1 Positioning the 'Experimental' in Beckett

Introduction: A Living Legacy

The year 2019 marked the first thirty years of Samuel Beckett's posthumous legacy, and as the world's theatres, publishers, and universities regularly, variously, and vigorously display, his literature is not yet gathering dust. Beckett's writing continues to find new readers, reach new audiences, and cross into new media. The complexity of his archival, philosophical, intermedial, and theatrical legacy generates new scholarship at a rate that few authors can match. Yet a discomfort attends this enrolment of Beckett in the literary canon, one perhaps signalled in the title of James Knowlson's authorised biography, *Damned to Fame*: how can avant-garde artistic innovation be preserved, once it becomes universally recognised and widely available? When undeniably epochal artistic work has left its epoch of origin, does it still function as advertised, or must it adapt to new conditions? In the 2060s, will received interpretations from the 1960s continue to domesticate the radicality of Beckett's vision? 'Habit', as Vladimir warns, 'is a great deadener'. How, in the face of ubiquity, will Beckett's thought live?

The problem seems especially acute in the theatre, which trades in ephemeral events, as opposed to the novel, which historically has taken the form of an apparently more static object (though literary forms too are changing within digital culture, and stasis may have been an illusion all along). Any Beckett performance in the era of late capital entails a collision between elements of the culture industry sometimes working at cross-purposes. Four of these 'agents' in the world of the theatre can be ranked on a scale moving from greatest to least 'degrees of freedom':

> Artistic impulse (what artists, given varying experiences of Beckett, wish to do);
> Production exigency (what is feasible to achieve within time, space, and budget);
> Market forces (what programmers/reviewers assume audiences will want to see);
> Copyright (what the Estate and its representatives will willingly licence).

Especially given the hard power vested in the latter two, such a system seems destined to lead to repetition over variation, or tradition over innovation. This might seem to suggest that Beckett is insufficiently available to contemporary theatre artists, or at least that his work is no longer a space of performative experimentation (if it ever was).[1] Compounding this perception is the reputation that Beckett (during his life) and his Estate (after his death) developed for

[1] The tension between the avant-garde and the canonical Beckett was noted a decade ago, in the lead editorial of the special issue on Beckett in *Performance Research*: '[to] the considerable, obsessive machine of "Beckett Studies" Beckett seemed at one and the same time too difficult and

reacting to controversial productions with legal action. Indeed, the partial list that follows implies a history of significant conflict between artistic impulse and copyright, with the 'calling card' of the conflict also listed:

JoAnne Akalaitis, *Endgame*, 1984 (setting)
De Haarlemse Toneelschuur, *Waiting for Godot*, 1988 (female)
George Tabori, all productions, 1980s–1990s (circus)
Gildas Bourdet, *Fin de Partie*, 1988 (pink)
Susan Sontag, *Waiting for Godot*, 1993 (text/stage directions)
Deborah Warner, *Footfalls*, 1994 (stage directions)
Robert Bacci, *Waiting for Godot*, 2006 (female)

Belying the prominence of these controversies in media reporting and thus in the public imagination, a far longer list could be made of work that did not meet with such restrictions, but proceeded nonetheless, despite falling outside of the theoretical boundaries. There is almost no prohibition that Beckett made in one case that was not transgressed in another, either with his permission or without his prevention. Partly on these grounds, we challenge the discourse that Samuel Beckett's drama is not already a terrain for experimental practice. This view may have developed from the series of historical controversies relating to the plays in performance, leading to a perceived restriction in interpretation or to limited freedom to experiment with Beckett on stage, but it does not reflect the complex and protean nature of such restrictions.

This introduction seeks first, then, to reclaim the experimental tradition within Beckett's lifetime, recalling how he interacted with trends in performance in the second half of the twentieth century, as he drew on, revised, and contributed to strands of both aesthetic modernism and postmodern dramaturgy. Beckett's use of generic fluidity, technology, long-term development, iteration, and collaboration – modes that also define the 'experimental', a term we discuss in detail later in this section – shows greater openness than is often assumed. Since his death, the range of practices happening at high-interchange locations and 'nodes' of Beckettian practice both continue and extend such innovations. The work of artists like Natalie Abrahami, Peter Brook, Katie Mitchell, and Robert Wilson, or of companies like Company SJ, Gare St Lazare Ireland, Pan Pan, and Touretteshero – among many others working in installation, festival, or university contexts – all reveal the increasingly interdisciplinary, international, and intermedial character of contemporary Beckettian praxis. Such experiments

too experimental, still, for the mainstream, but somehow too passé for explicit consideration by those at the "cutting-edge" of contemporary practices' (Laws 2007, 1).

enable engagement beyond Beckett, within wider social challenges and transdisciplinary research problems.

What is at stake in considering experimental Beckett is more than simply an analysis of aesthetic choices or matters of taste in the theatre. This research is intended to open pathways where performance can be considered to illuminate contemporary culture. The multidisciplinary artists discussed in subsequent sections as offering examples of 'contemporary performance practices' around Samuel Beckett, both through their statements or through their work itself, articulate alternative modes of engagement and emergent features of Beckett's *oeuvre* that reveal new affordances for experimental research, performance, and education via his texts. Though this introduction identifies some of the experimental heritage of Beckettian practice during his lifetime, our main examples are drawn from the work of practitioners over the past ten years (since 2009), with attention to Irish and UK work that has demonstrated international impact.

We have in mind two audiences for this research. First, it is for scholars of Beckett whose expertise may (or may not) lie in contemporary performance, but for whom interpretation of Beckett's works in performance remains an area of enquiry; second, it is for artists, students, or educators who are seeking to update past models of Beckett in performance with attention to contemporary praxis. This intervention is not about staging plays, but rather about how twenty-first-century practitioners operate and negotiate the dynamics of tradition and innovation across the works of Beckett, including many works not 'intended' for performance or works not performed 'as intended'. In seeking to take a long view of questions that pertain to the past ten years of Beckett in performance and consider how they are relevant to the next thirty years of Beckett's reception, this work groups experimental practices into three categories: embodiment, space, and technology. Before offering detailed case studies, however, this introduction proposes a theoretical and historical framework for the 'experimental' in Beckett.

'Accursed progenitor': An Evolutionary Model

In describing the situation that pertains to Beckett in performance now, we have found it useful to consider Beckett's literature as a living thing to which he gave birth. The discourse of literature is increasingly laced with organic metaphors, and Beckett studies is no different; indeed, Beckett scholarship is one of the driving forces in the wider field of 'genetic' criticism. The term 'epigenesis', invoked by Dirk van Hulle and others to refer to the post-publication/post-presentation alterations that individual texts continue to undergo, is useful in

capturing the dynamics of change at stake here.[2] Biology uses the term 'phylogenesis' to discuss the evolutionary development and diversification of a species or group of organisms, helping us to group Beckett's texts as a phylum within literature that is undergoing collective change. We argue that Beckett's work today is 'evolving' – that is, his texts form living systems inherently connected to their origins, but also adapting to new conditions in a framework of multiplicity, according to a logic of survival.

A paradox is also involved in thinking about Beckett giving birth to anything, given his narrators' intense anxieties around parturition, obsession with birth trauma, and broadly negative orientation towards children. A recurrent theme in *Endgame* is the denial of reproduction or regeneration of any kind, for any species, precisely to arrest the inevitable processes of evolution: 'But humanity might start from there all over again!', says Hamm of a flea (Beckett 2006, 108). Of his own parents, Nagg and Nell, Hamm has nothing but invective to offer: 'accursed progenitor!', he calls his father (96). This is a layered accusation with biblical echoes (see Genesis 9–10 in the King James Version), and because of the passively voiced 'accursed', the subject here is ambiguous: it could refer either to the speaker of the curse (Hamm) or to a higher power. What is clear is that in a Beckettian universe, a primal curse attaches to the act of giving birth; in relating Beckett's writing to this act, it would follow that Beckett's writing is similarly cursed. These burdens are as follows:

(1) 'Born astride a grave': All writing is doomed to end; writers fade, works are extinguished, and the last reader who knows or embodies Beckett's work will someday die.
(2) 'A difficult birth': Writing is generally painful and difficult to create, for Beckett especially so. Doing justice to his writing, either editorially for publication or directorially for the theatre, is a challenge.
(3) '*Optimum non nasci, aut cito mori*': To be born is to enter into suffering, because of the machinery of desire. Writing, if it is truly alive, is by its nature unruly, unwieldy, and difficult to control; writing that survives longer due to its own excellence is, at the same time, ever more open to abuse and compromise.

It may even be that Beckett's 'lineage' or 'family' of works is specifically cursed, condemned to more difficulty than usual, due to Beckett's unique combination of talents and interests. Beckett exhibited prolific creativity across multiple media, but he was saddled with an extreme care for detail, the stress of

[2] A detailed exploration of epigenetics begun in *Modernism/Modernity* (Van Hulle 2011) is developed further in section 4 of *Modern Manuscripts: The Extended Mind and Creative Undoing from Darwin to Beckett and Beyond* (Van Hulle 2013).

which is exacerbated the more prolific one is. His strategy of 'vaguening' and his judicious use of silence, even his recurrent unwillingness to comment on meaning, paradoxically lead to a profusion and proliferation of interpretations. Quoted endlessly about the need to keep genres distinct, Beckett collaborated repeatedly and fruitfully on intermedial translations of his work. Famously resistant to the trappings of fame, Beckett's insights have resonated to such an extent that he is viewed almost as a secular saint. The theoretically rigid rules around acceptable performance choices are unevenly enforced, with the result that festivals, programmers, and audiences can't seem to get their fill of remixing, restaging, and rethinking this work. In short, though prodigious effort was expended during and after Beckett's life to exert control over the work, containment of an *oeuvre* is always-already impossible. Writing has an agency all its own. It may stretch the metaphor to the breaking point, but perhaps Beckett was a bad parent: limited communication, uneven rule enforcement, and attempts at control, followed by sporadic flashes of intolerance of his writing's hard-won independence.

If the basic idea of an organic paradigm for Beckett's literature is accepted, then this carries both political and practical significance for those who work in the field, either as practitioners or as scholars. Namely, our role becomes the construction and maintenance of a healthy ecology in which the work can flourish, expand, and continue to self-actualise, pushing the animating impulse of Beckett's work forward across boundaries and into new terrains. This is one of the motivations for establishing networks, conferences, research centres, and in our own case, the Samuel Beckett Laboratory, where spaces are designated and communities of practice are built that seek to address some of the questions that live within the work (Heron and Johnson 2017; Heron and Johnson et al. 2014). Such practice is conducted not in a framework of commercial endeavour, with the pressures of the culture industry that this entails, but rather in terms of iterative, durational, and fundamental research and pedagogy.

Living Laboratories: An Experimental Model

In the first dossier of outcomes from the founding year of the Samuel Beckett Laboratory, we cited Philip Zarrilli (2002) in relation to the 'metaphysical studio' (Heron and Johnson et al. 2014, 73). In the present introduction, in which we apply the words 'experimental' and 'laboratory' in the context of public and professional performances of Beckett, we again find Zarrilli useful:

> We should always engage the open-ended dialogical question of how our knowledges 'about', 'for', and 'in' continuously inform each other, and are not simplistically dichotomized. Our problem is to keep this dynamic

> dialectic constantly 'alive', to have artists and scholars of performance join those scientists who are rigorously exploring the 'biological and phenomenological' and thereby building bridges 'between mind in science and mind in experience [Varela 1991, xv].' (Zarrilli 2001, 44)

This helps to map a relatively porous borderland in which the practices on either side of the notional scholar/artist divide are intimately related, perhaps because they are subject to the same societal forces and epochal events transforming the culture industries and universities alike. The debates that have created binary divisions between arts/sciences faculties or qualitative/quantitative methodologies are called into question by the increasing priority on interdisciplinary research, social challenges, or transdisciplinary problems in which all are forced to engage. In the sections that follow, we explore Beckettian embodiment as an 'experimental entanglement' (Fitzgerald and Callard 2015, 16–23), an interdisciplinary methodology that brings the humanities and social sciences together with neuroscientific research to 'explore how different ways of being *experimental* can open up new avenues through which to think and work collaboratively across distinct arenas of expertise' (9, emphasis added).

The term 'experimental' denotes that which is *experienced*, tested, or observed, especially within the scientific context, where it is usually applied. Within the arts, the connotations of the term suggest the provisional, untested, and emerging (especially in relation to the avant-garde; see Harding 2013). Indeed, there is an etymological slippage at the root of the word 'experiment'. From the mid-fourteenth century, there is the 'action of observing or testing' alongside the 'piece of evidence or empirical proof', giving us the association with rigour and fact. However, there is a parallel trajectory for the word, from the Old French *esperment* ('practical knowledge, cunning; enchantment, magic spell; trial, proof, example; lesson, sign, indication') and the Latin *experimentum* ('trial, test, proof, experiment').[3]

This tension between the *enchanted/experimental* and the *tested/experimental* offers us a methodological opportunity, and not only for works by Samuel Beckett. It is tempting to associate the former with the arts and the latter with the sciences, but we suggest that experimental processes are considerably more

[3] 'Experiment' is in use from the mid-fourteenth century, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The compendium *Online Etymology Dictionary* traces the origin in detail: 'action of observing or testing; an observation, test, or trial'; also 'piece of evidence or empirical proof; feat of magic or sorcery', from Old French *esperment* 'practical knowledge, cunning; enchantment, magic spell; trial, proof, example; lesson, sign, indication', from Latin *experimentum* 'a trial, test, proof, experiment', noun of action from *experiri* 'to try, test', from *ex-* 'out of' + *peritus* 'experienced, tested', from Proto-Indo-European root *per-*, meaning 'to try, risk', an extended sense from root *per-* 'forward', via the notion of 'to lead across, press forward'.

nuanced and complex than a simple distinction between the affective arts and the objective sciences. In most scenarios, the burden of proof lies with the practitioner of the experiment, or with the practice that claims to be *experimental*, which will always-already be some form of trial (even when the artist puts their own practice on trial). The fact that some notorious Beckett productions have migrated from the playhouse to the courthouse is a further 'trial' resonance here that we seek to rebalance. As Anna McMullan has argued, Beckett put 'theatre on trial' (1993) in his own practice, and we show that his later collaborators continue to do so, in acts of *enchanting* that seek to *test* the value of the texts through performance. While these contemporary artists are engaged in acts of *testing* through experimental practice, their source material is the original 'tried-and-*tested*' dramatic literature where we first become *enchanted* with Beckett. With McMullan, we also place this work within an interdisciplinary and intercultural research field. She writes that Beckett's works in performance are 'laboratories for staging embodiment' (2010, 14) that produce knowledge *and/as* experience.

'Beckettian experiments' may enter the public sphere disguised simply as performances of his plays; often, however, they appear within a theatre laboratory constituted as such, or they may be participatory events that encourage an audience to put Beckett 'on trial' through performance. Either way, the source text is being extended into a practical encounter that will enchant, test, or prove an aesthetic hypothesis through an embodied, spatial, and temporary activity. In practice, this happens in numerous ways and within diverse environments: from studios in schools, colleges, and universities, through to art galleries and public spaces. Some of these contexts may be experimental in the avant-garde sense, without being experimental in the rigorous or scientific sense. However, as several scholars of scientific experimentation have shown (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Crease 1993; Knorr-Cetina 1999; Barad 2007), this objective rigour is equally susceptible to the practical or *enchanted* knowing as it is to proven or *tested* evidence.

Robert Crease demonstrates that experimentation functions as theatre in *The Play of Nature: Experimentation as Performance* (1993), where he considers the stagecraft of scientific experiments. The laboratory as 'theatron' literally performs 'something materially into being . . . the laboratory itself is a space of action' and 'experimenters are in the role of producer-directors' (106). This interest in materiality of experiments is especially helpful for our study of contemporary performance practice on Beckett:

> Like artists, experimenters are restricted by the limits of their equipment and materials, they push these limits and must wait and see what works. . . . An artistic performance begins with a performative play-space that is not

> infinite. . . . A performer allows such things to function as organic parts of the performance as event . . . apparently inessential details spelled the difference between success and failure. (110)

That laboratories are spaces of failure – given Beckett's interest in failure – is also a crucial concept here, and several interdisciplinary studies of failure start to emerge, from science (Firestein 2015) to the arts (Le Feuvre 2010). Experimental failure is therefore an important feature of the aesthetic risk and the ethical value of our case studies. This work frequently happens within an avant-garde 'legacy' of failure ranging from Antonin Artaud to Pina Bausch, from Joseph Chaikin to Ariane Mnouchkine. Here creative failure is productive, generative, and *necessary* within experimental processes. For Chaikin: 'All prepared systems fail. They fail when they are applied. . . . Process is dynamic: it's the evolution that takes place during work. Systems are recorded as ground plans, not to be followed any more than rules of courtship can be followed' (1972, 21).

Staying with the historical example of Chaikin as an experimental Beckettian helps us to explore the practice of those selected later in this work. His published writing documents experiments in the avant-garde sense, but his interest in failure within laboratory processes also starts to address the scientific problems with methodology and analysis. Recent performance-based studies (Ridout 2006; Bailes 2011; Halberstam 2011) have tended to foreground the hopeful or radical potential of failure, which adopts an experimental strategy of *unknowing* to explore new terrain (see Heron and Kershaw 2018). Some of this work underpinned the ecological thinking of Gregory Bateson, whose paradigm that 'an explorer can never know what [s]he is exploring until it has been explored' (2000, xxiv) may resonate with experimental artists like Chaikin. His own reflections on his work with the Living Theatre, with Judith Malina and Julian Beck, and with his own Open Theatre ensemble, frequently use this language of exploration:

> Julian Beck said that an actor has to be like Columbus: he has to go out and discover something, and come back and report on what he discovers. Voyages have to be taken, but there has to be a place to come back to, and this place has to be different from the established theater. It is not likely to be a business place. (1972, 54)

The terms engaged here are reminiscent of Zarrilli's when he calls his studio 'a place of hypothesis, and therefore a place of possibility' (2002, 160). The question of whether the 'experimental' is the province of closed or open spaces – rehearsal rooms with fellow ensemble members and invited guests, or theatres filled with public audiences – is one of the tensions inherent in this strand of twentieth-century practice. 'Failure' as a term, of course, has different valences depending on what is at stake in the artistic encounter, namely how public it is.

And yet something productive emerged in the twentieth-century avant-garde from the willingness to fail in front of others: as Chaikin notes, 'when the Open Theater started we were only a private laboratory. We did performances, occasionally, but basically we were a laboratory performing unfinished work' (1972, 104). He imagined in 1965 that 'one of the good things is that we're willing to *fail*; it helps us go beyond the safe limits and become adventurers' (56, emphasis added). This fundamental kind of failure is a special joy of laboratory experimentation in both the theatre and the sciences, recalling Crease's conclusion that 'the artistry of experimentation, like that of the theatre, is often accompanied by a feeling of joy and celebration' (1993, 120). If this outlines the affect associated with *enchanted* experiments rather than merely *tested* ones, what are the circumstances or contexts that might give rise to this enchantment?

We argue that the key step is the revaluation of failure, as this encourages and sustains our natural curiosity towards the unknown (or provisionally unknowable). Failures to achieve *expected* outcomes that nonetheless teach us something, a normative concept in the sciences, is obviously a part of 'closed' performance laboratory praxis as well. But due to the material burdens of being a working artist within late capital, it is more challenging for artists/audiences to embrace failure in the 'open' public cultural sphere of art practice. This is also why the term 'experimental' is sometimes used as a pejorative in certain regional theatre cultures or subsets of the theatre audience. Yet a fundamental association of failure with curiosity and creativity seeks to reclaim the term. The performance laboratory is a place of iterative failure, where artistic research produces an *unknowing* or 'not-yet-knowing' (see Borgdorff 2012) and where the distinction between 'things we *want to know* (epistemic things) and . . . objects *through which we know* (technical objects)' (190) emerges as a hermeneutic tool for experimental Beckett, especially regarding the tension between the enchanted and the tested indicated earlier in this section. We understand this tension as methodologically valuable to the tradition of Beckettian performance, and as an essential precursor to the emerging cultures of sustained/sustainable experimentation.

Performance Cultures: An Emerging Model

As the expansion of theatre texts and practices across national and cultural boundaries flourished in the twentieth century, especially in the related flows of 'globalisation' and 'festivalisation' towards the end of Beckett's life, a rethinking of what is meant now by 'performance cultures' is warranted. Since the 1990s, influential discussions in theatre studies began to identify the

city (rather than the nation) as a key unit for such cultures,[4] and indeed it is visible how certain cities – London, Dublin, and New York – remain highly important 'nodes of practice' for Beckettian experiments. The examples selected for this research are predominantly focused around these high-interchange locations which both represent Beckett locally and distribute Beckett internationally. It is also noticeable that in all three cities, experimental works tend to emerge within a wider ecology of interested scholars, artists, and scholar-artists (and depend on the presence of a willing audience).

Our case studies, divided into experiments with (1) text and embodiment, (2) space and environment, and (3) media and technology, each have antecedents in the performance cultures of these cities, as well as among notable twentieth-century Beckett practitioners. Chaikin's practice, for example, is a clear instance of experimentation with embodiment and text: in his *Texts*, a piece mainly based on *Texts for Nothing* but including the closing lines of *How It Is*, he performed (1981) and later directed Bill Irwin in the same adaptation (1992), drawing together the intensely physical work of clowning with textual material that does not easily yield drama.[5] From the same New York avant-garde ecosystem of the 1960s–1980s, another prose adaptation like David Warrilow's *The Lost Ones* (1975) is an example of how space, by revising audience proxemics within an alternative configuration, can be used experimentally to generate new experiences of Beckett. Indeed, the whole archive of Mabou Mines adaptations (1976–86) (including *Cascando*, *Mercier and Camier*, *Company*, and *Worstward Ho*) reveals a thriving experimental culture that precedes (and, we argue, also supersedes) the legal crisis around 1984's *Endgame* at the American Repertory Theatre (ART) involving JoAnne Akalaitis.[6] For the experimental approach to media and technology that fills out the final set of case studies, we need look no further than Beckett's own practice as a key precursor. Beckett repeatedly 'iterated' his work with/on/through media, generating alternative variations and foregrounding the technologies of distribution as well as philosophies of representation: Marin Karmitz's authorised film version of *Comédie* (1966) and Beckett's television versions of *Not I* (1977) and *What Where* (1985) all show an artist willing to

[4] See Kennedy (1993) for an early application of this model to Shakespeare; Fischer-Lichte (2009) and Pavis (2010) for a new discourse (and debate) around 'interweaving cultures' replacing 'interculturalism'; Harvie (2009) for a survey of theatre and the city; and Knowles (2017) for a recent survey of the whole literature in this arena.

[5] Materials relating to Chaikin's 1981 performance and the Chaikin/Irwin 1992 production were consulted at the University of Reading, which holds extensive 'Stage Files' on prose adaptations.

[6] Even Akalaitis herself went on to direct *Beckett Shorts* in 2007, transgressing genre (*Eh Joe* on stage) and bending stage directions/contract restrictions (mainly by interpolating music) without incident. See Goodlander (2008) for a review of the production.