



*Reading* Modern Drama

Edited by Alan Ackerman

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# Reinventing Beckett\*

S.E. GONTARSKI

I don't know whether the theater is the right place for me anymore.

– Samuel Beckett

[T]he bourgeoisie will recuperate [the avant-garde] altogether, ultimately putting on splendid evenings of Beckett and Audiberti (and tomorrow Ionesco, already acclaimed by humanist criticism).

– Roland Barthes

Samuel Beckett's creative life (and personal life, for that matter) was marked by a series of transformations and reinventions. In the process of remaking himself, over and again, from donnish academic to avant-garde poet, from Joycean acolyte to post-Joycean minimalist, from humanist to post-humanist, perhaps, most certainly from poet to novelist to playwright to theatre director, Beckett was simultaneously reinventing every literary genre he turned his attention to. In the midst of remaking narrative in the wake of World War II, for example, he began simultaneously the reinvention of theatre, writing the ground-breaking (but still unproduced) *Eleutheria* between *Molloy* and *Malone meurt* [*Malone Dies*] and *En attendant Godot* [*Waiting for Godot*] between *Malone meurt* and *L'Innommable* [*The Unnamable*]. Almost as soon as he began to experience some recognition, most notably in the theatre, however, he began to recoil from it as well, as if it represented a threat, the desired attention he had struggled so hard to achieve barbed with threats to his art (and even perhaps to his self-image). Enthusiastic about his anti-boulevard play *Eleutheria* and eager for its publication and performance, for example, he quickly repudiated it, withdrawing it from scheduled publication after the staging of *Godot*, finding it in later years impossible to translate even for his long-time publisher, Barney Rosset, refusing again to have it published,<sup>1</sup> at least in his lifetime, and finally, if fundamentally by proxy, prohibiting any staging, apparently in perpetuity. It was, however, a play central to Beckett's theatrical reinvention as it, almost literally, swept the stage clear of both boulevard and naturalistic debris and so bared the stage for what

would become, in English, *Waiting for Godot*. British critic and staunch Beckett advocate Harold Hobson may have privileged Beckett's second full-length play in the following description, but his comments are equally apposite to *Eleutheria*, the restriction to "the English theatre" excepted. *Godot*, he noted,

... knocked the shackles of plot from off the English drama. It destroyed the notion that the dramatist is God, knowing everything about his characters and master of a complete philosophy answerable to all of our problems. It showed that Archer's dictum that a good play imitates the audible and visible surface of life is not necessarily true. It revealed that the drama approximates or can approximate the condition of music, touching chords deeper than can be reached by reason and saying things beyond the grasp of logic. It renewed the English theatre in a single night. (11)

Joyce may have celebrated "Ibsen's New Drama," noting that "the long roll of drama, ancient or modern, has few things better to show" (49), and Shaw accepted the role of heir in "The Quintessence of Ibsenism," but for Beckett, no such lineage; Ibsen's new theatre smacked of didacticism and "explicitation" from which Beckett recoiled: "All I know is in the text." He wrote to his American director, Alan Schneider, on 16 October 1972 in relation to the staging of *Not I*, "'She' [Mouth in this case] is purely a stage entity, part of a stage image and purveyor of stage text. The rest is Ibsen" (Harmon 283).

*Godot* would not, of course, be Beckett's sole or final theatrical reinvention. At the dawn of a new century, it has become the most "recuperated" of Beckett's plays, its fiftieth anniversary in 2003 celebrated by waves of bourgeois nostalgia. By 1963, however, a decade after the French premiere of *Godot*, Beckett would repudiate the character-based drama on which he had, thus far, made his theatrical reputation and focus instead on shaping and reshaping, as author and stage director, an iconic theatre of sculpted images. The composition and performance history of *Play*, beginning in 1963, not only moved stage space to the interior, it triggered an increase in Beckett's direct involvement in stagecraft as well, since it demanded a level of technical sophistication and precision unknown in his earlier work, and the demands of staging *Play* finally forced a reluctant and private Samuel Beckett to assume full, public, directorial responsibility for his own works. With *Play*, then, Beckett reinvented the theatre again, moving it yet further from Ibsen, if not more broadly from humanism itself, as his art moved beyond, even denied, character, the mainstay of traditional theatre, and shifted the theatrical (and theoretical) ground from corporeality to the incorporeality of what we call (perhaps too glibly) Beckett's late theatre – a shift from the body, say, to the voice or

consciousness, from “matter to memory” (to echo Henri Bergson), often detached from any ground; that is, memory ungrounded and with no discernable reservoir. After 1963, Beckett’s became a theatre of immateriality, of ghosts, his work itself the ghost or after-image, not only of the commercial theatre, but of his own earlier work. It became more overtly a theatre of images and the enigmas of perceiving them. His theatre would become, in many respects, a recuperation of the Bergson he had lectured on in his short unhappy career as a university don. Moreover, as a man of the theatre, he not only began directing most of his new work but also began revising, and thereby reinventing, his previous oeuvre, his own canon, even those works firmly established within the theatrical repertory.

Beckett’s transformation from playwright to theatrical artist was thus a seminal development, a final blow perhaps to modernist or Ibsenist theatre, a shift beyond textuality, since most of the late works are unreadable, and yet that transformation is slighted in the critical and historical discourse that continues to privilege print over performance, the apparent stability of text over the vicissitudes of theatre. Such neglect of the impact of Beckett’s direct staging of his plays distorts the arc of his creative evolution (to coin a phrase) as it undervalues his emergence as an artist committed to the performance of his drama as its creation and continual recreation. Beckett would finally embrace theatre not just as a medium through which a preconception was given its accurate completion but as *the* process through which the work of art was realized. As Beckett evolved from being a playwright offering advice to directors and actors to taking full charge of staging his plays, practical theatre offered him the opportunity for self-collaboration, through which he might reinvent himself as an artist yet again, as he found the means to subvert his own texts. Not only does denial of the evolutionary vitality of performance mark most Beckett criticism today, as it delimits a dynamic process of becoming (or creation) at an arbitrary point – publication; such emphasis on stability, arbitrary as it might be, has become the core ideology of the protectors of Beckett’s reputation into the after-Beckett. The Beckett estate, the legal extension of the author, remains committed to the decidedly untheatrical ideology of invariant texts, in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The estate seems determined to stop the process of self-subversion that is the hallmark of vanguard art, blunting its political edge and domesticating Samuel Beckett and his work into bourgeois acceptability. Theirs is an argument for a homogeneous Beckett. Such recuperation of the revolutionary has, of course, become the hallmark of late capitalism, as patronage of even our most radical art has come from global corporatism, and the Beckett estate is following suit if only by insisting on its property rights. What grates is the exercise of those rights under the banner of an aesthetic purity and authorial protection designed to save Beckett from his own self-subversions.

## EMBRACING THE PERFORMATIVE

Reluctant as he may have been at the onset, Beckett embraced the volatility of performance as *the* theatrical art. The transition was gradual, growing from his involvement in staging *En attendant Godot* [*Waiting for Godot*] between 1950 and its opening in January of 1953. Jean Martin, who was the first Lucky, recalls Beckett's being passive at rehearsals in the closing weeks of 1952:

I rehearsed for only about three weeks in all. Sam said practically nothing while we were putting it on. You see he was extremely shy and very, very discreet . . . He relied entirely on Roger Blin [his French director, who also played the role of Pozzo]. But he came to rehearsals every day. And Suzanne came very often too. But they didn't offer any advice. (qtd. in Knowlson and Knowlson 117)

Beckett's letters to Roger Blin belie Martin's observations, however. As early as 19 December 1950, Beckett wrote Blin, "I have an idea for the set. We must get together. Could you pass by our house one day this week?" (qtd. in Oppenheim 295). In spirit, though, Martin's observation represents at least Beckett's public posture, his advice almost always rendered privately. What diffidence or reluctance existed began to be assuaged in 1957 with the staging of Beckett's next play, *Fin de partie* [*Endgame*], but the year of near-total transformation from author to director committed to performance was 1966. Beckett was preparing (with Mariu Karmitz and Jean Ravel) a film version of Jean-Marie Serreau's June 1964 Paris staging of *Comédie* [*Play*]. He rushed off to London to oversee the taping of *Eh Joe*, with Jack MacGowran and Siân Phillips, his first teleplay (nominally directed by Alan Gibson and broadcast on BBC 2 on 4 July 1966). He supervised two vinyl recordings for Claddagh records: *MacGowran Speaking Beckett* and *MacGowran Reading Beckett's Poetry*, the former accompanied by music – Schubert's Quartet in D minor – Beckett himself playing gong in a family trio that included John and nephew Edward. He then rushed back to Paris to oversee Jean-Marie Serreau's series of one-acts at the Odéon, Théâtre de France, including a reprise of *Comédie, Va et vient* [*Come and Go*], and his own staging of Robert Pinget's *Hypothèse*, with actor Pierre Chabert. Beckett wound up taking over full responsibility for staging this theatrical evening at the Odéon, but without program credit. The first of his works for which Beckett received full directorial billing was the 1966 Stuttgart telecast of *He Joe*, broadcast by SDR on Beckett's sixtieth birthday, 13 April 1966.

By 7 April 1966, Beckett would lament to his American director, "Very tired. Nonstop theatre, film (*Play*), TV and Radio since before Xmas . . . Forget what writing is about" (qtd. in Harmon 202); but he soon went on

to accept an invitation from the Schiller Theatre to direct a play. He chose *Endspiel* [*Endgame*]. The decision was monumental and would commence a systematic reinvention of nearly all of his theatre works over the next two decades. He prepared a *Regiebuk* [director's notebook] for each production, and those notebooks, with their meticulous outlines of the play's actions and internal parallels, would characterize his approach to directing.<sup>2</sup> In February 1969, Theodor Adorno wrote to relay an offer for Beckett to direct *Waiting for Godot* in Hamburg. In his reply to Adorno on 15 February 1969, Beckett politely declined, citing the amount of work it would take: "it is a very big job and health is not grand." But he noted as well, "I have promised to do *Das letzte Band* [*Krapp's Last Tape*] with Martin Held at the Schiller (Werkstatt) this summer."<sup>3</sup>

As crucial as Beckett's re-intervention in his published texts is the almost simultaneous development of his radical minimalism, an imagistic aesthetics that would come to dominate his theatrical work. That minimalism may be most evident, of course, in the thirty-five-second playlet called *Breath*. When Ruby Cohn asked Beckett in the summer of 1968 whether or not he had a *new play* in the offing, "He answered, almost angrily, 'New? What could be new? Man is born – vagitus. Then he breathes for a few seconds, before the death rattle intervenes'" (qtd. in Knowlson and Knowlson, 129). He then wrote out the entire play called *Breath* for Cohn on the paper table cover of a café.<sup>4</sup> That spirit of abstraction and contraction, captured most succinctly and fully in *Breath*, would inform the whole of his directing career.

Beckett's directorial changes, then, represented – and still do for that matter – his "latest word" on his plays, yet that latest word has, more often than not, been ignored – by theatre directors, scholars, and most importantly, by his guardians and heirs. Theatre directors and some scholars have themselves often been suspicious of the implications of Beckett's own productions, fearing that Beckett's "latest word" might freeze text and performance possibilities. The pressing issue for these scholars and theatre practitioners quickly became, what relationship existed between Beckett's creative interventions, his self-subversions in his own meticulously directed works, and future performances? Are Beckett's productions now the standard from which no deviation should obtain? This is roughly the position of the estate that sanctions, in both senses of that self-contradictory term, performances. Oddly, the estate also rejects the texts that are the products of that final intervention. That is, they have rejected the revised texts, arguing that they are localized variations on an invariant text as originally published (with minor subsequent corrections). The revised texts are thus merely versions of a published original, but all texts, reaching back to the earliest drafts, are merely versions – and each was deemed a stage that the author considered final, until the next version. The revised texts

are then that next version. Whether or not the creative process comes to a halt at publication is a much-debated point, especially in theatre and theory, but even conservative Beckett critics do not accept a doctrine of textual invariance. Yet that, essentially, is the position of the Beckett estate, and it has caused something of a crisis in the theatrical community. More than a few directors have refused to work with Beckett's material (Herbert Blau and Lee Breuer, chief among them), while others have been prohibited from doing so (Deborah Warner and JoAnne Akalaitis, among them).

Admittedly, some of the tensions between Beckett's theatre and the international community of directors were created and aggravated during Beckett's lifetime. Beckett was less than happy with André Gregory's 1973 *Endgame*, for which the audience was seated within wire-meshed chicken coops.<sup>5</sup> In Robert Brustein's 1999 review of the Beckett/Schneider letters, he identified Beckett's American director, Alan Schneider, as a self-interested conspirator, quoting Schneider's condemnation of his competitor:

The André Gregory troupe . . . was "inclined to use text for own purposes," later reporting, in a long letter, on how "the production takes such liberties with your text . . . and with your directions," calling it a "self-indulgent travesty, determined to be 'different' for the sake of being 'different.' "

Beckett intervened to stop a European tour of Gregory's production, on Schneider's advice and request. But it was JoAnne Akalaitis's staging of *Endgame* at the American Repertory Theater in December 1984 that prompted Beckett to intervene fully and forcefully to try to halt the performance. Hours before the opening, lawyers were still negotiating the textual alterations. Akalaitis's crimes were that she had set her production in a subway station with an abandoned subway car as backdrop, adding music by her ex-husband, Philip Glass. Beckett was convinced, with much encouragement from Schneider, that the production was an unacceptable alteration of the text, particularly the stage directions, which for Beckett, as we know, are not ancillary but integral to the text. He further objected to the increasingly common American theatrical practice of colour-blind casting, black actors here in two of the four roles. A final compromise allowed the production to open but with Beckett's disclaimer printed in the playbill: "A complete parody of the play. Anybody who cares for the work couldn't fail to be disgusted" (qtd. in Brustein 13).

In addition to Akalaitis's 1984 *Endgame*, high-profile conflicts surrounded De Haarlemse Toneelschuur's all-female *Waiting for Godot* in 1988. Through the Société des Auteurs et Compositeurs Dramatiques, Beckett took legal action to prevent the Dutch company from staging its all female production. Gildas Bourdet's "pink" *Fin de partie* [*Endgame*]

for the venerable Comédie-Française also in 1988 met overwhelming resistance as well. Beckett and his French publisher, Jérôme Lindon, forced the Comédie-Française to withdraw certain alterations of, and additions to, the prescribed setting and costumes for the production, leading to Bourdet's decision to remove his name from the credits. The Beckett estate, then controlled by the French publisher, saw as its duty such continued enforcement. Susan Sontag's radical *Godot* in war-torn Sarajevo in 1993 erred by the introduction of multiple cast members,<sup>6</sup> but Sarajevo was evidently beyond the reach of western European law; Deborah Warner did not fare as well with her 1994 London production of *Footfalls* at the Garrick Theatre, which was denied permission to tour Europe after being viewed by Edward Beckett. But Katie Mitchell's "peripatetic" evening called *Beckett Shorts*, for the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Other Place in 1997, where several productions were shown simultaneously, was ignored by the estate's lawyers. Unsurprisingly, Akalaitis and Warner have directed no Beckett since their 1984 *Endgame* and 1994 *Footfalls*, respectively. As Akalaitis has noted, "I don't think I'd be allowed the rights" (qtd. in Fanger).

Some theatre artists with personal connections to Beckett received the dispensation of benign neglect, however – the itinerant Hungarian theatrical director George Tabori, for one, who studied in Germany until 1933, before emigrating to England, where he was a journalist for the BBC. He then worked with Brecht in America, returning to Germany after World War II. Fascinated by Beckett's work, Tabori directed many of the plays, situating himself within the debate between directorial originality and fidelity to Beckett's vision. His search for a subtext in Beckett's theatre assumed radical forms in a series of productions of what he called "dangerous theatre" in the 1980s. *Beckett Evening 1* in 1980 took place in the Atlas Circus in Munich, with circus artists and animals representing the state of being captured and tamed, whips and whistles suggesting the Holocaust. The actors were to take Beckett's work literally, find their personal subtexts, and pursue the concrete experience behind the image. His production of *Breath* was simply recited, stage directions and all; *Not I* presented a young actress tied to a wooden wall with knives fixed all around her by a knife-thrower. The Auditor was an elephant on which the woman, set free by the elocutionary act, rode triumphantly from the arena. *Play* was performed by three actors walking about restlessly, *seeking* the limelight to tell their part of the story.

Beckett's reaction to Tabori's excesses was restrained. When Tabori staged *Le Dépeupleur* [*The Lost Ones*], Beckett wished him "the best of agonies" but did not restrict a bizarre interpretation that combined Auschwitz with being improperly born, naked bodies, black plastic pipes, a carp in a large aquarium, and the subtext of the human condition in a scorched landscape bereft of love. Tabori's 1984 *Waiting for Godot* was

much acclaimed, but it horrified Beckett. The characters were refugees, intellectuals, foregrounding Beckett's activities in the Resistance during the war. The play was set in the round, with production crew onstage to suggest the evolution of an imaginary rehearsal, with scenes of hatred and compassion, despair and tenderness, played out as interludes in the ritual of waiting. His *Happy Days* of 1986 was even more *outré*, with Winnie's mound replaced by a bed and Beckett's "woman about fifty" acted by the attractive, young Ursula Höpfner, in plunging décolletage. The subtext was to imbue the metaphysical with concrete human experience, that of a tense human relationship; but casting the physically disabled Peter Radtke as Willie, in a performance incorporating Karl Böhm's rehearsal comments about *Tristan und Iseult* and groans and whistles of whales to accompany Willie's agonized craving for Winnie, was a curious mix (see Feinberg-Jütte 95–115). Through it all, Tabori's hope was to liberate Beckett's texts from dogmatic models, a hope shared by many subsequent directors, Gildas Bourdet and Deborah Warner among them.

Beckett, himself, thus assumed an exigent approach during his lifetime, modulating such antinomies of production. He was far from consistent in this respect, of course. For all that he believed in authorial control, in practice, when it came to "alternative" productions, "it made a tremendous difference if he liked and respected the persons involved," as biographer James Knowlson notes (*Damned* 608). On the issue of gender change, however, he remained steadfast. Writing to his American publisher and theatrical agent, Barney Rosset on 11 July 1973, he noted,

I am against women playing *Godot* and wrote Miss [Estelle] Parsons to that effect. Theatre sex is not interchangeable and *Godot* by women would sound as spurious as *Happy Days* or *Not I* played by men. It was performed once in Israel, without our authorization, by an all-female cast, with disastrous effect.<sup>7</sup>

The position that Beckett himself took with regard to Akalaitis's 1984 ART *Endgame* is the one currently holding sway internationally. Simply stated, it is that the author is the sole authority on and arbiter of the theatrical works, a position accepted and extended by his estate and buttressed by international law. In other words, the process of reinvention that had been the hallmark of Beckett's creative life has apparently come to an end, Beckett's theatre rapidly becoming part of the quid pro quo of bourgeois commerce, a system he struggled so hard to unmask. One consequence of such a repositioning is that the climate in which scholars and theatre practitioners investigate the complexities of Beckett's theatrical oeuvre and his theatrical career has been chilled.

The inevitable question that arises in the early years of the twenty-first century, fifty-plus years after the premiere of *En attendant Godot*

[*Waiting for Godot*], in the seventeenth year of the after-Beckett, 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 yet another way, is there a future for Beckettian performance? Can it be reinvented again? And if so, what might such reinvention look like, given the restrictions on performance imposed by the legal heirs to the work, heirs who function with all the *droits d'auteur*, but none of his flexibility? Must the avant-garde, already "the parasite and property of the bourgeoisie," accept its own impotence, as Roland Barthes has asked, or worse bring about its own death? (69). In addition to their most publicized interventions into performance, the executors have all but kept from the public the principal work of the final two decades of Beckett's creative life, his continuation of the creative process, his full revisions of his dramatic texts. These revisions are, of course, available in a limited capacity, in the very expensive editions of *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*, which Beckett himself not only authorized but financed as well, but their cost severely restricts their availability. Even university libraries resist such an expenditure under current budgets. The estate has refused permission to publish the revised or acting texts separately as alternative editions or to re-issue the *Notebooks* in affordable, paperback editions.

Admittedly, part of the reason for the position of the estate is the difficulty of determining authorial intent off the page. Which of the revisions in Beckett's productions are meant for the local contingencies of particular actors or a particular stage? As Beckett wrote to Polish director Marek Kędzierski on 15 November 1981, "Herewith corrected copy of *Fin de partie*. The cuts and simplifications are the result of my work on the play as director and a function of the players at my disposal. To another director they may not seem desirable."<sup>8</sup> What Beckett sent Kędzierski, however, is simply not readily available to other directors, except in *The Theatrical Notebooks*.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Beckett did not direct and revise each of his plays, and so not every text has been systematically reinvented. That is, Beckett's work on productions did not always result in permanent changes to a printed text. Occasionally, local revisions were made by Beckett to respond to the process of collaboration and to the nature of a particular theatrical space, or changes were contemplated that were never formally incorporated into any text or production. In his notebook for *Damals*, the German translation of *That Time*, which he directed along with *Tritte* [*Footfalls*] at the Schiller Theatre in 1976, for instance, Beckett offered an alternate staging of the play, one that might increase its verisimilitude. If Listener's hand were to be *seen* at full light, it should be clutching a sheet around his neck. The tension of that grip should then increase during the silences.

That detail added to the play's limited frame suggests that *That Time* is something of an experiment in perspective. We perceive the Figure as if we were watching him from above as he lay in a bed.

In addition, for his television production of *What Where* Beckett revised the German text extensively, but he never fully revised the stage directions of the original English text. This was due in part to the fact that Beckett continued to work on the visual imagery of the play all through rehearsals. By this stage of his directing career, he had developed more confidence in or grown more trusting of the creative collaborations that theatre entails, and he was creating his theatre work in rehearsals, directly onstage (or in this case on the set), although he made his usual pre-production notebook for the performance as well. As his technical assistant, Jim Lewis, recalls,

If you want to compare this production [of *Was Wo*] with the others for television, there's one major difference. And that is his concept was not set. He changed and changed and changed . . . I've never experienced that with him before. You know how concrete he is, how precise he is. Other times we could usually follow through on that with minor, minor changes; but this time there were several basic changes and he still wasn't sure. Many things, different things. (qtd. in Fehsenfeld 236)

Lewis's observation suggests the single most salient element in Beckett's evolution into a theatre artist: his commitment to the idea of performance and his acceptance of a variety of possible creative outcomes. In practical and literary terms, such a commitment meant that nothing like a final text of his work could be established before he worked with it directly onstage. Writing to Alan Schneider in response to his American director's queries about staging *Play*, Beckett expressed what had become obvious to him: "I realize that no final script is possible until I work on rehearsals."<sup>10</sup>

Almost simultaneously, after Beckett had just seen a rough cut of *Film* in 1964, he argued quite clearly against a slavish fidelity to the script. Beckett wrote to Schneider on 29 September 1964, shortly after viewing *Film*:

[G]enerally speaking, from having been troubled by a certain failure to communicate fully by purely visual means the basic intention [as outlined in the script, presumably], I now begin to feel that this is unimportant and that the images obtained probably gain in force what they lose as ideograms . . . It does I suppose in a sense fail with reference to a purely intellectual schema . . . but in so doing has acquired a dimension and a validity of its own that are worth far more than any merely efficient translation of intention. (qtd. in Harmon 166)

Moreover, textual variants among the published texts testify to the fact that Beckett's plays do not exist in a uniform, static state. Legally, a director can follow any of these various published texts and still conflict with Beckett's

recorded intentions. Most English editions of *Krapp's Last Tape*, for instance, still depict Krapp with a clown's nose and wearing white boots, and the play is often performed thus. Arguments about staging a *Godot* respectful of Beckett's wishes are frequently based on the assumption that a single authoritative script exists. In the general editor's note to *The Theatrical Notebooks*, James Knowlson has observed that "in the case of *Waiting for Godot* . . . whole sections of text have *never* been played as printed in the original editions" (vii). And I myself have noted in the *Endgame* volume of *The Theatrical Notebooks*, "[C]ritics and directors [are] forced into a position of building interpretations and mounting productions of Samuel Beckett's work not so much on corrupt texts such as almost all English versions of *Waiting for Godot*, but on those the author himself found unsatisfactory, unfinished" (xxv).

The response of the estate has its own compelling logic and its standard contract calls for adherence to "the integrity of the text and stage directions" in order to create "the image of universality that the author sought." In a letter to the *Guardian*, Edward Beckett continues his defence with an analogy:

There are more than fifteen recordings of Beethoven's late string quartets in the catalogue, every interpretation different, one from the next, but they are all based on the same notes, tonalities, dynamic and tempo markings. We feel justified in asking the same measure of respect for Samuel Beckett's plays. (25)

He suggests that since musicians, however freely they may "interpret" a piece of music, do not deviate from the composer's notes, why should a director depart from Beckett's dialogue or directions? The analogy is intriguing. What we know of a score is that it is not music, as a playtext is likewise not theatre. Both printed versions are approximations. But, of course, Edward's analogy is imperfect in other respects. Theatre, as Beckett spent much of his career demonstrating, is as much a visual as an aural art form, at least as much gesture and plastic imagery as poetry. Theatre is not a music CD. The more apposite analogy might be with opera, and there the analogy breaks down. Most operas have been staged in a myriad of what strict interpreters might consider outlandish versions, and the music has survived, as would Beckett's unique music. But the estate seems adamant and so Beckettian performance in the twenty-first century may be at an impasse.

### **KENNETH TYNAN'S *BREATH***

The power of tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors.

– Aristotle

Perhaps the most egregious violation of Beckettian law, the sort of thing that Beckett's works apparently need protection from in the after-Beckett, according to those in the business of such protection, occurred during Beckett's lifetime. The result was both a travesty of Beckett's intention, and, ironically, Samuel Beckett's most successful, at least most popular, theatre piece. *Breath* has been problematic since its conception. For many a director, the problem of mounting Samuel Beckett's shortest (but not slightest, I will insist) play, has been less how to stage so short a piece (the options for this characterless, thirty-five-second playlet are really quite limited) than in what context to offer it. Although Beckett called it a "farce in five acts" (qtd. in Cohn 298), it is something less than an evening's theatre. The play is simplicity itself, an anonymous life cycle reduced to its fundamental sounds – birth cry and death groan, which, according to what text there is, sound identical. A debris-littered stage with "[n]o verticals," a brief cry and inspiration as lights fade up for ten seconds; a hold for five more; then expiration, "immediately cry as before," and slow fade down of light. The recorded voices and lighting fades, up and down, are identical and have the simple symmetry of Pozzo's poignant observation: "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (*Godot* 58). There seems very little a director can do to muck it up. Its most memorable performance was its first,<sup>11</sup> as the opener, called "Prelude," to the Jacques Levy-directed and Kenneth Tynan-conceived sextravaganza, *Oh! Calcutta!*, the image and title adapted from the painting of Camille Clovis Trouille's posterior odalisque, with its pun on the French "*O quel cul t'as [O what a lovely ass you have]*," said "*cul*" being prominently displayed. As an opener to an evening of shorts, by Beckett or a variety of artists, as was the case with the Tynan-Levy production and as it is most frequently performed, the play is inevitably lost. Tynan drew attention to the playlet by adding three words to the opening tableau. To Beckett's "Faint light on stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish," Tynan added, "including naked people" (Calder 6).

Leading off with Beckett, *Oh! Calcutta!* premiered at the Eden Theatre in New York City on 17 June 1969. After a cautious thirty-nine previews, it opened, moving to Broadway on 26 February 1971, where it ran, and ran, and ran, with only slight interruption, until 6 August 1989. Finally, 85 million people saw the 1,314 performances, making it, uncontestedly, the most viewed Beckett play ever, a record unlikely to be broken. Top ticket prices were an astounding US\$25.00, "unprecedented even *on* Broadway," according to Bruce Williamson, who introduced the work for a "pictorial essay" in *Playboy* billed as "A Front-Row-Center Look at *Oh! Calcutta!*". *Calcutta!* (known by some wags [so to speak] as Jingle Balls), was "the only show in town that has customers piling into front row-center seats armed, by God, with opera glasses," according to Williamson. But Tynan

was called a literary pimp, and his stable of authors, Beckett included, “a pack of whores” (Williamson 167).

As the *Playboy* feature suggests, the musical spawned something of an industry, reflecting the era’s sexual revolution and its commodification of sex. A book version of the play was issued by Beckett’s American publisher, Barney Rosset of Grove Press, who published the play *as performed* in an illustrated edition in 1969, attributing to Beckett alone the playlet – with Tynan’s erotic alterations. While only the earliest playbills identified authors,<sup>12</sup> Rosset’s volume listed them under a traditional Table of Contents. The musical was subsequently issued as an LP, was made into a Hollywood film, and is still currently available in CD, VHS, and DVD formats. The enterprise may have been Beckett’s sole entry into the Age of Aquarius, certainly his only appearance in *Playboy*. Despite such phenomenal success and unprecedented exposure, drama reduced to its bare necessities, one might say, most respectable critics have generally joined Beckett in the condemnation of at least his contribution to the production. John Calder has argued that “the American edition of *Oh! Calcutta!* has completely changed the atmosphere of sterility and indeed the message itself by changing the stage directions . . .”(6). And, indeed, Tynan’s revision makes explicit the possibility of regeneration amid the brief seconds between life and death, a possibility already implicit in Beckett’s text, since the opening “vagitius” is identical to the closing “cry as before,” hence another “vagitius.” Moreover, Beckett’s characterless drama is never completely so, as the stage is always inhabited at least by the ghosts of actors, afterimages of performances, even in their absence. When actors are not present, memory provides their images, in *Breath* no less than *Godot* or *Hamlet*. Tynan’s production merely re-projected, re-directed that implicit image onto the stage.

*Breath*’s association with the infamous *Oh! Calcutta!* has, however, been ignored in early publications, particularly in Grove Press’s catchall volume, *First Love and Other Shorts*, published in 1974. The production was finally acknowledged in the *Collected Shorter Plays* of 1984 and the *Complete Dramatic Works* of 1986. Like Calder, Beckett was appalled by Tynan’s alterations, but his contract forbade immediate interference, and so the play continued as re-written – at least in the United States. Beckett successfully suppressed his contribution in British productions and moved to halt all future productions. He wrote to agent Jenny Sheridan on 27 April 1972: “I have come to the conclusion it is almost impossible to do *Breath* correctly in the theatre so I must ask you to decline this request and *all future ones for the play*” (emphasis added).<sup>13</sup> But Tynan’s production uncovers a haunting subtext, and as such it is a production worthy of re-examination, especially if we accept the necessity of periodic reinvention of Beckett’s *oeuvre* that Beckett himself seems to have embraced.

### GONTARSKI'S *BREATH*, OR AFTER TYNAN

It was the clamour over Tynan's excesses that kept me thinking about how a director might solve the problems of staging *Breath*. My solution was not to "stage" it at all – that is, not to perform it in a theatrical space – but I also wanted a performance closer to Beckett's than to Tynan's *Breath* and to present it as an independent entity not as part of an evening's theatrical sequence. Moreover, I wanted to foreground what I still consider the play's avant-garde potential, its power to subvert or defy conventions and expectations, to foreground the play of memory, and to shock its audience into thinking, at very least, about performance itself. That was what Deborah Warner wanted with her *Footfalls* that so provoked the ire of the Beckett estate, after all. I needed something other than a theatrical venue for the sort of performance I had envisioned. I kept in mind as well Beckett's comments to his favourite actress, Billie Whitelaw, while they were rehearsing *Footfalls*: "I don't know whether the theatre is the right place for me anymore," Beckett told her. "He was getting further and further away from writing conventional plays," Whitelaw observed. "And I know what he meant. I thought, well perhaps he should be in an art gallery or something. Perhaps I should be pacing up and down in the Tate Gallery . . ." (qtd. in Kalb 235).

My opportunity presented itself in December of 1992, when I was invited to participate in an evening of visual art and performance at Florida State University Gallery and Museum. The evening would be built around the electronic satellite reception of a piece of hypertext, *Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)*, from novelist William Gibson. *Agrippa* was scheduled for simultaneous broadcast to nine sites around the world, immediately after which, the piece would be distorted and destroyed by its own viruses. It was in such a fragile and ephemeral artistic environment that I wanted to present *Breath*. The overall plan for the evening was to use the gallery as a decentred theatre space. Events would be performed in several venues of the gallery, and the audience would roam or drift from one to the other with only the slightest prompting. Rather than adopt the structure of an outdoor fair, where simultaneous performances are offered to a roaming audience, the gallery evening would feature sequential performances without overlap. The evening, then, would comprise readings and other theatrical performances and environments among the gallery's various nooks and rooms. My offering was, then, in keeping with the hypertext theme, or rather would present versions of digital or telereality. I decided that *Breath*, like all of Beckett's short plays needed a frame, and since the traditional proscenium arch was unavailable in the gallery, I would create my own. Rather than construct a proscenium, however, I built an oversized prop television, through the absent screen of which *Breath* would be performed "live," if that's the word, or at least the pile of "miscellaneous rubbish" would be

physically present in the gallery. In the printed program, I called the performance “A Simulated Television Production,” but the heap of “miscellaneous rubbish” was of a piece with other installations in the gallery, so that Beckett’s “play” was, for many, indistinguishable from the other art objects on display (or from the gallery’s refuse outside the service entrance, for that matter). Mine, or rather Beckett’s, was simply framed by an almost clownish simulated television screen. To my mind, this was the continued development of the hybrid art that I take to be Beckett’s late theatre, an art of icons, images and afterimages, ghosts of memories – as closely related to sculpture as to what we have traditionally called theatre.

The performance of *Breath*, as opposed to the gallery’s other sculptures, was “announced” by the light’s fading up on the set, that is, on the heap of rubbish some ten feet behind the television screen, as the gallery lights simultaneously (but only slightly) dimmed. The brief cry (vagitus) and amplified inspiration would sound for some ten seconds, and after the prescribed five-second pause, the expiration and identical cry for some ten seconds. Fade down the stage; fade up the gallery.

*Breath* was repeated several times during the evening, interspersed amid other performances. I had hoped that such repetition might suggest the regenerative element I saw as implicit in the play (which the theatre-savvy Tynan made explicit). Since I had deliberately chosen to associate Beckett’s “play” with sculpture by the very fact of offering the performance in an art gallery, I was not surprised that the audience never seemed to understand that it was watching what I would consider live theatre, since the performance lacked what had heretofore been deemed an essential ingredient of theatre, actors. The audience, deprived of its standard ambience and cultural cues, failed to applaud at the fade down, but neither did they applaud the viewing of other sculptures as they departed, even when the gallery lights dimmed as they did to announce another *Breath*. And, of course, there was no curtain and so no curtain call – whom would we have called, after all? I took that lack of response as a measure of the success of this production, which had blurred the distinction among artistic forms and became, almost, invisible theatre, but while I may have saved the play from being lost amid a sequence of other plays as planned, I may also have lost it to a neo-Dadaist revival of found sculpture.

#### **ATOM EGOYAN: STEENBECKETT**

One dynamic possibility for the future of performance is that offered by Egyptian-born Canadian film maker Atom Egoyan, who directed a traditional production of *Krapp’s Last Tape*, starring John Hurt, for the Beckett on Film series, the ambitious attempt in 2000 to record the Gate Theatre’s much toured and touted Beckett festival, during which all nineteen stage plays

were performed. Egoyan subsequently used the completed film as a centre-piece for his own personal artwork, an installation at London's Museum of Mankind, the entry dominated by massive marble pillars. The installation folded continuous showings of the film, in altered, antithetical perspectives, into a larger environmental exhibit of recorded memory that Egoyan called *Steenbeckett*. Egoyan's work – like Beckett's – focused on memory, its preservation and evocation. Participants entered the now all-but-deserted Museum of Mankind, walked past stacks of nineteenth-century diaries that obsessively documented a diarist's every meal, say, or every journey, every bed slept in, every partner slept with. These were the obsessive recording of what unrecorded might be deemed incidental, and it seemed to be the exhaustiveness of such documentation that appealed to Egoyan, as it did to Krapp and presumably Beckett. Spectators walked through a darkened warren of passages, up stairs, through tunnels, past discarded typewriters, phonographs, disks, "spooools," photographs, to a makeshift projection room, where the commercial film of *Krapp's Last Tape* was screened for a restricted audience, 10–12 at a time, sitting on a makeshift bench no more than six feet from the film projected on the opposite wall. The film's grainy images were a massive twelve- to eighteen-feet high, and so they dwarfed the spectators, who had discovered or stumbled upon what seemed to be another discarded cultural object. From there spectators ambled or stumbled to another room, some not waiting for the film to end, others sitting through it more than once. In the next room, a mass of film – two-thousand feet of it, according to the program – ran continuously and noisily along rollers, up and down, back and forth, in and around the room, floor to ceiling, wall to wall, over and over again, and finally through an antique Steenbeck editing table at the far end of the room, where the film was visible in miniature and seen through the cat's cradle of noisily rolling film. Obsolete, the Steenbeck editing machine was the equipment that Egoyan deemed right for editing his film of *Krapp's Last Tape*. The analogue device had all the look of a clumsy antique, the look Egoyan was apparently trying to achieve in his film. As important as the film itself, both its materiality and the gigantized and miniaturized images it provided, was the material editing machine itself, central to Egoyan's reinvention of *Krapp's Last Tape* and the centre-piece of his installation, as the material tape recorder might be to Beckett's. The play *Krapp's Last Tape* was thus another deteriorating relic, a museum piece, say – Beckett frozen in time – and simultaneously a stunningly fresh work of art (see also Barfield).

#### ADRIANO AND FERNANDO GUIMARÃES: *TODOS OS QUE CAEM*

The treatment of a Beckett text or performance as a found object, as in Egoyan's *Steenbeckett*, is central to the aesthetics of the Guimarães

brothers, visual artists based in Brasília, Brazil, who have maintained an ongoing and evolving dialogue with Beckett's work since their first show, *Happily Ever After* [*Felizes Para Sempre*], which included various versions of *Happy Days*, *Come and Go*, *Play*, and *Rockaby* and which ran, in a variety of venues, almost all in Brazil, from 1998 to 2001. The approach of Adriano and Fernando Guimarães is to combine theatre, performance pieces, music, visual arts, and literature into a hybrid, composite art form and to collaborate with major contemporary artists. For *Happily Ever After*, they worked with plastic artist Ana Miguel, who designed costumes and stage props; with photographer and lighting designer Dalton Camargos; with museum curator Marília Panitz; and with guest actresses Vera Holtz as Winnie in *Happy Days* and Nathalia Thimberg as the "Woman in chair," W, in *Rockaby*. A second instalment of their work *We Were Not Long ... Together*, which ran in a variety of configurations during 2002–03, was built around *Breath* and featured four other pieces: *Catastrophe*, *Act without Words II*, *What Where*, and *Play*. The third incarnation of their dialogue with Beckett was built around *All That Fall*, again interspersed with their own videos, photographs, objects, and performance pieces, and featuring as well *Rockaby*, *Not I*, *Rough for Theater II*, and *A Piece of Monologue*. These three anthologies, performed over a six-year period, constituted a multimedia trilogy of spectacles in a variety of manifestations that connected Beckett's theatre works to larger public spaces beyond theatre. It was thus, in conception and execution, the very opposite of the Beckett on Film project taking shape at almost the exact same time in Europe. No two manifestations of the Guimarães brothers project were ever the same. Theirs was an art that resisted being reduced to homage, the goal of the film project, presumably.

As art critic Vitória Daniela Bousso writes, "The transition between the visual and the theatrical constitutes a hybrid space, a territory of complexities ruled by experimentation in the work of Adriano and Fernando Guimarães" (97). As their work focuses on the human body, they engage directly the cultural games of regulation and control that are played upon it. For the Guimarães brothers, the body is less ancillary than it might generally be in Beckett, say, and instead becomes the seat of the struggle of power relationships – if not overtly expressed, certainly a subtext of Beckett's work as well. The body is here foregrounded, according to art historian Nicholas Oliveira:

The body interprets or plays the part of a character but simultaneously represents itself, affirms itself as a recipient of the unconscious, in other words, the body interprets that role, in the installation, that gives access to what is unstable and ephemeral. The body's unpredictable action always offers a condition for rupture or destabilization in the postmodern work. (qtd. in Bousso 98)

Beckett's works are thus treated as ready-mades by the Guimarães brothers and hence in no need of serious revision or renovation, since they are already – preceded and followed, as they are, by images of the Guimarães brothers' re-imagining of Beckett – afterimages of Beckett's texts. The Guimarães' performances are, thus, less critiques of Beckett's work, than reinventions of it, its afterimages. What is elicited from Beckett is as much the result of the Guimarães brothers' installed environments as it is an intrinsic part of the works themselves, and thus Beckett's works move, unadulterated, into a new poetic space – become part of a new poetics. The Guimarães brothers create something like their own Beckett archive, Beckett in or as a cabinet of curiosities, a Beckett made up of cultural shards.

Their antiphonal use of Beckett's works and words is a case in point. Their treatment of the play *Breath*, for example, is presented in conjunction with an installation that they call *Breath +*. Although performed along with other, better known plays, *Breath* here takes on the role of a central work, one version of which features a live, naked actor in an embryonic sack that harkens back to Tynan's *Breath*. Their image, then, foregrounds the regenerative potential of the embryo. Corollary productions, the *Breath +*, feature an actor (or actors) submerged in water who responds to an authoritarian and apparently arbitrary bell that commands and controls his (or their) submersions and resurfacings; hence it controls his (or their) breath. In one version, actors immerse their heads in buckets of water at the bell's command. In another, a single fully clothed actor is submerged in a massive fish tank, the duration of his submersion regulated by the bell. In a third image, submerged actors, again fully clothed, are grotesquely contorted in a bathtub and viewed from above. In each case, the actor's breathing appears subject to or regulated by an arbitrary, external force, in this case a bell or buzzer, but it might be as well the whistle or prod in the two *Acts without Words* or the piercing bell in *Happy Days*, works that the brothers staged as part of this ongoing dialogue. Much of their work, then, spills out of the theatre into gallery space (or out of the gallery back into the theatre). The extension of the playing space emphasizes the idea of expressive space, something other than theatrical space used as a backdrop.

Another performance is called *Light -*. Here, power (much of it in the form of electrical power) is transferred to a participating audience, where spectators turn light switches on and off to control the pace of action in performance. In this case, the light switches are often dummies, the light controlled by a remote switch; so the regulatory system of control is itself diffused, often mysterious, frustrating both actors and audience; thus, the body of the audience (or the audience's bodies) is folded into the performance and into the power struggle. *Double Exposure* is an installation composed of four environments, with the words of several of Beckett's short plays projected onto walls, windows, and transparent boxes. Beckett's

words themselves are presented within boxes, as cabinets of curiosities, the eighteenth-century forerunners of what we, today, call museums:

Along the whole length of the gallery's entrance glass doors there are texts by Samuel Beckett. Upon entering, the spectator finds himself in the first environment: an almost dark rectangular foreroom, outlined by glass panes, on which fragments from texts have also been written. At each end of this room there are life-size pictures of the character that appear throughout the exhibition. The photographs are almost identical, but they reveal the character under the action of two contrasting lights: one that is excessively bright and one that is too dark. Both make its image evanescent. (103)

That is, what we see as apparently life-like is decidedly an image (as Bergson has been reminding us at least since his *Matter and Memory*) or afterimage, its appearance or disappearance regulated by light, which in turn is regulated by (electrical) power, which in turn is regulated (apparently) by spectators. If *Breath* + emphasized the materiality and machinery of the body, *Light* – foregrounded its ethereality. The focus is, thus, on the fact that all perception is imagistic if not imag(e)inary. The second environment is a house, a rectangular prism made of exposed brick, along which Beckett's texts continue. Along its outer walls spectators can look through peepholes and see real-time videos (again images) of the gallery taken by a set of security cameras from a variety of angles. An interior lined with dark panes is the third environment. Here, the audience watches black-and-white video of a character closing windows to stop a flood of light entering that threatens to extinguish his own image, since he is only a projection of light. When vapour lamps are turned on in the room the character's image disappears and the spectator "encounter[s] his or her own reflection on the walls." They (the subjects) have thus *replaced* what appeared to be the "character" (object).

The fourth environment consists of a glass scale model of the house, sitting on a table. Projected images are then reflected on the model's glass and on the room's walls. In another section of the installation, the audience is encouraged to deposit objects, usually, but not exclusively, photographs of sentimental value – but, of course, only to themselves. The audience moves through the installation, lingers, examines, and reads those images on the walls or Beckett's words on or in boxes as a preface or postlude to the performances of those plays that are on display; so that the play itself, once performed, is already an echo, a double, an afterimage.

## THE FUTURE OF BECKETT STUDIES AND BECKETT PERFORMANCE

Amid the restrictions on performance imposed by the Beckett estate, its attempts to restrain if not subdue the recalcitrant artwork by its insistence

on faithful and accurate performances, a faith and accuracy no one seems able to define, a resilient and imaginative set of theatrical directors and artists continues to re-invent Beckett by developing a third way, through radical acts of the imagination, by folding the authorized, legally owned object, like a ready-made in a gallery, into another context, such as storefronts, disused or abandoned buildings, or museum installations. They thus assert the heterogeneity of Beckettian performance without violating the dictates of an estate-issued performance contract. "Here, precisely, is the Beckett that will hold the stage in the new century," notes Fintan O'Toole, discussing the issue of fidelity to Beckett's texts in another context (45). "The merely efficient translations of what are thought to be the great man's intentions will fade into dull obscurity. The productions that allow their audiences to feel the spirit of suffering and survival in our times will enter the afterlife of endless re-imaginings" (45). The Guimarães brothers, Atom Egoyan, and others offer one approach to the re-imaginings necessary to a living art. The alternative is that Beckett work be presented as what it may, indeed, have already become, a curio in a box of curiosities, a museum piece preserved, without deviation (except perhaps for deterioration), exactly as written (at least in some hypothesized version); but, even so, as I have been suggesting, even such a presentation could be re-imagined and altered radically in a new environment, an alternative space. If the Beckettian stage space has become a battleground for political and legal contention, the squabble one over property rights more than artistic integrity or aesthetic values, those directors who have taken their cue from Beckett's own comments on theatre and the developing aesthetics of his late plays have found their freedom of expression, a liberation of their imaginations, by abandoning or spilling out of that contested space we call theatre into a more expressive one. They have developed a hybrid art, sweeping Beckett along with them, moving theatre to where he always thought it belonged, among the plastic arts, and accomplishing yet another reinvention of Beckett.

## NOTES

- \* This chapter was presented as a contribution to the "Samuel Beckett at 100" Distinguished Lecture Series at the University of Toronto, 10 March 2006.
- 1 The full details are available in my "Introduction" to *Eleutheria*.
- 2 The notebooks, transcribed, translated, and annotated, have been published as *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*.
- 3 *Das letzte Band* opened at the Schiller Werkstatt on 5 October 1969, on a twin bill with Ionesco's *Der neue Mieter*. Beckett's own direction of *Godot* would not take place until March 1975 at the Schiller-Theater in Berlin.
- 4 For holograph, see Harmon 219.

- 5 Gregory's production opened at New York University School of the Arts on 8 February 1973.
- 6 Good discussions of these productions appear in Oppenheim; for Sontag's *Godot*, see Bradby 164–68.
- 7 Cited with the permission of Grove Press and the Beckett estate.
- 8 Cited with permission.
- 9 Most of these changes are also outlined in Beckett's letter to Blin of 3 April 1968; as Beckett notes, "I strongly recommend to you the following simplifications" (qtd. in Oppenheim 299).
- 10 For details, see "De-theatricalizing Theatre."
- 11 The British premiere was given at the Close Theatre Club in Glasgow in October 1969, produced by Geoffrey Gilham, according to John Calder's note in *Gambit*, where the play was first published in its unadulterated form (7).
- 12 Those for productions at the Eden Theatre and published at first by Evergreen Showcard, a division of Grove Press, and then by Playfare.
- 13 Cited with the permission of Faber and Faber.

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