good shape everyday, the actors are, you are, you can't experiment. Referring to our production with Lisa again, you see Lisa, there were times where we had, we were not on top form, but we took the time and we were fighting for the time to sort out things. When we do the lighting for *Footfalls* it takes me hours and hours, but if you have a schedule: two hours rig the lights, focus the lights, find the level of the lights, all in two hours or three hours, it is impossible. It's the same with the lighting in *Footfalls*, you come back the next day – and I have had this experience, thank God, with Beckett so I have some strong person above me who tells me that I'm right to insist that I have to look at it again, maybe it looks different tomorrow. I have experience, I try to say this in the documentary too, that he had the same problems and that's why I say theatre is an impossible business because you are forced to – 'tak, tak, tak' – to do it and no matter what, the curtain has to go up. And these plays are so subtle, they are music, they are so subtle they have to be rehearsed. Beckett said that *Footfalls* is all movement, it's all light, it's all pace, timing, and the music, then there's a little bit of text, but that takes nerves, nerves, nerves and time, and as we mentioned today, the courage to fail and to walk out of the theatre leaving people behind who think this guy is nuts, he doesn't know what he wants, he has no idea what he wants.¹⁹ Today he says 'No, this way is right,' the next day he says 'No it's wrong,' and so on, but you have to face this. Me, perhaps I'm too stupid to do it otherwise.

NJ: Thank you. Our next question is from Jonathan Heron from the University of Warwick.

Jonathan Heron: I have a question about reducing. You spoke in the film today about reducing in Beckett rehearsals. We heard Anthony [Uhlmann] speak earlier in the week about, in the manuscript for *What Where*, a process of elimination and we are aware of other practitioners, Harold Pinter describing Beckett as 'exquisite Minimalism' and Ian Rickson recently talking about directing Pinter in *Krapp's Last Tape*, this reducing down, reducing like reducing a stock or a distillation, so could you give us some practical examples of how you reduce in rehearsal?

WA: May I extend this documentary perhaps? That's easiest for me because Beckett did it, I didn't. For example, in the beginning we didn't know how to position the face of Bam, the large face on the left side and the small faces. The first idea was to have a grey rectangular on the right side, on the left side the face, and in this grey we would fade in the faces so we had a

¹⁹ In a letter to Ruby Cohn sent from Ussy on 30 November 1975, Beckett wrote: 'The "pacing play" (*Footfalls*) is new. Very short.' Beckett in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1966-1089*, vol. 4, eds. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, Lois Overbeck (Cambridge: CUP, 2016), 413.

black background on the left side and the face of V coming out of the black and a grey playing area as you would have on the stage, a lit rectangular playing area. Then we had a black *passepourtout* around this grey area so we had this small strip, grey and so on. This was all reduced until we found out and Jim Lewis (the cameraman) found out, why don't they come out of the black, the black of the television box, which was so normal so that was, for example, a form of reduction. Then we had them as – when they are defeated when they come back, these small faces – we had them bow their heads as the sign of being defeated and then we found out the bow of their heads would shift the focus of the camera, it would distort the whole image. So we, it was my invention, I said: 'Why don't they just come back with closed eyes?' So he bought this, closed eyes you know, when they come back. It's much simpler and quite striking because the death mask is not distorted, it's emphasised even and then Bam was, no, Voice was speaking... Well, for example, Beckett had the idea of spring, summer, autumn, winter to go up with the Voice to summer and go down autumn, winter with the Voice. Then Voice had his eyes open, the first step was he had his eyes open when he was speaking and eyes closed when he was listening. 'Cut.' Then he had his eyes open all the way through. 'No. Eyes closed,' you see. Then Jim Lewis said: 'Oh Sam, I liked the open eyes.' Beckett said: 'All these gadgets, all these gimmicks. We have been striving for simplicity for one week now, but it's yours Jim. It's yours. It's all yours, do as you like.' [Laughter.] And then we had another go with the eyes open and then Sam said: 'No. Eyes closed.' He made the decisions. That went on day after day after day, there are more examples which I don't recall, but that was really, the background is that he could afford for ten minutes' peace having two weeks of shooting time. You don't find this anywhere in the world nowadays, so he could afford to develop it.

NJ: I think we have one more question there, Mary at the back. We are very close to time, so I think this will be the closing question and then I think we'll just have a final thank you.

Mary O'Byrne: Thank you. Walter, I had the privilege of attending your production with Lisa Dwan in Galway and I was absolutely rooted to my chair during *Footfalls* particularly. There are just two things I wanted to maybe hear your thoughts on. One was – I have been at the production of *Footfalls* a number of times, but on this occasion I don't think I ever experienced anything of the cruelty and intensity of May recounting the story of Mrs Winter and the daughter and how Lisa just, for me, had two completely different voices for Mrs Winter and the daughter. I'm intrigued as to how that was arrived at. And then the second thing I wanted to ask you about was the lighting and my experience of the stage image with the lighting was that there was a shadow, a black shadow under Lisa's head and for me that black shadow was, could've been, her mother, her other, someone's other. It was really beautiful and again, if you can share a little bit on the development of lighting during the play. Thanks.

WA: Thank you very much, that's really wonderful. That's how it, for me ideally, has to work if I go on in the theatre. Thank you, really. That's an exchange between what happens on the stage and what the audience ought to experience. I'm not the master of your experiences, I'm not the master of the audience's background, I'm not the master of *anything*, but if it works this way - it can work for other people in another way, a different way - it is most fulfilling to do the job, for me. That's what I call poetic, then, because it is reading a poem and everybody reads a poem in a different way and reads it five times or ten times or so on, and discovers new things. As Beckett, without coquetry said when an actor said: 'I discover new things every time,' he said: 'So do I.' You are the discoverer in this case, so thank you. The mother's voice, that is really Lisa's thing, but it has to do with what Beckett said, 'May only knows her mother's

voice.’ So her mother’s voice is different and is similar. The syntax is very similar to what her mother said, for example. The play is very simple, it’s a simple play: a girl who hasn’t been out since girlhood and has only her mother around her adopts her mother’s voice ... I have a little girl of six, my partner, ten times a day she says: ‘Now she speaks like you. Oh, that’s you, that’s you, what she says now’. If we have achieved a touch of this, the symbiosis between the mother and the daughter... but to say it again of course it was long rehearsals and discussions – it may differ from evening to evening – but of course it is intentional to have this difference between mother and daughter and find out this subtle difference and so on. The lighting thing is quite... nothing intended. I was fighting for the light to grow darker, darker. It was technically impossible, so we have the shadow maybe you’ll see it, I hate it, but if you think it is mother it’s fine. [Laughter.] I’m exaggerating, I don’t hate it, but that’s what I mean: ‘Let her up, let her down’, the poor guy, the lighting technician, ‘Can’t we get rid of it, can’t we have it more subtle, can’t we have the transition between dark and light without noticing any hard break here, shadow...’ These are the things which at the time take hours and so if this your interpretation it’s absolutely valid for me, it’s wonderful. That’s how one ought to read the pieces, that’s what I think.

NJ: Well, due to time constraints for both our public members and our students we will have to hold our discourse here. I do want to say that I’m sure we could fill many more hours with the passion, the knowledge, the anecdotes, and the wisdom of practice that comes through you I think independently as an artist, not as a mediator or representative of Beckett, but as an artist yourself. And so it’s a huge honour for us to hear from you in your voice and your experience, the way that you’re doing it, so I would just like to extend our gratitude from the Summer School, Walter, for coming and speaking with us and speaking with the students, and the staff, and the audience. And I would like to thank our audience for coming out, asking good questions and showing your attentiveness. We do encourage you to see the rest of the Summer School programme, we have one more event this evening, John Minihan who is here as well, the photographer of Beckett that many of you will be familiar with, is speaking tonight at the Samuel Beckett theatre at 6pm.²⁰ I would just again like to give a very warm thank you to the director Walter D. Asmus.

WA: Thank you.

²⁰ John Minihan, *Samuel Beckett: Photographs by John Minihan*, with a forward by Aidan Higgins (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1995)