

Transcript of Samuel Beckett: A Conversation, with Ian Rickson, and Mark Taylor-Batty, at the Minghella Building, University of Reading, October 3rd 2013, 7.30pm.

Please note that this transcript has been lightly edited by Anna McMullan, Ian Rickson, and Mark Taylor-Batty.

Welcome and Introduction by Sir David Bell, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Reading.

My name is David Bell and I am the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Reading. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this event this evening and to those of you who are visiting the university for the very first time, a special welcome.

We are celebrating both the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Beckett International Foundation and the launch of a new Beckett research project. Although I promise not to keep you too long this evening because you are all eagerly waiting the main event I think it is just important to spend a moment or two describing a little bit about our Beckett history, decidedly one of the most significant jewels in the University's crown, our Beckett archive, itself set up in 1971. I guess that was the first step in the beginning of our now proud and internationally renowned presence in the Beckett world. Now the world's largest collection of resources related to Samuel Beckett, this archive is recognised as being of national and international importance by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. It was created by a small team of passionate Beckett scholars; spear-headed, I think it's fair to say, by the now Emeritus Professor James Knowlson and Jim is here this evening with us. Its success, in Jim's own words, was done to co-operation and collaboration as well as love and enthusiasm with a small amount of bare-faced cheek thrown in for good measure. Of course, more than anything else, the friendship and support from Samuel Beckett himself was our most important asset. His patronage and generosity, donating many of the items in the Collection, made ours a very special archive indeed. Our scholarly pursuit of all things Beckett continues and perhaps not surprisingly the Collection grew from year to year but it wasn't until 1988 that the Charitable Trust that is the Beckett International Foundation was established. Although just a year before his death, and at the age of 82, Beckett supported the founding of the Trust with its mission to further the study and appreciation of the work of Samuel Beckett.

We have, of course, an ever-growing team of established and emerging Beckett scholars. They work in close collaboration with a star-studded patron list of Beckett lovers from the literary and theatre worlds, and again, the unstinting support of the Beckett family. The Beckett International Foundation at the University of Reading

really is a wonderful legacy celebrating the life and work of one of the 20th century's most influential, artistic and creative minds. So we've come a very long way from when that small band of enthusiasts first put Reading on the map with Beckett Studies. It's a great opportunity tonight to have a further conversation about Samuel Beckett and his work, but there's another reason to be here tonight: Staging Beckett is an Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project at the University, here at Reading, in collaboration with the University of Chester and the Victoria and Albert museum. This project is designed to develop the world's first comprehensive database of productions of Beckett's plays in the U.K and Ireland. It will be examining the role of Beckett in shaping modern theatre practice in the U.K and Ireland, and this project will enable a unique picture of British and Irish theatres to emerge through their approaches to staging Beckett. So another exciting step in this exciting field of Beckett Studies.

That is more than enough from me so I am delighted to introduce our speakers this evening. Acclaimed theatre director and former Artistic Director of the Royal Court, Ian Rickson, who himself staged Beckett, working with Harold Pinter on Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* at the Royal Court Theatre in 2006 and then on TV with the BBC. Dr. Mark Taylor-Batty is a leading expert on the careers in theatre of both Pinter and Beckett. What better combination could we have, ladies and gentlemen, to explore the challenges of bringing the work of Samuel Beckett to life on stage.

Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome Ian Rickson and Mark Taylor-Batty.

(claps)

Taylor-Batty: Thank you, thank you for that welcome. We're here tonight to talk mostly about this fabulous production of *Krapp's Last Tape* and there is a magnificent picture of that [of Harold Pinter in *Krapp's Last Tape*, photographed by John Haynes, projected behind the speakers] to upstage us.

Rickson: John Haynes, you may know, the photographer of many, many plays, really changed the way we see theatre and I think he drew so much from Beckettian sensibility because many theatre photographs before John Haynes were set up, broadly lit, shots of people in relationship and that's absolutely fine, but John was the first to really embrace the void and the darkness, with figures in a kind of Rembrandt-like, palpable presence. John had retired, I think, maybe ten years before we did *Krapp's Last Tape* but I was thrilled, as was Harold, that he photographed it and it

looks pretty good, the photograph.

Taylor-Batty: Yes, Harold wasn't the only one to come out of retirement for that photo in fact.

Rickson: Yes, yes. It was a kind of farewell for him.

Taylor-Batty: I thought we might start by talking a little bit about your relationship with Harold just as a kind of context for that production. And if I understand, the first piece of theatre you ever saw was a piece by Harold Pinter. Is that right?

Rickson: Yes. My family weren't theatre-goers but they liked Max Wall who had already played Krapp at the Riverside. Max Wall was at our local Greenwich Theatre doing *The Caretaker* and so we were all taken along - I would have been twelve I think, thirteen - because of Max Wall. I remember *not* laughing and particularly the kind of dark, melancholy, mad quality of the play and being really affected by it - particularly the speech about electric shock treatment. I didn't *yet* know that my Mum's mum had had electric shock treatment and there was something very profound about seeing it as a first play. So that was my first encounter with Harold. Then when I ran the Royal Court I found him a very generous mentor and he kept an eye on me. I asked him to direct quite a few plays which he didn't do but we produced *Mountain Language*, and *Ashes to Ashes*. He was very warm and fascinated in the international side of the Royal Court. I interviewed him a number of times and I think powerful people like that can have an aura around them of being kind of frightening and aggressive but that's as much about what we project onto them. I found that if you related to Harold quite directly and you didn't - well I was going to say you didn't flatter him - but you *did* have to flatter him to a point (and then make it go a point further), but on the other hand, you had to be robust with him and challenge him - I think he liked that. So that's how I got to know him.

Taylor-Batty: So your first professional relationship with him, was it that production of *Mountain Language* or was it earlier?

Rickson: Yes. He'd directed a play called *Oleanna* [by David Mamet] when I was at the Royal Court, but not running it, and then Katie Mitchell directed *Ashes to Ashes* and *Mountain Language*. Then I really got to work with him on this although I've directed lots of his plays.

Taylor-Batty: I was going to ask you, you made your name at the Royal Court as Artistic Director, and indeed before that, doing what the Royal Court is famous for - supporting emerging new writing - and your relationship with that work was at the centre of your profile. I remember in an interview with you earlier on in the last decade when you said you'd never directed any classics and since then you've had Pinter, Beckett, Chekhov, Shakespeare. If you're going to do the classics they are the ones to start with. What was it that made you migrate towards people like Beckett and Pinter?

Rickson: Well, initially it was the Royal Court's fiftieth anniversary, and the question was how could we celebrate the unique identity of the English Stage Company and Jocelyn Herbert [stage designer and major presence at the Royal Court until her death in 2003]. Bill Gaskell offered a production of a James Joyce play. I thought we could map out a theatre lineage of Joyce, Beckett and Pinter, because when you read lots of plays you realise how influential that tributary is for writers, but in the end due to rights and other complicated things, it felt really exciting to do *Krapp's Last Tape* and celebrate that part of the theatre's history. And yes, it was the first 'old' play I ever directed. I think when you leave a theatre like the Royal Court it's hard to find good new plays - if you're running a new playwriting theatre you can choose the best plays - and so there's a kind of logic as a freelancer to doing classics. But also, perhaps, as you grow older, those classics, you feel more inspired to take them on, and if you're really prepared to do *Krapp's Last Tape* or *Hamlet*, I think you have to be willing to go somewhere deep. I think I became mildly clinically depressed doing *Krapp's Last Tape* and I remember reading (it's not your fault Jim!) Jim Knowlson's book [James Knowlson's biography of Beckett, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, London: Bloomsbury, 1996] and reading as much marginalia as I could on Sam, and it deeply affected me. I think the great writers really take you there and maybe when you're younger that can be harder. He was very interested in alchemy, wasn't he, Beckett, like Jung - and the idea that it's in the nada, the darkness, where real meaning is. If you're willing to go there, actually it might be challenging, it might be upsetting, but it's going to be, well, like alchemy, it's going to be transformative, something's going to be made from it. And I think my directing work since has been really transformed through Beckett and Pinter.

Taylor-Batty: So Beckett and working with Pinter opened up your career as a director?

Rickson: Yes, very much so and my craft I think.

Taylor-Batty: You talked about your approach to plays and reading around them. Very

often in professional theatre there's a kind of suspicion of academia and scholarship and a separation between practice and those of us who write and talk about it.

Rickson: Yes.

Taylor-Batty: And you seem to me to embrace scholarship; you approach scholars to talk about productions. I read somewhere that you invited a Yeats scholar into *Betrayal* rehearsals, for example. So you really value the kind of input you can get from that minutiae that a body of people can offer. Is there a specific example with working on Krapp?

Rickson: I think if you are a keen reader and your mind has been blown by, I don't know, reading Foucault or Leavis or anybody, and you realise that a work of art is more than itself, that it is also a manifestation of the soil that begets the writer, then you'd be mad not to draw on the world of academia where there are so many bright people. When you draw a dynamic route between those people and theatre practice it's exciting. It might seem random that a little reference to Yeats can lay the trail. But having Roy Foster come in on *Betrayal* was so useful for us. The three actors, for example, loved hearing him illuminate what specific choices of Yeats would mean for the characters. There are the words the characters say: the tip of an iceberg, but underneath it, all that other work is being done by these conversations. I think with Krapp I didn't need to bring those sorts of people in to Harold as Harold was incredibly well-read and he had lived inside Krapp since probably 1958. I certainly drew from a lot of the work that Jim [Knowlson] had written, that regiebuch with all of Sam's notes [Beckett's Production Notebook for *Krapp's Last Tape*, UoR MS 1396/4/16, published as *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, Vol 3: Krapp's Last Tape: with a revised text*, edited by James Knowlson, London: Faber and Faber, 1992]. I did bring quite a lot of that material into rehearsal and Harold would love that. He loved me reading out the break-up letter between Sam and one of the women that haunt the lyrical female tone of Krapp. He would love random things I'd throw at him that I felt would get us closer to mining the centre of the play. A risky one was, I love Johnny Cash, and before Johnny Cash died, he recorded a very bleak song, 'Hurt', and there's a video of this song 'Hurt' which is really beautiful and very resonant. It's got a kind of deep sadness and it's very defiant. I know that Harold is not interested in this type of music, but I gave him this and I said, 'I think there's a little tangential link to what's happening in Krapp'. He watched it, he came in, he was responsive and you know, it's lovely that sort of thing, as it allows you to attack the play in a sort of suggestive, creative way. That's what practice is, isn't it? It's about playing, exploring and collaborating...

Taylor-Batty: There's a great back story with Harold and Samuel Beckett.

Rickson: You should talk about that.

Taylor-Batty: Well there was a famous story about Pinter coming across a copy of *Murphy*, in a public library. He had read an extract of *Watt* in *Poetry Ireland*, a magazine, and fell in love with it. He saw that the copy of *Murphy* hadn't been taken out for ten years and stole it. I thought it was just a story and one day when I was left alone in his office I checked the desk and on the shelves and there it was. He then had an exchange of letters about *Waiting for Godot* with friends who'd been to see it, he was on tour in Ireland so couldn't get to see it. He defended *Waiting for Godot* without ever having seen or read it and that letter has recently been published. He became great friends with Donald McWhinnie who had recently directed *Embers* and a dialogue ensued between those two. Then he read some Beckett on the radio at the BBC. They became friends when *The Caretaker* was put on in Paris in 1961 by Roger Blin and Jean Martin who were of course Pozzo and Lucky and Hamm and Clov in the first Beckett. That was when their careers were bonded and they became friends.

Rickson; He got very bilious and drunk, didn't he, Harold, and Sam went off in his 2CV to find the one chemist that had bicarbonate of soda at 3 am.

Taylor-Batty: And they would write to each other, they would send each other their scripts, and I think Harold would always write back and say 'that's wonderful'. And then Sam would write back and sometimes offer criticism as well. There's one famous example with his play *Landscape* where, apparently, Sam wrote back, full of positive comments, but said 'I think you need to lose that section'. And Harold didn't take criticism very well and went on with it. Then Peter Hall, one day after rehearsals, contacted him and said 'I think it's going well apart from this one section, which I want to talk to you about'. No one ever tells Harold to cut anymore, but I think he got the hint, with two people seeing it – I don't know what section it was. How much of that relationship, how much of that respect, how much of that knowledge of Beckett and his work seeped into the rehearsal room?

Rickson: Well I suppose you've got 'the score' which is the play, and then you've got the actor who is a kind of 'medium' channelling the score. And if the medium is relating to the material in a very real way and in an inspired way it's really amazing in the room. You really felt Harold was channelling his idol and his comrade. I found that incredibly moving because it was towards the end of Harold's life - the whole dilemma of should we be putting somebody 75 years old through the ordeal of performance? He'd come through cancer but then had this awful skin complaint

which really affected his mouth and his speech. But I think he drew from Sam 'I can't go on, I must go on' and, I hope Edward [Edward Beckett, Beckett's nephew, and executor of his Estate] won't mind, but when we did a couple little things like cutting the bananas, Harold would say 'I spoke to Sam last night – he said it's ok'. He did feel a sort of dynamic pathway to the source and people like Barbara Bray who was very close to Beckett would come over and see it. A great inspirer for me is Jocelyn Herbert who was of course very close to Sam and one of the first things I did when I took over at the Royal Court was to go and see this woman (who changed the face of Britain design for those of you who don't know her). I sat in the little hut that Sam would sit in, in Jocelyn's garden, and I felt that I was trying to draw from the best of Jocelyn and the best of the Royal Court where the play is the thing and the design must articulate its centre without getting in the way. Jocelyn had designed the Leicester *Krapp's Last Tape* which looked really like our production which was very spare, haunting and sort of elemental. So it's great to stand on the shoulders of other people. I think that's what Harold was doing every day. He felt like, well he said, 'this is my swan song', but I think it was a palpable manifestation of love, about artists and that man.

Taylor-Batty: He actually said that?

Rickson: He said that. Yes.

Taylor-Batty: I'm just thinking forever about that relationship and the way that, in coming to that swan song and coming to that end, and almost merging with Krapp, mentally, there was another dimension. One of the things that's really plagued Harold's career is this constant reference to Beckett and 'his being not quite as good as Beckett' and in his shadow. I wonder if there was anything that made him hesitant about doing that production, as this thing had always haunted him? Especially in Europe, when he died, I did a survey of all his obituaries around the world, and throughout the ones in Europe was this reference to Beckett.

Rickson: Not so much in England?

Taylor Batty: A little in England but not consistently.

Rickson: I think I made the call at quarter to twelve, saying would you think about Krapp, and I think at half past he rang back saying can we meet for lunch tomorrow and then he said in the first three minutes 'I want to do it'. Harold's such a distinctive element and I hope in this instance strong enough to make Beckett even stronger. I

remember, we worked hard on it, for months before rehearsal. He explored doing it in an Irish accent, for example. But it felt to me more honest and pure if it's an 'unmediated' Harold doing the play with the things that were in Harold's own life: loss, drink, a sense of how the early work still looms. Krapp refers, doesn't he, to his book that comes out with three library copies which is a bit like the novel you were saying a young Harold stole from the library. So I think he warmed to all those sort of ghosts and tributaries running through, making the thing more itself.

Taylor-Batty: I want to go into the rehearsals and talk a little bit about what was going on in there. One of the significant additions to that production that is not in the script was the electric wheelchair. Now that was practical. To what degree did you find that worked with that set, actually embellished it in any way, and to what degree was it a hindrance that had to be negotiated?

Rickson: I think he could have done it standing but I think if you glimpse the frailty of the performer too much it can tip you out of the play, and what I liked about the wheelchair was how it evoked a man entombed on his last day. We don't know what's happened to the world outside the room, yet inside, with all this equipment - a big bulky wheelchair, an old reel-to-reel tape machine (in our production a slightly more modern one) - felt to me eloquent about where the sensibility of that man was, and it gave Harold an empowerment to play. When Krapp talks about the fire in him, you want to feel the fire in the performer, whether you're doing *Footfalls* or *Not I* or *Krapp's Last Tape*, whatever, at a really strong level. Otherwise, the work with Beckett can tip into a minor key and we lose the vital defiance of his characters. 'I can't go on, I'll go on'. Is that the right quote? 'I can't go on'?

James Knowlson: 'I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on'.

Rickson: Exactly. So, yes. I think it's empowering for the performer to deliver himself.

Taylor-Batty: So the actor is trying to catch this history rooted within them which they are finding themselves in dialogue with. Also the actor has to deal with all this physical stuff which couldn't have been easy in Harold's case?

Rickson: Well a) he's a technophobe, a light switch was a problem! b) he's got big chipolata, no, sausage fingers and c) just the idea of remembering all the minutiae of tasks was demanding enough. He had 'spool school', as we called it, everyday, which was quite tense initially: was he going to be able to do it?, but gradually he did, in

fact every day throughout the performances, he practiced rigorously. I think what's amazing about this play specifically is that it's a very pure acting challenge. The best actors are the best listeners, a lot of what happens is very pure. I thought about Lucian Freud and the way he captures presence. And how Lucian Freud-like this portrait play is. One night I watched the play through the back of Lucien Freud's actual head, as he had come with the idea to paint Harold, and there he was, listening to these words of presence and imagination. If you can really imagine the girl in a green dress or a green coat, actually, on a platform, or you can remember that amazing thing of the black ball in the white dog's mouth, you can really imagine what the audience sees. Plays don't really take place here and they don't really take place there, they take place in a sort of charged zone in between. If you really take the actor there to think in pictures I think *we* see, and that's part of the strange alchemy of theatre.

I suppose I am a Stanislavskian and I'm looking at what the objective is and I'm trying to help the actors think in pictures. Harold, as you've catalogued, is 'I don't care a *** about what's happening offstage, it's just what's happening on stage'. There was a kind of grappling to come to a way of working together and there was a real 'fight or flight' day for me on day three. We both love *Partie de Campagne*, the Maupassant story, as well as the Jean Renoir film of it, and there's a section of Krapp drawn from the idea of a boat on water and something happening. On this afternoon I was asking him to really take me through, I can't remember whether it was reeds or irises or something, I remember him saying: 'I've known this play for fifty fucking years, don't ask me about it', and I said 'I have to'. And I really had to stand up to him. I was shaking under the table but having done that I found him then very supple the next day, and we found a really trusting way of working. The irony is I felt my job was often slowing his thinking down and getting him to really relish the pauses and the silence. Sometimes I felt his internal clock was quite fast. Everyday he would come in at quarter past two and we rehearsed from 2.30 to 6. The Royal Court is quite a raucous place and we were rehearsing in the old transport cafe and it was shrouded in muslin to make it like a cave or private chamber. Eighty excitable kids who were coming for a work shop with the Young Writers Programme would be told to be quiet because there was this important man inside. So the whole theatre, the environment of it, would tune into these three hours. The only person who wouldn't observe this vow of silence was the African woman who worked for London Underground, who'd come up on her fag break and sing, but, actually, it went with Krapp because he has that whole thing about a woman singing and then whether he could sing.

Taylor-Batty: Did Harold learn anything about the play? You talked about how he kind of was 'I know this text', it's part of his biology if you like, and yet you have to steer him as an actor, if that's the right approach. Did he appreciate the text differently as a result of that? How did he express that?

Rickson: Yes. I think he really did. I found the notes on the production in my father's attic on Sunday and my assistant had written down things Harold had said and she had him one day saying: 'I'm really starting to fall in love with this old bugger'. I think there's nothing like being inside the performance, being scaffolded by Beckett's amazing sense of rhythm, the living nature of a prop, a dictionary, a spool. I think it was very rejuvenating for him to get so much more through being an actor.

Taylor-Batty: I remember watching it and it was partly historic. This was an event the like of which I had never been at and knew I probably wouldn't experience again. That's simply because you had Harold Pinter on stage in Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*. It was almost like a dream come true. And I wonder to what degree you were aware of and wanted to manage or just let flow whatever results that was going to bring to the production?

Rickson: I think there's something about the synergy between those two artists and their cultural footprint that had to be allowed to just 'be'. The Theatre Upstairs [at the Royal Court] is an old attic. It has a special reverberative quality because of all the risk writers have taken, their collective failures and adventures, so the performance echoed with all those special ghosts.

Taylor-Batty: One of the very moving things about this production, and we alluded to this earlier, is that here is a writer towards the end of his life playing a writer towards the end of his life. It was a swan song as you said, he was aware of all those resonances, and that made a sea of connections between, not just Harold and the text, but Harold and that relationship he's had with his loss. The reflections on mortality within the play must have had some quite significant meaning for him given that he had faced death and beaten death in the past, and had written about that, and here he was performing a confrontation with mortality.

Rickson: I think plays are about lots of things, but most of the best plays are about one thing which is loss. Perhaps, plays began through song and the need to lament. Krapp is just shot through with loss. It is a tone poem of loss, but on the other hand he seems to be exploring when and why he bids farewell to love. He wants to revisit that moment which is another deep source of loss. When Beckett writes Krapp he's mourning his mother, his brother, his lover, his ex-lover. Have I missed anyone Jim?

James Knowlson: His father.

Rickson: His father of course.

James Knowlson: His father and above all, Ethna McCarthy whom he'd always loved but she married his best friend. She was pronounced terminally ill two months before he began this play.

Rickson: You can really feel that, can't you?

Knowlson: The first person he sent it to, by the way, was Ethna McCarthy. The girl with big black eyes, incredible eyes.

Rickson: Harold would share his own losses in rehearsal. He could be very candid. He talked about weeping at his son's bedside, thinking about the possible misery to come, almost like a Beckett line. When we had our tea break, you're in this fugue, this sort of Beckettian state you get into, and you want a theatrical anecdote or a joke or something. My assistant Lyndssey Turner and Harold, they each knew Yeats backwards so there would often be a Yeats poem or a terrible joke. He would really fasten on to any nourishment in any of these anecdotes or stories. I told him some stupid story about nearly cutting my finger off, a sort of unconscious castration. (Why am I even telling this anecdote, it's embarrassing!) But I told Harold. Anyway, basically, afterwards, the nurse chatted me up, which of course is a male fantasy, and actually took me home and Harold said 'Tell me that story again'. Somehow the play and the process has summoned this sensuous nurse. Wasn't Beckett's mother a nurse? I love the way he just would steal and take what he needed to make his performance as alive as possible. Please cut that thing out about the nurse!

Taylor-Batty: Moving on to some of your notes from that production. When you looked through that document is there anything that stands out particularly about this?

Rickson: Well, I loved thinking of ways to feed Harold. He knew more about Kafka than I did but I remember finding this quote which felt redolent of the play. We were trying to make his desk an island in a sort of black sea and everything on it is freighted with dynamic weight. I love that Beckett notion that the stage must have a maximum of verbal presence and a maximum of corporeal presence. With so few objects you can really charge them up. So when Krapp knocks the tapes to the floor it's a kind of attack on himself. Anyway, I remember reading this quote to Harold and Harold jotting it down and loving it:

'You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table, desk, and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait.'

Beckett said 'all theatre is in waiting'.

'Be quiet. Simply wait, be quiet, still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you, to be unmasked. It has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.'

I loved sharing that with that and frankly I loved knowing a bit about Kafka that he didn't know. Also, we examined these letters that Jim provided, for example, his break-up letter to Pamela [Mitchell] when Beckett says 'All I want is to be in the silence'. And we would talk about the ritual of theatre, that you come into this dark room alone and in a crowd. Krapp himself says, 'With all this darkness in me I feel less alone.' Full stop. 'In a way.' I think that's a full stop, it might be a comma, but I think it's a full stop. It was very rewarding attending to the minutiae of punctuation - how just the placement of a comma, or a pause is pregnant with possibility. That detail of course runs throughout Harold's work, doesn't it? The way a beat or a colon can do something to the consciousness of an audience. What else? We explored Manichaeism: the dynamic between dark and light that the playwright was so interested in. I am just the person in the room gently helping Harold pick his way through all these things as deeply and meaningfully as possible. Everyone should do this play! I think it's his most accessible play, it's amazing, and so modern. There is a new word that's recently come into our language - Beckett loved dictionaries, didn't he - the 'selfie', a picture you take of yourself. Perhaps this is what is happening here, someone is taking a selfie, examining their life, and trying to shore up the ruins of it.

Taylor-Batty: Okay, so I think we have a little time now to get some questions from the audience about this production and its relation to Pinter and Beckett.

Jonathan Bignell: Many of us will know the production from the T.V version, and one of the things T.V. does best is close-up, and segmentation of the action, so I wonder how you think that version worked out in relation to the theatre version?

Rickson: To tell you the truth I'm a little furtive about it because I think theatre doesn't sit well on television. There's something about the strange ritual of performance which is unforgettable. So, for example, with this play *Jerusalem*, everybody wanted to make a film of it except for myself, the main actor, Mark Rylance, and the playwright Jez Butterworth, because we feel it would only limit it. I think this film is at least a very good record of Harold's performance which is the point of it. There is a virtue in a television close-up but there's something strange about the proscenium where you can create a more heightened sense of intimacy by the way an actor is engaging with an audience.

What do people feel about *Krapp's Last Tape*? Has someone seen it 19 times? Is it a zone you want to go into? How accessible is it? Is it major art which needs to be seen again and again?

Audience: Yes.

Rickson: And why?

Knowlson: May I? I'd just like to say that I thought that the film was brilliant. And I'd like to say that your production was the most amazing - and I'd seen all of them up to that point, well the important ones - but I thought it was the most amazing production that I have ever seen - really because of all the details you went into, but that's just the preface to my question.

Rickson: You're very kind.

Knowlson: You made some wonderful decisions, really, and I wonder first of all, I'd like to ask you about that little gap between sentimentality and lyricism. I thought you got that absolutely bang on and that must have been quite tricky. You also gave him an acerbic side – then there's the post-script question about the Rembrandtesque lighting by my friend John Haynes who was involved here. It's also wonderfully lit and I think that from that point of view you clarified things and particularly with the cubby hole, at the back, so it's all seventeenth century Dutch. So: first lyricism and sentimentality, secondly lighting and not cutting him off from the real world because you've got sounds effects going on in the beginning, not self-indulgently, but discreetly.

Rickson: I think the essence, as I understand it, of George Devine [Artistic Director of Royal Court 1956-65], who loved Sam, and Jocelyn Herbert is: the writer is the primary artist and the rest of us are interpretive. This is not necessarily a fashionable view at the moment where many people see the director as the primary artist, as an *auteur*, with the text something to play with. Of course there are an amazing group of fantastic *auteurs* who produce superb work, but I come from that Royal Court tradition and therefore I just steeped myself in as much Sam as possible. I read about each production he did and it seemed to me there was an intensifying and a deepening the more he directed the play, where he cut out sentiment, cut out the clown-based, slapsticky shtick which can be sentimental. It felt to me that where he was going the more he did the play, was to a far more visceral, stiller, lyrical place than a sentimental place. He put these death-looks in the play where Krapp looks behind him and senses mortality. I'm getting goose pimples remembering them and they're very rarely done I understand, and so thrilling when you basically trust Sam. And the lighting? Theatres are full of modern lights with noisy fans and low drones that

upstage the performer. The kit on the last but one play I did had such a big carbon footprint that the actors couldn't heat in their dressing rooms. On Krapp we used old lights that had a heavy, liquid quality, and very slow cues. That's how you can achieve, by the simplest means, something really painterly. I don't know what you think about that, Sophie [Sophie Jump, award winning British scenographer, granddaughter of George Devine], but they knew what they were doing – Phillips [Andy Phillips, lighting designer at the Royal Court], Herbert!

Bill Prosser [artist]: This influence of painting stops it from being monotonous. Is there any particular artist who you think influenced the way you dispose of artifacts on the stage?

Rickson: I think Lucian Freud, Rembrandt, and I really love this Belgian painter called Borremans who is brilliant on objects in space and has a strange theatrical quality. We put all those up in a room.

Anna McMullan: I'm wondering what you took from this production as a director?

Rickson: I think every young director should direct Beckett because he's such a great teacher. He teaches you that meaning is in form. Sensibility and feeling are also encoded in rhythm, so ignore this at your peril. I'm currently doing this play *Mojo*, and in it there are two bins in which a body is cut in half. I'm trying to direct this play like I'm directing it for the first time. I haven't directed it for eighteen years. We'd been moving these two bins around the space. Now I know the playwright Jez Butterworth hadn't read *Endgame* but maybe he'd seen the cover of *Endgame*? Anyway, where these bins ended up, purely by chance is where they are in *Endgame* - downstage left, just sitting there. I thought is that a bit too on the nose? But actually, he was right, it's where bins *should be* on stage. What else? He really makes you mine the moment. Perhaps what we want to feel when we are watching a play is that every moment is dynamically alive. Not surfed over. I know his plays can feel that there is not a lot of latitude for the director in terms of interpretation, for good reasons. If they are like recipes they really are 'put half a teaspoon of turmeric in, stir three times'. You have to open the handbag, in *Happy Days* there, and close it there. That's what you have to do, but cooking those recipes can be really rewarding.

Taylor-Batty: They're not easy, are they?

Rickson: No they're not, but the alchemic, distilling of things is a great lesson to learn.

Everett Frost: I'm *un sauvage* (fierce) about messing with Beckett and everything you're saying this afternoon is music to my ears, but I wonder about other playwrights, many of whom I respect a lot. Can you mess with, say, Brecht or Wesker or Brian Friel or, well, you pick with Shakespeare. I wouldn't mess with *King Lear* but I wouldn't mind *Much Ado about Nothing*, or something like that. In that kind of environment when you're coming at a playwright that isn't... with Beckett there's no more room to do anything other than what he wants, Pinter is almost the same way....

Rickson: You could say there are other texts that are classics that are more open texts. You could do a production of *Woyzeck* in very different ways. I think there is less latitude because of the precision of the aesthetic in Beckett and that's what's special about it.

Matthew McFrederick: You spoke a lot about ghosts and tradition in particular there, and there were 27 years between when Beckett was performed at the Court in 1979 with Billie Whitelaw doing *Happy Days* and your production of *Krapp's Last Tape* in 2006. I'm just wondering in those interim years, in terms of the influence of Beckett, did you find he seeped into the imagination of other playwrights and directors in particular McDonagh or McPherson or Sarah Kane?

Rickson: Yes I think so. I think those writers, particularly Sarah Kane, are very, very well-read. When you read a lot, you want to - it's like a diet isn't it - you want to extract the nutrients from the best diet possible. Sarah loved Beckett, and I think her work is not derivative, it is itself, it has learnt lessons that are passed down. I think he would be very proud of that inheritance, actually. I think Harold wouldn't mind in those obituaries you mentioned, he wouldn't mind coming second to Beckett. You'd have to ask him.

Taylor-Batty: You remind me, talking of Sarah Kane, there's a fantastic line in *Blasted* when the Soldier says, 'tell them that you saw me, tell them that you saw me', paraphrasing that line from *Godot* and yet she turns it into something else, makes it compelling. Something about the ethics of the media. She condenses it with that Beckett line, that's one example.

Rickson: She was twenty-four when she wrote that.

Audience member [friend of Matts?]: I've never seen a production sadly but judging from this one and the photos, it looks like you've taken away the red nose that Krapp

has. I also noted that you took away the banana which is the most obviously comic moment of the play. Also there seems to be a preoccupation with death and an emphasis on death. I'm just wondering, because Beckett's incredibly funny as well, and I'm not saying death can't be funny, but how much thought did you put into the comic aspects of the play?

Rickson: Harold said he was allergic to bananas. *I think* he was lying. We wondered, and this was a bit arrogant of us, whether the slapstick in the play was used to smuggle in the modernism in 1958. The more Beckett directed it the more he took away the white shoes, white face, red nose, the shtick. He purified it and that also felt very true to Harold. But I think our production was funny, there was this edgy coil of tension with a sardonic humour. Once, to my shame, and this shows you must always trust the play, I said to Harold 'When Krapp relishes the word "spool"', I said, 'let's explore what that is and don't feel any pressure to follow Sam's instruction there'. He said 'I'm going to do that, it's one of my favourite things' and he really did 'spooooool'. People laughed a lot and I think if you're going to take people to a place of mortality they need the laughs as release but I'm sure most other productions are much funnier. I'd seen John Hurt's production at the Barbican about six months before that and it was beautiful, very different. I guess you've got to do your own Krapp according to who you've got and where you are. Quite a lot of young actors are now recording it, the 37 year olds.

Taylor-Batty: I've done that.

Rickson: Great, we'll look forward to your one.

Taylor-Batty: I think that's all we've got time for thank you very much.

Rickson: And thank you.