

Beckett After Beckett

BY JONATHAN KALB

"I see nobody on the road," said Alice.

"I only wish *I* had such eyes," the King remarked in a fretful tone.

"To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too!"

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

Samuel Beckett's centennial year, 2006, generated all the expected hoopla internationally: symposia, lectures, exhibitions, articles, memoirs, new Beckett editions, new theater productions, and much more. Also as expected, the main focus of this activity was the state of his reputation. Is he still relevant? Does he still speak to us? Was his appeal faddish, his importance time-bound? Cooler heads might well have added one other question: has there ever been a time since Beckett's major works appeared when they were *not* up for reassessment? His continuing relevance has been the explicit or implicit impetus for an unbroken string of articles, essays, and books dating back to the 1960s. He may well be the most reconsidered dramatist in history.

One reason for the constant circumspection is that Beckett's afterlife effectively began while he lived. His genuine humility notwithstanding, he was a revered and monumental figure who could hardly sneeze



Samuel Beckett

without reinforcing his legend. His aversion to interviews, his refusal to be filmed, his increasing brevity of expression, his graveyard humor, even his notorious efforts to rein in theater directors, all contributed to a premature graven image, and idols always beg to be toppled. Another reason, though—and I say this respectfully as an occasional contributor to the academic Beckett industry—is that the fundamental contours of his remarkable oeuvre, the broad outlines of its basic artistic gambits, have been plainly visible for decades to all interested observers. Short on major revelations, the Beckett industry (a victim of its own zeal and diligence) has been mainly filling in details for some time, and in the sped-up media age lack of explosive developments too easily reads as lack of excitement.

Anyone who accepts that Beckett is a writer of epochal importance probably understands that the problem of reassessment is most fruitfully viewed as a mirror. The works, at this point in their history—surrounded by mountains of fine criticism, objects of envy and one-upmanship around the globe—are far more interesting as measures of us and our shifting world than we can be of them. What possible use, one wonders, is yet another sheaf of naively opinionated reviews of *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame* other than as an opportunity to analyze the naiveté? I have been following productions of Beckett's dramatic works for more than twenty years, and the single constant in that time has been that, done well or poorly, they have always shown up the quality of ambition in those who produce them and the depth of expectation in those who attend. This essay is an exploration of Beckett's reflective presence at the current moment.

Let me begin with a few descriptions of recent performances, which are useful as springboards. The first is a production of *Not I* starring Marian Seldes and directed by Lawrence Sacharow. It was part of a multi-play evening called *Beckett/Albee* in New York City, one of the most high-profile American productions of Beckett in many years. *Not I* is late Beckett. Its sole speaking character is a mouth, called Mouth, who pours forth an astonishing torrent of words, partly fragmentary, barely coherent, in a rush, as if thrust into speech after lifelong silence. In Sacharow's production, Seldes was not masked narrowly around the mouth, as the text specifies, nor did she speak the monologue in a hurry. Half of her head was visible, destroying the illusion of disembodiment,

and she spoke in a slow, deliberate, wholly rational manner, coloring every phrase with impressively “understood” inflections and insinuations. When she paused to deny the first person (“What? Who? No? She!”) she seemed to be speaking on a cell phone.

Neil Jordan’s version of *Not I* and Charles Sturridge’s of *Ohio Impromptu*—both done for Michael Colgan and Alan Maloney’s widely publicized “Beckett on Film” series—had comparable problems. Jordan’s film began with the beautiful, young, healthy, smiling Julianne Moore, in a slim-fitting black outfit, entering the set and seating herself on a stool. After a quick cut to her mouth, she delivered Mouth’s monologue with minimal sense of panic, agitation or discomfort, displaying teeth so straight and white that they struck an Australian critic as a plug for “American dentistry.” In Sturridge’s *Ohio Impromptu*, Jeremy Irons supplied the superfluous acting, playing both roles in this play for two identically dressed men seated at a table (long black coats and long white hair), his presence duplicated through technical wizardry. Irons’s juggernaut of earnest sighs, blinks, fidgets and nods rendered the enigmatic encounter depressingly comprehensible.

In Joanna Settle’s production of *Rockaby* at the Old American Can Factory in Brooklyn, the “prematurely old” woman rocking herself “off” on a pale rocking chair was cast with an attractive young woman, and the set was a bay window looking out at countless real windows in the New York cityscape. The gratifications of youthfulness and site-specific literalism thus trumped the grimmer satisfactions of decrepitude, solitude and “going down” before imagined and possibly imaginary “other windows.”

Just one more example: Joanne Akalaitis’ *Beckett Shorts*, an evening of four brief plays at New York Theatre Workshop. Here, Mikhail Baryshnikov defied expectations in *Act Without Words I*—a traditionally laborious mime in which a hapless, mute figure is comically tormented by mysterious offstage forces—by playing the role without mussing his neatly coifed hair or rumpling his natty sport jacket and trousers. Each play on the program was followed by a slow-motion, celebrity-worshipping video clip of Baryshnikov performing some unremarkable action just seen, as if the evening’s live experiences required completion or validation by mediated ones.

Why recount events so clearly deserving of merciful oblivion? Because they demonstrate an illuminating common pathology. Yes, it is true that good Beckett has also been abundantly available in recent years. Many of the other “Beckett on Film” productions were excellent, as were most of the Dublin Gate Theater productions from the 1990s that inspired them. The truth is, however, that productions like the ones just mentioned win the most attention, partly because of their potential for scandal (Beckett’s Estate can be as strict as he was concerning the demand to follow his stage directions), and because they connect to the project of ongoing reassessment mentioned before. By assuming that a certain atextual razzle-dazzle is needed to accommodate the impatience of media-age couch-potatoes and mouse-clickers, directors imply that both they and their audiences are unequipped (or no longer equipped) to appreciate Beckett’s severe art served up straight.

Interestingly, twenty years ago, when I published my book *Beckett in Performance*, nearly all the instances of directorial improvement on Beckett that I found were with the early plays (*Godot*, *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, and *Krapp’s Last Tape*). Akalaitis’s 1984 *Endgame* in Cambridge, Massachusetts, set in a burned-out subway tunnel rather than the empty grey room Beckett specified, was only the most famous among dozens of examples, because it provoked the author’s public ire. The productions just mentioned, however (and many more I could cite), are all of late plays—the punctiliously crafted stage tableaux from which introspective words emanate, which were more or less sacrosanct territory while Beckett still lived (he died in 1989). The front of effrontery has evidently shifted. The biggest Beckett scandal of the 1990s involved a late play: Deborah Warner’s 1994 production of *Footfalls* (1975) at the Garrick Theatre in London’s West End, which the Estate closed down because the central character, May (played by Fiona Shaw), wore a red gown rather than a grey one and wandered about the auditorium rather than pacing mechanically to and fro in the strip of dim light the script stipulates.

Now, I am not a purist concerning Beckett’s stage directions. My feeling is that attempting to protect any drama from the slings and arrows of outrageous posterity is a mug’s game. Theater practitioners must be free to try out new ideas and fall on their faces if those ideas are bad, or theater art will stagnate. Sure, most of the bright new ideas applied to

Beckett are weak compared with his, but not all of them are, and some good ones (such as George Tabori's marvelous open-rehearsal versions of *Godot* and *Endgame* in Germany) have come from directors who tested out very bad ones (Tabori's *Happy Days* banally substituted a bed with feather pillows for Beckett's elemental mound of earth). Furthermore, Beckett himself was inconsistent in granting permission to adapt and alter his works (saying yes to friends such as Tabori and others who had access to him, no to others through his agents), and his Estate risks the appearance of hypocrisy in continuing that inconsistency.

Having conceded all this, however, I return to assessing results, and the lessons are particularly pointed with later plays done (as the early plays always were) by directors and actors who crave satisfactions from the world of show business to which Beckett was utterly indifferent. Beckett's later plays are the pure distillate of his theatrical aesthetic, his severest and most enduring challenges to received expectations. They approach his signature themes of nothingness, the imagination, and the void through extreme actorly restriction (speaking from urns, frozen in a rocking chair operated offstage, or with one's head strapped to a masking apparatus). Contrary to what some prominent Beckett doubters have claimed (Peter Brook and Charles Ludlam among them), expressive freedom for the actor is possible in these works, but it can be exercised only from within the prescribed circumstances of *real* physical and vocal limitation, or the performances lose their haunting effect.

The effect comes partly from the basic absurdity of reducing a supposedly entertaining theatrical circumstance to such meager extremes (sharpening the classic Beckett anti-spectacle), and partly from the non-metaphorical aspect of the actors' palpable strain and exertion, which links the works with endurance art. More than anything, though, the effect comes from forcing the performer and spectator onto a shared plane of heightened concentration about the "mine" of emptiness Beckett drolly called "what not," and if actorly denial is false or absent, if comfort or vanity are obviously held more dear than artistic sacrifice, then the scaffolding of that plane collapses. Which is why productions that respect the author's instructions (like those in *Beckett/Albee*) can fall flat as easily as ingenious productions (like Settle's or Sturridge's) that seek improvements with directorial gimmickry: in either case, the experience is ruined by excessive worldliness.

Of course, the Western societies that most celebrated Beckett during his lifetime were always egregiously worldly, awash in consumerism and its attendant ills of celebrity-obsession and compulsive trivialization when most of his plays first appeared. His drama has been, for many, an oasis in that desert—its spareness and quietude, its wit's-end, last-ditch humanism were blessed refreshments in the face of media-swarm and rampant cynicism. One recent theory of Beckett (from Martin Puchner) is that his plays are essentially closet dramas that acquired unique theatrical currency. Puchner sees the plays' core impulse as anti-mimetic and anti-theatrical, which is overstating the case a bit, but they are unquestionably bastions of resistance to the dominant, ego-driven, shallowly ironical theatricalism of Western culture.

In December 2006, *Time* magazine famously designated "You" as its person-of-the-year, and the media critic Brian Williams wrote: "It's all about you. Me. And all the various forms of the First Person Singular. Americans have decided the most important person in their lives is . . . them, and our culture is now built upon that idea." In the era of YouTube, MySpace and Reality TV, it should be no surprise that Beckett's star should be waning. His works deconstruct rather than flatter consumer culture's most precious conceit of an integrated, self-sufficient, self-invented ego. Also, now that Beckett's plays no longer qualify as new or fresh, actors have little prospect of achieving the sort of specialty stardom in them once enjoyed by Jack MacGowran, Patrick Magee, Billie Whitelaw and David Warrilow. Also, directors chasing celebrity today have much more to gain from leaving their personal stamp on a play than from illuminating it.

Influence is obviously an elusive object, particularly with a major figure. It seeps into the culture at large, diffuses everywhere, and becomes for all practical purposes untraceable. Despite knowing this, in the winter of 2006 I set out to gather some information about Beckett's direct influence for a centennial article in *The New York Times*. My approach was to interview seventeen working American playwrights, some quite prominent (the transcripts were published in the January 2007 issue of *Performing Arts Journal*), and many of their remarks support the ideas I've raised. Almost all the playwrights described Beckett as a decidedly ambivalent influence, while claiming to revere him.

Here is Christopher Durang: “[Beckett] meant a lot to me in the 1960s and 70s, particularly as a world view, but it’s actually a world view that’s hard to live with.” Richard Maxwell: “I have a kind of appreciation for what I imagine to be rigor and that rigor [seen in Beckett] seems to belong to another time. It probably shouldn’t, but I don’t feel like you see it that much, at least in terms of playwriting. I don’t know, I don’t have it.” Richard Foreman: “I respect Beckett and obviously he was of great importance, but in a way I resent the fact that people tend to use him as a club to beat down other avant-garde efforts, because comparisons are made where people say, ‘Look, Beckett is avant-garde but he’s also very humanistic’ — as opposed to these other people who are just too crazy and too cerebral and what have you.”

In a 1995 lecture/essay called “On Pretentiousness,” Tony Kushner articulated what I take to be the core terms of this ambivalence when he called Beckett “that matzoh of a playwright.” Kushner wrote:

Baking lasagna has long been my own personal paradigm for writing a play. A good play I think should always feel as though it’s only barely been rescued from the brink of chaos, as though all the yummy nutritious ingredients you’ve thrown into it have almost-but-not-quite succeeded in overwhelming the design. . . . A good play, like a good lasagna, should be overstuffed: It has a pomposity, and an overreach: Its ambitions extend in the direction of not-missing-a-trick, it has a bursting omnipotence up its sleeve, or rather, under its noodles: It is pretentious food. . . . There is, of course, art that is not pretentious, just as there are of course good foods that are not overstuffed. There is, for instance, the matzoh: thin where lasagna is fat, flat where the lasagna is thick, cold and dry and desert food where the lasagna is wet and steamy and Mediterranean, somber where the lasagna is meretricious; poverty versus richness. [Like Beckett] The matzoh is not pretentious; it is hard, brittle, transportable . . . The matzoh is a spiritual discipline, and it rebukes me each time I contemplate it that I am, or believe myself to be, incapable of such discipline.

Kushner went on to say that this sort of pretentiousness, overstatement and histrionics, which he identified with, were specifically “American tropes,” so I asked him in my follow-up interview whether he meant to say that the quintessential American drama was necessarily very full and thick and not spare or thin like Beckett. He answered:

I wouldn't say that, because I don't know that there is such a thing as the singular “American drama.” There's the emptied out version and there's the overstuffed version. David Mamet certainly represents one development of American drama, in the Pinter/Albee tradition, which is obviously very indebted to Beckett. But there's also a tradition in American fiction of an emptied out or pared down exploration of American inarticulateness. There's a mistrust of language in this country and some really remarkable writers have explored that.

In other words, for Kushner, the “pared down” aesthetic that does have artistic traction in America is representational, a branch of American realism, “an exploration of American inarticulateness.”

He has a point. We do have playwrights in America who have assimilated and reprocessed Beckett to remarkable effect. Some examples are Foreman, W. David Hancock, Rinde Eckert, Wallace Shawn, John Jesurun, Will Eno, Len Jenkin and Mac Wellman, who have employed slippery or deconstructed conceptions of character, tested the limits of theater's metaphoricity, or experimented with a pulverized sort of “pared down” language. These writers, however, have remained alternative figures whom the Off-Broadway and regional theater systems mostly ignore. The great majority of playwrights who have thrived in those systems — Beckett epigones like Mamet and others — fit Kushner's criterion of representationalism, as do most of the dramatists who have achieved post-Beckett prominence in Western Europe.

This stylistic dominance was the subtext of a broadside published in November 1988 on *The New York Times* op-ed page, called “*Godot* and Other Trash,” written by the American playwright Robert Patrick. Patrick upbraided all the snobby advocates of “trash” writers like Beckett, whom

he called “a pleasantly lugubrious, collegiate skit writer.” “It’s going to take patience to restore rational standards,” he wrote. “We have turned the earth over to idiocy and we may not turn it back. After all, once you’ve given Samuel Beckett the Nobel Prize, what are you going to give to Lanford Wilson, Harvey Fierstein and Tennessee Williams? The moon?” The true cause of anger and fear here was the prospect of theater art that successfully resisted Kushnerian pretentiousness by winning coveted recognition by the American media machine.

Beckett, strangely enough, still seems to stand above frays like this one. For many theater people across the globe he now represents a dream of emancipation from the relentless demands of the fast-paced entertainment world, or a site for absorption of complex, arcane or monastic artistic aspirations that no longer seem reasonable, or the apotheosis of a certain sort of noble failure (“Fail again, fail better”). Impressively, he has so far avoided ubiquitous efforts to brand and trivialize him, though one wonders how long he can hold out. The March/April 2006 issue of the journal *Business Horizons* published a 6,500-word article by a marketing professor named Stephen Brown entitled “Fail better! Samuel Beckett’s secrets of business and branding success,” which reduced Beckett to eight superficial qualities that the author recommended would-be high-fliers should study and emulate in order to succeed as managers and entrepreneurs. Brown’s bullet points: (1) think differently (2) persevere (3) be brief (4) accept contingency (5) embrace ambiguity (6) don’t fear nostalgia or retrospection (7) question the premises of stories (8) seize authority by refusing to coddle customers. Clearly, no shame or hesitation attaches anymore (if it ever did) to the wholly functional use of great literature.

Yet another example appeared in the multi-page spread celebrating Beckett’s centennial in the prestigious German weekly *Die Zeit*. One of the lead articles, by Evelyn Finger, was titled “Die Pointe heisst Hartz IV” (“The Punch Line is Hartz IV”—Hartz IV is a controversial recent law in Germany that placed new limits on social welfare entitlements by restricting unemployment benefits). The article began, “The Beckettian heroes of today sit from 7 a.m. on in offices and wait for the future,” and its general point was that Beckett’s work perfectly conveyed the terror and menace of the government’s heartless new policies.

All the examples I have mentioned, admittedly, are only grains,

but as Clov says, grain gathers upon grain until one day, suddenly, there's a heap. My overall point is that the accumulated heap, looked at broadly, is decidedly inhospitable to the likes of Clov. Others share my disquiet, as it happens. During 2006, the veteran Beckett scholar S.E. Gontarski lectured at numerous international forums to explain his conviction that the Beckett Estate's strictures were endangering Beckett's reputation. Gontarski wrote (his lecture was published in *Modern Drama*): "The inevitable question that arises . . . is whether Beckett is thus rapidly becoming theatrically irrelevant. Put another way, will the year of celebrations of Samuel Beckett's work in the centenary year of 2006, including innumerable productions, presumably all authorized, be its headstone as well? Put another way, is there a future for Beckettian performance?"

These are good questions, but the Beckett Estate is only part of the problem. Beckett today is caught in a triple squeeze: the Estate hampers free experimentation; triumphant media culture with its apotheosized individualism hampers understanding and appreciation, however well the works are done; and the forces of functional degradation stand eager to brand and belittle the corpus. We don't recognize, most of us, that Beckett's works are criticizing their critics and reflecting more on their producers than on their author at this point, because we are too busy fretting and watching over our own narrow interests. Reassessing him still carries an ego-boost, so few years after his public triumphs. Inevitably, though, "we are read by works we cannot resist," as Harold Bloom wrote about Shakespeare.

The avant-garde playwright Mac Wellman, a lifelong Beckett admirer, said in his interview with me: "I don't know if it is a time for Beckett. I do know that a lot of people claim to like Beckett and don't really. . . If it were up to me I would retire *Endgame* and *Godot* for ten years," until a time when the "savagery and cruelty" in them aren't overwhelmed by the "saccharine and faintly sentimental" aura of modern classics. My only rejoinder to that is: why stop with those works? Perhaps the greatest service those who care about Beckett could do him in our time is to stop producing all his plays until conditions arise again in which "nothing" (as the Unnamable perceived it) may be relished in a theater: "Ah if only this voice could stop, this meaningless voice which prevents you from being nothing, just barely prevents you from being nothing and nowhere."