

Tell Me about the Worms!

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For more than three decades, I have taught an occasional graduate seminar on Samuel Beckett and the theatre art he both seeded and directly inspired. My seminar has had various insufficiently inspired titles related to heritage, after-life, and “the Beckettian” (I’ve never hit on the right variant of “I’ll go on”), and its syllabus is fluid, absorbing a shifting cast of younger artists who I think are significant and whose work could never have existed without Beckett. These are generally major figures whose innovations seem to me unimaginable without his precedent, but some lesser-knowns find their way in too. Questions of direct influence are unimportant in this course, for the simple reason that Beckett’s impact on theatre is so massively diffuse by now as to be all but untraceable. It’s easy to imagine all sorts of significant creators utterly unfamiliar with his work, now and in the future, who are nevertheless deeply affected by it.

When Bonnie Marranca invited me to contribute to *PAJ*’s valedictory issue, I thought of my experiences in this seminar, which I always look forward to (every time hoping to find a better title!). I’ve often felt that the discussions in this class, conducted at roughly six-year intervals, really amounted to a periodic check-in with what was vital in contemporary theatre. The list of artists and artworks we’ve considered over the years contains many of my theatre pinnacles—those all too rare evenings when I have felt the theatre (a chronically depressed, insular, and marginal art) to be not just relevant or moving but suddenly and anomalously essential again, necessary, and utterly irreplaceable by any other form.

Early academic discussions of Beckett’s effect on younger artists in the 1960s and 70s often led with either the dubious category of the absurd (to corral figures like Stoppard, Shepard, Kopit, and Guare) or the subject of spare language and frequent uses of silence (to include others like Pinter, Storey, Albee, Mamet, and Fornes). I never bothered with the absurd in my course, finding it embarrassingly reductive, and have generally glossed that first generation of “post-Beckett” playwrights because most have had plenty of attention. But I’ve always found the discussion of laconic language and slow pacing—which connects to the larger Chekhovian

tradition—much more engaging, as that tradition’s vigor and longevity are continually affirmed by the arrival of figures like Sarah Kane, Richard Maxwell, Will Eno, and Annie Baker. I will come back to this topic in a moment but first want to explain some pressures that shaped my seminar when it began in the 1990s.

At that time, no academic inquiry into Beckett could avoid the subject of politics and the question of whether his resolutely ambiguous and polysemous work (set in what Bert States called “generic” times and places) was politically evasive. Pinter himself had taken a strong political turn then, Mamet was already courting controversy, Caryl Churchill and Adrienne Kennedy had turned topically explicit, and I felt a responsibility to include political attacks on Beckett by writers like Georg Lukacs and Darko Suvin on my syllabus along with the famous political defense by Adorno. Surprisingly enough, it was the Brechtian Heiner Müller who surfaced as our first substantial case study suggesting how a contemporary theatre-maker might be both politically cutting-edge and meaningfully Beckettian.

Müller was an art star in the 1980s and 90s, one of the most frequently produced playwrights in the world, with PAJ Publications as his American publisher. An East German and committed Marxist, he first distinguished himself with edgily topical Berliner Ensemble-style plays but later turned to Western avant-gardist techniques after being banned in his country. He developed into a complex, extremely well-read thinker and poet whose writing confronted both history and the psycho-social self (pitting individual against communal identity in the tradition of *Lehrstück*, for instance, and also questioning the integral self in the spirit of deconstruction). At first his relation to Beckett was casual and flippant. The play that launched his international fame, for instance, *Hamletmachine* (1977)—a densely referential, defiantly gnomic work that combined a quasi-Shakespearean drama of political equivocation with a quasi-Artaudian battle of images and words—ended with a character being wrapped histrionically in gauze, much as Hamm is stagily re-covered with his handkerchief “old stancher” at the curtain of *Endgame*.

But a remarkable change occurred in Müller with *Description of a Picture* (1984), an eight-page text that grew out of his collaborations with Robert Wilson. This piece was profoundly rather than superficially soaked in Beckett. Beckett’s late dramas are short and built around meticulous stage pictures, striking and nearly motionless tableaux from which ambiguous flows of words emerge whose relation to the pictures the spectator must puzzle out. The most demanding of these is *That Time* (1976), whose central image is a disembodied head listening to streams of fragmented, possibly post-mortem memories that never resolve into an integral narrative, establish a singular speaker-identity, or orient us in time. Drama is created only in our efforts at imaginative construction. *Description of a Picture* works exactly the same way. A dense block-text describing a nearly still, dreamlike picture suffused with enigmatic violence and a looming “frozen storm” (a trope for the

stagnant history that was frustrating Müller then—he had called capitalism “the ice age”), it uses the memory of an ambiguous, disintegrated “I” as the site of a mental drama spectators must “create” in the course of listening to it. “A landscape beyond death . . . the explosion of a memory in a dead dramatic structure.”

Wilson’s 1986 production of this piece at the American Repertory Theater (presented as a “Prologue” to his adaptation of Euripedes’ *Alcestis*) was an astonishing event, like a fifteen-minute cryptic pregnancy, containing no images described in the text. The audience sat almost in darkness (a random tableau of posed actors and artifacts briefly appeared in very dim light) while overlapping offstage voices spoke the description from start to finish without emotion. Most people around me sniffed in puzzlement or rolled their eyes when it ended, but I was stunned by the incongruous grandeur of what I’d seen, its extraordinary restraint, the sheer scale of the weird kaleidoscopic monotony and dynamic stasis it evoked. The end of history troublingly served up as mental “pure cinema.”

In his famous and monumental 1999 book *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann surveyed the enormous field of Western experimental theatre, swelled by then into a bewilderingly diverse arena. Lehmann courageously proposed a set of unifying values and principles for this work, considering a vast range of boundary-stretching playwrights, auteur-directors, performance artists, and groups that he deemed cutting-edge because they all somehow resisted the “artificially imposed” organizing strategies and internal logic of “drama,” seeking instead freer, more open, less coercive platforms for theatrical action. In making this claim, Lehmann anticipated certain objections: chiefly, that his theory might seem to depreciate political engagement and advocacy. That is why he was careful to specify that “the postdramatic theatre is a post-Brechtian theatre,” meaning:

not a theatre that has nothing to do with Brecht but a theatre which knows that it is affected by the demands and questions for theatre that are sedimented in Brecht’s work but can no longer accept Brecht’s answers.

Counterintuitively, in such a theatre, figures like Müller, Wilson, or even Beckett, may be Brecht-heirs. Lehmann considered the Brechtian parable dead, because it was patriarchally manipulative, but he was certain that theatregoers in the post-modern era, distracted and savvy, awash in information, mistrustful of all authority, could be reached politically through non-ideological means—that is, through the host of indirect, oblique, and subtle strategies used by all the experimentalists he discussed (ranging from Jan Fabre and Robert Lepage to Tadeusz Kantor, The Wooster Group, Richard Foreman, Theatre Angelus Novus, La Fura dels Baus, and many, many more). I have recommended Lehmann’s book to my Beckett students ever since it appeared, not because I agree with everything in it but because I find

it to be a remarkably useful foil for naive politics—exactly the thing to slide across to the sort of student who arrives pre-outraged at Beckett, due to an unexamined conviction that worthwhile art must always necessarily refer explicitly to worldly ills (the everlasting “craze for explicitation” Beckett’s Director complains of in *Catastrophe*). Lehmann’s permanent merit is the massive trove of alternative models for political theatre he describes, citing Müller and Beckett as basic touchstones.

Another complexly political artist we began discussing in the late 1990s is Suzan-Lori Parks, who burst onto the American theatre scene then with a series of plays (including *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, and *The America Play*) with precisely sculpted, jazz-inspired language that fused Black vernacular with a profusion of literary references. Like late Beckett and Müller, Parks’s early plays also posed daunting challenges to directors due to their lack of straightforward stage directions and strangely depersonalized characters. She deployed layered cultural metaphors and compound metatheatrical tropes involving facsimiles, imitations, and minstrel references (e.g., characters called Before Columbus, Black Man with Watermelon, and Old Man River Jordan) to explore desire, despair, and the insidious lure of racial stereotypes and historical myths. Her fondness for Beckett was plain, in numerous direct allusions (e.g., a Hamm-like woman who presided over her room in a wheelchair, multiple characters enduring purposeless waiting), and also in repeated uses of the device of the absent center.

The absent center is a signature Beckett technique. From the title character who never arrives in *Waiting for Godot*, to the unheard gossip in *Come and Go*, to Mouth’s unmentioned trauma in *Not I*, to the reason May is pacing in *Footfalls*, to the unexplained “danger zone” in *Quad*, Beckett’s dramaturgical habit was to organize action around some missing central element, often redolent of death, that comes to feel like the real subject of each work. Parks’s *The America Play* (1990-93) is a unique historical variation on this tactic.

The play’s very setting is a missing center: “A great hole. In the middle of nowhere . . . an exact replica of The Great Hole of History.” In this place, a Black man called the Foundling Father describes rising in the world from gravedigger to a popular Abraham Lincoln impersonator working in an arcade where customers pay to shoot him, and then his widow and son speak about him while digging for artifacts and relics of his life in the “hole.” *The America Play*’s theatrical vocabulary—and therefore its orientation to its history—is richly Beckettian: chiseled dialogue, gravid imagery, a preoccupation with the dying and dead. The Foundling Father and his family are trapped in an earthy, generic nowhere that could be a negative of Winnie’s mound, a flagrantly metaphorical place that binds them to a harmful past even as they strive for “archeological” accounting and recovery. Their repetitive, incantatory, grimly comic backchat has the same cruel

aftertaste as Didi and Gogo's, the point obviously being that they too have kept their appointment, at devastating cost to their souls.

Another writer with a sharp political edge my class sometimes discusses is Wallace Shawn, whose connection to Beckett is meaningful though not as deep. Shawn has always been a determined critic of the comfortable, educated social class he hails from, which happens to be the urban intelligentsia that generally attends serious theatre. In his early plays from the 1970s (e.g., *The Hotel Play*, *Our Late Night*, *A Thought in Three Parts*) he took the well-worn avant-gardist tack of trying to shock this audience, with porn, casual sex, and black humor about degeneracy and hypocrisy. Then, in the 1980s, he abruptly abandoned that approach, beginning a new body of work built on monologues and direct address to the audience. These plays (e.g., *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, *The Fever*, *The Designated Mourner*, *Grasses of a Thousand Colors*), which he has often performed in, now comprise an entirely new idiom.

Each sets out to confront its bourgeois audience with its own moral complacency through intense, intimate, and absorbing stories told by characters very much like them. The speakers are familiar, well-spoken people who shock us undemonstratively with, say, chat about their blithe sympathy with fascistic ideas, or confessions of numbed indifference to the execution of intellectuals and artists in a dying democracy, or wrenching nausea at the poverty and violence in a dictatorship supported by the U.S. The Beckettian moment is in the almost complete absence of enacted drama—the actors just sit at a table, or in an armchair, or lie in a bed—as well as in Shawn's assumption that intensive listening can be a dramatic act in itself. His remark in a note to *The Fever* could apply to all these plays: "the drama of the event should really occur in the spectator's mind, not in the performance." Interestingly enough, these works are gripping in part *because* of their humble physical circumstances. They need that pared-down simplicity to drive home the horror of their nightmares, and their stillness is one reason Beckett hovers behind their crepuscular gloom.

The political work of all these extraordinary artists notwithstanding, I have long felt that Beckett's greatest legacy to the theatre had little to do with any subject matter or formal innovations per se but rested rather in the model he established for the art's continuing existence. Beckett is the quintessential analog theatre artist in the digital age—the most vivid and authoritative reminder we have that the art at its degree zero can still deeply matter to us. This reputation is mostly due to the way his work always integrates the passage of real time, the fact of the dying actor, and basic human fallibility into its action. Felt duration, mortality, and things going wrong are always fundamental, never just tonal or atmospheric in his dramas. In fact, their wryly humorous way of grappling with these matters is the essence of their connection to Chekhov, and also to the Wilder tradition of the quotidian

and mundane that Jacob Gallagher-Ross calls “theatre of the everyday.” My nickname for this current of theatre is the School of Worms—“Estragon: Look at this muckheap! I’ve never stirred from it! . . . You and your landscapes! Tell me about the worms!”—and this school includes a number of exceptional playwrights and companies working today.

I’ll mention two companies, Forced Entertainment and Nature Theater of Oklahoma, which both operate on what might be called a diminutive Beckettian paradigm of punctured pretension. They make theatre out of ordinary behavior and chance-generated material, and their missions connect to John Cage’s utopian vision of an environmental theatre that would be going on all the time, blending seamlessly into everyday life and incorporating the accidental along with the aesthetically planned. This is an art of the hapless, the accidental, the awkward, and the ordinary that deliberately courts boredom and is sometimes structured around arbitrarily assigned rules, so the shows are like games no one can really win. I’ve found many of these companies’ pieces extremely moving and even joyful (e.g., Forced Entertainment’s *First Night*, *Bloody Mess*, and *Speak Bitterness*; Nature Theater’s *Rambo Solo*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Life and Times*), but I’ve sometimes struggled to explain why to those who haven’t seen them.

In her 2011 book *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, Sara Jane Bailes offers a theory rooted in Beckett and the concept of failure as an ethic and creative “modality.” (Her focus is Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, and Elevator Repair Service, but her theory would plainly apply to Nature Theater too.) Surveying Beckett’s many remarks on failure (including the most famous and abused, “fail again, fail better,” now reduced to a trendy slogan by self-help gurus), Bailes locates the power of this art in its contrariness, its nervy refusal of all mainstream culture’s common indicators of success; for her it is a poignant dissent against vacuous narratives of victory, progress, and wholeness. I agree that this is part of the effect. There’s a lot to say about failure. The philosopher Costica Bradatan has recently published a brilliant book about Weil, Ghandi, Cioran, and Mishima, *In Praise of Failure*, that could further illuminate all that these companies do. The wrinkle is, they don’t always hew to that mold. Their work also sometimes works ironically, rising to skill and even virtuosity despite itself. It can acquire a kind of anti-monumental grandeur in the course of denying grandeur and polish, which complicates its claims to principled failure.

The playwright most aligned with these companies is Richard Maxwell, who directs his plays himself and seeks a similarly anti-expressive, amateurish style. His plays take place on conspicuously humble sets (flimsy plywood walls, stock props, random furniture) meant to call attention to the theatre as theatre. His scripts sound a lot like transcribed everyday conversations, full of non-sequiturs, shaggy digressions, and apparent trivialities, but he considers them finished stories with fully

imagined characters and is as strict as Beckett in expecting word-perfect line-deliveries from actors. His notorious restrained idiom—which Marc Robinson calls “immaculate minimalism”—is intended to transfer “the burden of emoting” from actors to audience. Only performers who don’t demand attention, Maxwell feels, can create effective space for diverse and creative interpretation. The best Maxwell productions, I’ve found, alternate extended passages of maddening tedium with searing moments of bright revelation. My favorite is probably *Isolde*, his stunning 2014 play about an actress caught in a love triangle who is losing her memory. *Isolde* summons ghosts of both Beckett and Noh theatre as it winds down, with the title character speaking of disappearing as the play also fades to nothingness: “I don’t exist. I don’t exist . . . (pause) . . . erase . . . (pause) I don’t exist.”

Will Eno’s affinities with Beckett are very plain. This dramatist’s career was launched in 2005 with an aggressive, digressive, perplexingly freewheeling solo play called *Thom Pain* whose speaker is a sort of mashup of Molloy, Malone, and a self-hating insult comic. Pain compulsively tells and short-circuits stories, directly engages the audience, invents characters we suspect are versions of himself, then loses interest in them, and is preoccupied with language minutiae. Not every Eno play is so spare or curdled, some are populous and gently philosophical like Wilder, but the ones that have struck me most deeply are the sourer short ones, like *Thom Pain* and *Wakey, Wakey*, whose flimsy, sham fictional circumstances are like gossamer fabrics that become strangely substantial for reasons hard to pinpoint. Like Beckett, Eno creates spurious surfaces he knows we will see through and treats them as theatre-as-life metaphors. But he is more colloquial than Beckett and distinctly American, couching his metaphysical speculations in goofy vignettes, mic-drop wisecracks, pie-in-the-face aphorisms, and down-homey reflections that linger like throwaway prophecies. This blundering high-wire act can break hearts when it lands.

I’ll end with Annie Baker, whose slow, moody, cunningly low-key plays have prompted comparisons to Chekhov and Beckett ever since her Pulitzer-winning *The Flick* prompted mass walkouts at Playwrights Horizons in 2013. Baker’s quiet and subtle work is distinguished by long, frequent, precisely measured pauses and silences. As with Maxwell’s work, Baker’s plays are defiantly anti-spectacular, only she welcomes skilled actors who can plumb her characters’ psychological depths. Her people tend to be marginal, disempowered, or otherwise sidelined, and their bland exchanges paper over crushing anxieties and uncertainties. They typically feel rootless and lonely, and express a need to be seen to properly exist. (“*Esse est percipi*”—to be is to be perceived—was Beckett’s Berkeleyan epigraph to *Film*.) Baker’s characters occasionally drop light remarks about the breakdown of the world around them that pass without comment like melt-away bombs. Her most recent, exquisite play *Infinite Life*—about patients gathered in an alt-med pain clinic in California—is a perfect example. Now and then a word or two about grave outside matters like school shootings, agricultural pollution, and water contamination

is heard, but the focus stays squarely on interior stories of how people carry physical pain as a condition of life.

These somatic manifestations of a grievously injured world—like all the other worldly ills hovering and looming in the works of the artists I’ve discussed—are features of what Heiner Müller called “the frozen storm.” So is the merciless cultural economy more and more squeezing out serious theatre in the digital age. To predict any future is obviously idle, but I strongly suspect that whatever shape the future theatre takes, it will need the Beckettian current outlined here to grope and crawl its way forward. That current is the only reliably humble dimension left to it. And as Costica Bradatan says in his *In Praise of Failure*, “Only humility, ‘a selfless respect for reality,’ as Irish Murdoch defines it, will allow us to grasp what is happening” and maybe, just maybe, set ourselves “on the way to recovery.”

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