

## 1 Introduction

Reviewing *Happy Days* in 1961, Richard Gilman wrote:

That question of effectiveness, far more than the meaning of the plays – which are really far less arcane than we have been led to think – has always been to me the interesting one to ask about Beckett’s theatre. How does it manage to achieve its high intensity and complete conviction – how, really, does it *reach* us – after its apparent abandonment of most of the traditional means of dramatic communication?<sup>1</sup>

The question is as elusive as it is complex – it changes with each new Beckett text, and in any case there are few enough critical conventions adequate to a discussion of why any theater is effective – but anyone who has seen one of the dozens of exceptional Beckett performances in the past twenty-five years (Jack MacGowran in *Beginning to End*, David Warrilow in *The Lost Ones*, Billie Whitelaw in *Rockaby*, for example) will understand the impulse to continue asking it. It is the kind of question that is never answered with finality, but as data accumulate we can rephrase it in more specific ways.

Actors such as MacGowran, Warrilow and Whitelaw are habitually called “consummate,” “ultimate,” “quintessential” Beckett actors, but what exactly do those terms mean? How do these actors produce the effects for which they are praised, and precisely what are those effects? How do their techniques differ from those used in other theater? *Do* they differ? And is the audience’s role different? Alan Schneider, who at his death in 1984 was Beckett’s foremost director, always insisted he did little critical interpretation of texts. What then does it mean to call someone a “great Beckett director”? Since Beckett has repeatedly made clear that he will not tolerate what he calls “the omnipresent massacre and abuse of directorial function” (letter to Barney Rosset, February 13, 1973), to what extent can one presume to interpret his work, come to some provisional understanding of it, while directing it?

*Beckett in Performance* is an attempt to address these and other related questions through critical documentation of some of the more significant Beckett performances in Europe and America over the past several decades. It is not a history of Beckett production and makes no claims to exhaustiveness in that regard, but it does involve assessment of some seventy productions I

2 *Introduction*

have seen, both live and on video, between 1978 and 1987, and of interviews with actors and directors from those productions. It is a dramaturgical study rather than a literary one in the usual sense, written by someone whose most profound experiences of Beckett have occurred in the theater rather than the reading chair. It is an attempt to be articulate about some of those experiences in the interests of articulating a poetics of Beckett performance and discussing the place of that poetics in theater history. These issues are corollary to text analysis but nevertheless, in my view, equally important.

I was fortunate enough to meet with Beckett in Paris several times while writing this book, and the help he offered me in answering questions is evident throughout. I might mention that I still do not know exactly why he agreed to meet me in the first place. No doubt my case was helped by Warrilow, who did me the honor of sending a letter of introduction, but I would like to think it was also because he approved of my topic of study.

When Beckett and I first sat down together over coffee in the nondescript Hotel PLM in November 1986, my first thought, knowing of his notorious reticence, was to suppress the dozens of specific queries I had formulated in the course of writing *Beckett in Performance*, to say nothing of the hundreds of general questions I had formulated in the course of living my life. To my astonishment, though, he turned out to be more generous, helpful and open than many others of lesser talent and fame whom I have approached during my research. For a while I dodged about for a neutral topic, and then realized I was devising my own obstacles; for the kind of exegesis that always puts him out of patience had little to do with my work, which concerned concrete issues of theatrical production. He was actually interested in hearing about some of the performances I had seen, many done by his friends, and he spoke to me nostalgically about many others.

I remain very grateful to Beckett for his interest and assistance, and for the time he spent with me – which, by any conceivable standard, he need not have spent – and I have tried in the following chapters not to exploit his generosity. Upon leaving him each time, I searched out the nearest quiet place and wrote down everything I could recall about what we said to one another, but I have nevertheless refrained from publishing those notes. Citing a faulty memory, Beckett requested that I keep direct quotation of him to a minimum, and I have therefore quoted our conversations only where memory is not an issue and where I feel that the topic at hand calls for the specificity of his precise words.

Perhaps the best way to describe the point of view of this book – which will doubtless seem unusual to some readers – is simply to explain a few basics of dramaturgical procedure. Since a dramaturg is primarily interested in how plays generate meaning in performance, his analyses naturally focus on

performance as related to text and not, as is usual, the other way round. He is, in short, a semiologist, a researcher in the science of significances, except that he has no use for esoteric terminology. Unfortunately, semiology has never overcome the fact that a huge segment of the population stops reading or listening the moment it perceives the words “sign” and “signifier” in the same clause, and a dramaturg, if he is to be useful in production, cannot employ terms that make his collaborators stop listening. I am aware that some of the best recent writing on performance-stage transactions does make use of specialized language (notably the work of Patrice Pavis and Keir Elam), but this study avoids it as much as possible in order to remain useful to practitioners in addition to critics and others interested in Beckett as a literary figure.

The strategy of the book’s two critical sections, on acting and directing, is analogy and contrast. Each chapter focuses very closely on three or four productions, either of the same play or with the same practitioner, in order to draw conclusions about the problems of producing that work, or that type of work – type meaning any of the categories I have used to isolate production problems: early works, late works, television plays, works of prose fiction adapted for the stage. A third section contains selected excerpts from some of the interviews used as primary material for the critical study.

All the chapters in parts one and two function both independently as essays and inter-dependently as steps in an argument about Beckett’s historical context. That argument is then drawn explicitly in the conclusion, where I relate Beckett to the contemporary (mostly American) avant-garde: e.g. the Wooster Group, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, Squat Theater. Most people who bother about such matters at all would agree that, in general, theater has been unambitious and disappointing during the past fifteen years, and in that interval the avant-garde, like a monastery in the Dark Ages, has remained one of few significant focal points for serious contemplation about theatrical art. Any claims about progressiveness or radical originality in Beckett performance, then, must necessarily be held up against those of the avant-garde.

The claims I will make for Beckett have to do with the way in which presentational and representational action is blended in his theater – which is much more relevant to contemporary avant-gardist theories than either the avant-garde artists or most critics have perceived. Beckett’s oft-quoted words about Joyce also describe his own work: “You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read – or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not about something; it is that something itself.”<sup>2</sup> Beckett’s theater does not represent scenes from another time – or rather it does not only do so. It creates scenes whose subject matter is their duration in present time. His

#### 4 Introduction

dramas are not *about* experiences; *they are those experiences themselves*. This heightened authenticity in Beckett, a quality of unnerving straightforwardness, is similar in many ways to the ethic of “immediacy” that pervades much contemporary performance art and avant-garde theater.

It is also unique, however, because its source is a classic author and not a director or auteur. As I will explain through numerous illustrations, the famous resistance to Beckett both in the mainstream and the avant-garde is attributable partly to his demand, as a writer, for authority in productions, and partly to this very point about authenticity. The more narcissistic a theater practitioner is, I have found, the more he or she is threatened by the honesty in Beckett’s work, its tendency to throw duplicity back on itself, unmasking it. Indeed, part of Beckett’s significance is that he shows up the swollen, desperate egotism at work in the theater, and for that he has paid the price of unpopularity among a large group of theater professionals.

A few matters of procedure. Although I have written about certain performances as though they were stable entities, I understand that all live productions change from night to night. I am dealing in this book essentially with ephemera, and those who attended the productions I describe on different nights (or even the same night) may not have seen what I did. For this reason, I have tried to use as examples performances recorded on video or film, and have referred to those recordings in my description even when – as is true in most cases – I also saw the production live. A surprising number of films and videos of Beckett productions exist, far more than I thought when I began researching, so it is actually possible for readers to corroborate the majority of my observations. There are also important differences between videos and live performances, however, so even readers who take the time to go to the archives will occasionally have to take my word for certain points.

Nor have I limited discussion only to productions I have seen, though I have seen all those I use as main examples, and most of those two or three times. In order to give the study a broad enough historical base to permit generalization, I have occasionally relied on reviews, recollections of participants, and a handful of other excellent secondary sources, including: the published rehearsal diaries of Walter Asmus, Beckett’s Assistant Director in Germany; the special Beckett issue of *Revue d’Esthétique* edited by Pierre Chabert in 1986; McMillan/Fehsenfeld’s *Beckett in the Theatre*, which Dougald McMillan kindly allowed me to read in galleys, and the production sections of Ruby Cohn’s *Just Play: Beckett’s Theatre*.

On a related topic: as will become obvious, I have not accepted the unwritten taboo among theater practitioners against comparing different actors in the same role. Part of this book’s significance, I hope, is that it treats production with a critical seriousness usually reserved for texts, on the

assumption that theatrical performances are, among other things, works of art capable of being read closely. The ephemerality of the theater event has always protected actors and directors from having their work read closely, but video recording must inevitably change that. Some extraordinary precedents exist for the practice of comparing actors, such as Bernard Shaw's delightful "Duse and Bernhardt," and comparison is an invaluable tool for guarding against certain critical fallacies. For example, in most criticism, as Pavis writes, "remarks on . . . actors' performances are often preoccupied with the success or failure of illusion or verisimilitude," but Beckett's work, like that of many other twentieth-century theater artists, usually involves a radical critique of common assumptions about dramatic illusionism.<sup>3</sup> Comparing my own perceptions of several different performances decreases the likelihood of my making unjustified assumptions about actor/character distinctions in a given play.

In fact, Beckett's work presents an enormous trap for those prone to a priori assumptions, and I have tried throughout to be vigilant about that, especially when substantiating appraisals of performances. As already mentioned, Beckett helped me with information as much as he could, but at no point in this book do I treat his remarks or opinions as gospel, nor his productions – much as I appreciate them – as unchallengeable models. Where appropriate I explain the textual readings used as bases for judgments and leave the reader to decide their worth. Readers familiar with the field, though, will notice immediately a far greater degree of specificity in observation than that found in the majority of essays and journalistic articles on Beckett acting and directing. I have tried to respect the degree to which the works are composed of minutiae, and to bring to them a level of attention commensurate with what their performers must bring.

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PART ONE

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*Acting*

## 2 *Rockaby* and the art of inadvertent interpretation

Eclipsed among the millions of critical words that have been lavished on Samuel Beckett is an uncomfortable and frequently avoided question: on what level can spectators be expected to understand his theater? Some critics, with limited success, have tried to address this issue by pointing out parallels between the dilemmas of Beckett's characters and those of his audiences, but I want to shift the field of inquiry by discussing affinities between the actor's process of creating characters in rehearsal and the spectator's process of apprehending plays in performance. I focus predominantly on *Rockaby*, because Billie Whitelaw's extraordinary performance is well documented and also because there is an important article by Charles Lyons about the process of perceiving this play.<sup>1</sup> Lyons' essay, which has application to Beckett's other works as well, is to my knowledge unique in its detail concerning perception, yet strangely it does not mention Whitelaw at all, despite the fact that her kind of acting figures hugely in the process described.

In *Rockaby* a woman, dressed in black and "Prematurely old," sits in a rocking chair alone on a dark stage.<sup>2</sup> Though her feet do not touch the floor, the chair rocks on its own to the soothing regular rhythm of tape-recorded lines spoken in the woman's voice. As the play opens she says "More," and the rocking begins, seemingly in response to her word. During the next fifteen minutes, the play's approximate length, the rocking slows to a stop four times and the woman reacts each time but the last by saying "More," after which the rocking immediately starts again; the final time her head slowly sinks as the taped voice echoes more and more faintly. The recorded text, separated by the "Mores" into four sections, is repetitive, like a litany, and tells of a woman who goes "to and fro," looking "for another/another like herself," until "in the end/the day came . . . when she said/to herself/whom else/time she stopped"; on some repetitions of "time she stopped" the woman speaks along with the tape. The voice goes on to describe her going "back in" (presumably she was outside) to sit at her window "facing other windows/other only windows" looking for "another like herself/a little like/another living soul," but finding "all blinds down/never one up." In the final section we hear that she "went down . . . down the steep stair . . . into the old rocker/mother rocker/where mother rocked/all the years/all in black . . . off

her head they said . . . and rocked." Thus "in the end," as she rocked "off" seemingly toward death, she "was her own other/own other living soul" – "other" asserting itself in the theater as a rhyme for "mother."

The action is richly ambiguous. We hear a moving, almost sentimental tale but are not sure what the action onstage has to do with it; we are given insufficient evidence to determine either who the stage character is or if she has really died. We hear near the end that she ultimately came to function as "her own other," so we naturally reconsider the preceding story in that light and suspect that its third person point of view is a result of her having become that "other" at some point; like the narrator in *Company*, she "speaks of [her]self as of another." This possible split in the character is suggested to us in very conventional terms, similar to the age-old practice of suddenly unveiling new information about a character's background near the end of a drama, but it is more unsettling than that because it raises the possibility that the voice is lying – in the sense that many Beckett narrators lie (in *The Unnamable*, *Company*, *Cascando*, and many other works), by making up tales that seem somehow connected to their survival while also functioning as pastimes.

The mention of "mother" rocking permits several different responses: we may conflate mother and daughter, viewing the woman as a composite character who incarnates certain tendencies passed down through all generations; we may continue to view her as a singular character whose self-objectification has taken the form of identifying with her mother; or we may even speculate that the voice belongs to a true other, perhaps a daughter telling a story to "rock her [mother] off," or some other alter ego (perhaps the mysterious force that rocks the chair) who happens to have a voice similar to the woman's. As in *Waiting for Godot*, *Play*, *Act Without Words II* and many other Beckett works, the action seems to be a section of an endlessly repeated cycle – i.e. a process the daughter's daughter will also go through, etc. – but no confirmation is given that such repetitions ever occurred or will occur, and the story heard about the past may or may not be a narration of events leading up to the action seen onstage.

Lyons feels that this unverifiability is the essence of Beckett's originality as a dramatist.

Many of the moments that we witness in the theater encompass two kinds of significance: they enact a unique moment in time and, simultaneously, they function as representations of typical moments in the complete lives of the characters. In other terms, they operate both as complete or self-sufficient representations of a temporal unit and as metonyms of a larger temporal unit (an illusory wholeness that cannot be represented). I make this point to suggest that Beckett's use of partial or fragmented temporal units builds upon a fundamental convention of dramatic structure: the use of isolated or discrete moments in time as the expression of the quality of a larger

*Rockaby and the art of inadvertent interpretation*

11

section of the total narrative. Beckett's innovation is not the use of a brief episode as a metonym of an extended narrative unit; on the contrary, his drama appears unusual or original because he leaves the relationship between the individual episode and the larger implied narrative unverified and, therefore, equivocal.

(p. 306)

It is equivocal, he goes on to say, both for the characters in the dramas and for us as spectators.

We exercise our tendency to build up a narrative whole out of the fragments displayed and, at the same time, recognize that this created history is a product of our imagination – ephemeral and unverifiable. In that sense, our futile struggle to deal with the intangibility of the experience duplicates the struggle of Beckett's characters as they grapple with their images of the past in the baffling environments of the present.

(p. 306)

The only drawback to these excellent observations is their implication that such intellectual struggles might be primary experiences for spectators. Lyons stresses the fact of equivocation at the cost, to some extent, of delineating its variables: exactly how is the environment baffling to spectators and characters alike? Exactly what struggle or struggles are duplicated? He writes:

We see almost nothing of the woman's present processes of consciousness other than her decision to sustain the text by the command "More" and her agreement with the notion "*time she stopped*." We interpret the physical behavior of rocking as a compulsive rhythmic act. While we extrapolate from the details of the narrative to see her behavior as a self-conscious re-enactment of her mother's final pattern of action, no material exists in the text by which we can test the validity of our interpretation.

We may speculate that the gradual cessation of rocking and the final silence of the diminishing voice represent the character's death, but that speculation is, ultimately unverifiable.

(p. 304)

In Whitelaw's performances, however, we see quite a lot of "the woman's present processes of consciousness," processes that activate her motivations as variables in the text's transaction with spectators; the clues she gives to her character's motivations can and do change the terms of the play's ambiguity. The play in performance is subtler even than Lyons makes it seem; indeed, in light of Whitelaw's acting choices some of his carefully wrought phrases (such as "decision to sustain" and "compulsive rhythmic act") seem like hasty assumptions. It is important to understand the extent to which acting (and directing, and designing) affects theories of audience perception, for, unlike textual interpretations, they depend on particular performers and performances. And in Whitelaw's *Rockaby*, the experience of watching the woman rock, perhaps listen, utter her "Mores" and finally

drop her head is at least as powerful and significant as the experience Lyons describes of struggling to verify information in the taped text.<sup>3</sup>

The primary experience of *Rockaby* is that of a lullaby, an unchanging rhythm of words that lulls us into tranquillity until we are startled by the words "Fuck life" near the end, which make us perceive, at least in the woman's final moments, much more canniness than her previous near-catatonia has suggested. Before that we are kept from nodding like the woman by a sense of verbal expectation, a natural desire for predication that makes us await the end of the text's long sentence as much as the character's end. The narrative is like an extended predicate that refuses to resolve; we wait and wait for an active verb but keep hearing appositives ("all eyes/all sides"), new participles ("saying to herself," "facing other windows"), and what seem like new subordinate clauses ("till in the end") until the last section finally releases us with "and rocked" and the words following, which include "Fuck life." Like the Listener's toothless smile at the end of *That Time*, the "Fuck life" deliberately comments on the rest of the action, carrying the unnerving implication that the unblinking character may have been fully conscious all along.

The operative phrase here is "may have been," because a definite decision either way – toward consciousness or unconsciousness – would simplify the play to the level of melodrama. Though she may not have thought about it in these terms, Whitelaw took pains in rehearsal to preserve this "may have been," and her performance actually builds on the ambiguities Beckett wrote into his text. Significantly, Whitelaw's character never seems weak or unsure, yet her lines, live and recorded, clearly manifest the central uncertainty regarding active and passive consciousness. Her speech seems unquestionably driven by a clear mental purpose (which of course is never shared with us) that succeeds in projecting ambiguity without ambivalence.

When rehearsing and recording the tape with Alan Schneider Whitelaw regulated herself by moving her right hand back and forth like a soundless metronome, which allowed her to keep to a given rhythm while inflecting the lines in various ways. As with *Mouth in Not I*, she colored some of her lines in *Rockaby*, filling them out with diverse tones of voice and insinuations instead of leaving them neutral and with "no color" as Beckett requested. For example: the first several times she says "whom else" she pauses before the phrase and then emphasizes it as an irritable question – i.e. "whom else could I possibly be talking to?" – which implies self-awareness; in contrast, during repetitions of "a little like" she lets her voice trail up and down seemingly without direction as if she were singing to amuse herself and did not really understand her words. This variation creates an impression of a woman who is sometimes "off her head" and sometimes not, and leads the audience to expect only certain kinds of breaks in the median tone. Thus in the end when