

Review: Three Beckett Plays at the Harold Clurman Theatre, New York, 1983.

John Calder

Two of the three plays performed in the Summer of 1983 in New York were receiving their English language premiere, the other, written and titled for the Beckett seminar at Ohio State University in 1981, was being seen for the first time in a public theatre. Alan Schneider, was once again in charge of putting on stage the author's special vision of the world as he wants it done. David Warrilow, who led the cast during the early weeks, sadly had to withdraw, but the force of the three plays did not diminish with a change of cast, and he eventually returned to it.

Ohio Impromptu is unchanged from its Ohio premiere, but suffered a little from a smaller stage. The sculptural quality of a Beckett play always lends itself better to distance, width and surrounding blackness. It is the first Beckett play to present a Doppelgänger on stage, another Beckett pair, but this time seen as mirror images; it belongs to Beckett's ghost period, where phantoms that echo the haunting quality of memory and nostalgia in his work are seen or described on stage. Meaning is less important than atmosphere: *Ohio Impromptu* catches, in those tones of calm resignation that has characterised the Beckett of recent years, the sense of loss of a loved one, seen both from within and without, not only the memory of a face and a presence, but also a memory of that memory. The reader reads to his own image, is visited by that image, reads about that image that is his own memory of being visited. Some passages that have special poignancy for the listener are repeated on request. Seldom has the atmosphere of personal loss as it must be suffered by millions daily, been so perfectly captured in dramatic and literary terms. As with *Company*, the author again returns to a theme he has portrays many times, that loneliness and nostalgia are too personal, after a certain age, to be shared with any being other than oneself.

Beckett writes in metaphor, but seldom as directly as in *Catastrophe*, the second play in this group. He accepted a commission from the Theatre Festival at Avignon to write a play for a special evening to draw attention to the plight of Vaclav Havel, the Czech dissident playwright, who had then been in jail for some years. Without in anyway moving closer to naturalistic theatre, he has nevertheless caught in a way that must be clear to any audience the essence of Havel's situation and of any victim in the hands of total authoritarian power. As always with Beckett's most frightening situations, it contains much humour, and the audience laughs, before it draws in its breath as it begins to catch the point, much as it usually does in *Happy Days*. *Catastrophe* portrays a man in a studio or theatre being made-up and prepared for a "performance" in which he becomes a living statue portraying, from the director's point of view, the quiescent, unprotesting victim, a symbol of the ideal citizen of a totalitarian regime; to us he portrays helpless misery, but in spite of his helplessness, defiance shines—there can be no better word for it—from his suffering eyes.

Catastrophe is not only about a political situation and the place of the artist in it. The victim or "protagonist" is also representative of all actors, having to portray what writers write for them in the way directors tell them to do it (Beckett is not unaware of his own relationship with actors, particularly those who in the past have resisted his stage directions). The director in the play catches two prototypes, that of the political commissar and of the all-powerful personality director like Peter Brook, Vitez or Chereau, who bend a performance to their own interpretation, where

often the victim is the author himself; there are many “in” theatrical jokes. The director’s assistant coolly carries out her instructions, and it matters little if we are in a concentration camp or a film studio: all humane considerations are ruled out to achieve the ultimate work of art. The two-pronged metaphor is incredibly effective for all its surface simplicity. In time, as with all of Beckett’s work, more strands and allusions will be discovered.

What Where arrived at the last minute when the first two plays were already in rehearsal. Written in French for the Graz Festival, 1983, it must have been hastily translated by the author to finish off Alan Schneider’s evening, and most effective it is. I came to it cold, not having known of its existence and was only able to read it a week later; it takes much puzzling out. There are four characters, all identical, and if we can assume, as I will do until persuaded otherwise, that what in Beckett looks identical is identical, they are all the same person. In addition to Bam, Bom, Bim and Bem there is the voice of Bam which comes from a visible, spotlighted microphone on stage at head level. The clear indication is that what we are seeing is both a memory and a scenario: instructions come from the microphone, the voice of Bam controls what we see, puts the characters through their movements rapidly without words like a film running over its spools at rewind speed, and then starts again, occasionally stopping when Bam is not satisfied and a phrase is improved to add to the force of the theme. Bam wishes to elicit information about *what* was said and *where* it was said. On his instructions each of the Doppelgänger is tortured in turn to obtain the information, but on reporting back after having been “given the works” that they have not been able in spite of the torture to elicit *what* and *where*, they are themselves “given the works” to confess that they have lied and do know what the tortured man had to confess. Ultimately Bam himself fails to get the information from Bem that Bim had confessed to him what Bom had confessed and prepares to be “given the works” himself, either by himself or by the voice that is the nearest reality to the audience. The play shares many similarities with *Ohio Impromptu*, the identical characters in appearance and dress, the unwinding backwards of events and the stylisation of image and movement in particular. Events are in the past, already caught on the tape that the mind can reel backward and forward, purgatorial in atmosphere, it belongs to the sequence of plays, where memory is equated with a tape or film, that started with *Krapp’s Last Tape* and *Play* and that in Beckett’s fiction finds its expression in the *Molloy* Trilogy, especially *The Unnamable* and in *How It Is*. It sometimes appears that Beckett sees the universe like a gigantic Dantean computer where every consciousness, living or dead, is constantly running and rerunning the events of life in both directions, a concept close to the theories of J. R. Dunne.

The play is about truth, the impossibility of certainty and the distrust of second hand evidence, as unreliable as first hand evidence. There is of course much more to it than that, and scholars will tease out of *What Where* once the full implications of what lies behind Bam’s voice are thought out. The language, while exercising all the Beckett economy and the stylisation that is part of that economy, is near to the popular vernacular. But one thing is clear: each of these fifteen minute plays is a miniature masterpiece deserving thought and further acquaintance that parallels the extraordinary fictional texts that have appeared since his seventieth birthday, *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho*. Beckett has never moved far from the world of Dante, but now depicts reality in holographs that, like film, can be shown at will if the magician wills it. Increasingly Shakespearean, Beckett has taken over the role of Prospero, and he now presents literary creation and human creation as metaphors of each other, and the stage, where reality is created and portrayed for the length of time of the performance, a metaphor for life, which he once defined as

“the space of a door that opens and shuts” but now sees as the space of a dramatic performance. There is room for much speculation here for Beckett scholars on the nature of that universal theatre and the playwright who creates it that lies at the core of the current Beckettian perception with all its metaphysical possibilities.

In the first cast the always remarkable David Warrilow was partnered by Rand Mitchell, Donald Davis (Director in *Catastrophe* and *Bom*), Daniel Wirth and Margaret Reed (Assistant in *Catastrophe*). Later Kevin O'Connor joined the cast. The success with a public much greater than the normal public has astonished and delighted Jack Garfein who runs the Harold Clurman Theatre, and he plans another triple bill soon.

Due to a delay in publication of the last issues of *JOBS*, this review, written in 1983, although still valid as a review, is now somewhat dated. The successful triple bill went to the 1984 Edinburgh Festival, where it was highly acclaimed as part of a multi-event Beckett season at the Gateway Theatre. The production was also seen at the Jerusalem Festival in June 1985. A double bill of *Piece of Monologue* and *That Time* followed the success of the triple bill.

In spite of the tragic death of Alan Schneider the production has held up very well. Imperceptibly there has been a slight movement towards naturalism. In other Beckett productions mounted by the Clurman company, less attention has been given to the subtleties of line readings, so that, in *Endgame* for example, where stage directions have been carefully observed, there has been a definite falling off in the musical *legato* quality of the text and the big poetic moments are less effective. Big Beckett events are being prepared for 1986 in New York, when Beckett becomes an octogenarian, and it is only hoped that the casting and direction will have the meticulous attention the plays require. p 303

Review: 'Mois Beckett' directed by Pierre Chabert, at the Théâtre du Rond-Point, Paris, 15 September - 16 October, 1983.

Audrey McMullan

The Autumn theatre season opened in Paris with what amounted to a Samuel Beckett Festival, including three recent short plays—*Berceuse*, *L'Impromptu d'Ohio*, and *Catastrophe* at the Théâtre du Rond-Point; *La Dernière Bande* at the Poche-Montparnasse; and *Pas Moi* at the Théâtre Essai. The plays at the Rond-Point, home of the compagnie Renaud-Barrault, were acted by Catherine Sellers, Michael Lonsdale, and Jean-Louis Barrault. The director, Pierre Chabert, has previously worked closely with Samuel Beckett, particularly when he played Krapp in *La Dernière Bande*, under the author's own direction, at the Théâtre d'Orsay in 1975. He also played Hamm in *Fin de Partie* at the American Centre in Paris in 1981. There was a strong emphasis on the visual image—costumes, props, lighting, attitude and gestures of the actors, the interrelationship of figure, object, and space. Indeed, the visual purity of the images, especially in the first two plays, was a memorable feature of the production.

As the curtain opened on *Berceuse*, the light gradually delineated first a face, then the entire view of an old lady in a rocking chair, isolated against the surrounding darkness. In contrast to the Alan Schneider New York/London production, where Billie Whitelaw's dress was full and elaborately hung with sequins, the tiny figure of Catherine Sellers was enclosed in a close-fitting dress of black pleated silk, reminiscent of the designs of Fortuny in the earlier part of the century. The former gave a more vivid impression of age and decay—Ms. Whitelaw's hair was loose and dishevelled, her face worn, contrasting, like a Miss Havesham, with her stiff and rather fussy gown. Catherine Seller's appearance was more one of faded elegance. Her face, though deathly pale and shadowed, almost like a mask apart from the anxious dark eyes, was less obviously aged. The image as a whole, in the Paris production, was more refined. Any unnecessary visual detail was eliminated. The narrow vertical lines of the pleated dress emphasised the frailty of the figure, and complemented the lines of the chair, which both imprisoned and embraced her body. The chair was specially designed for the production by the decorateurs—two sculptors, Jean Herbin and Pierre Didot—so that the speed and depth of the rock could be modulated with considerable sensitivity. This enabled the rhythm of the chair's movement to follow closely the rhythm of the voice, rising, falling, or stopping momentarily.

The recorded voice of Ms. Sellers captured the musicality, and pervasive, incantatory rhythm of the verbal text. It also expressed a softness and a fatigue which contrasted with the apprehension in the large dark eyes, sometimes closed, as she listened to the voice, otherwise staring into void. Her enunciation of the four "Encore's" which punctuate the text conveyed both supplication and dread, suggesting an ambiguity in her attitude to death, desired as a release from her long, agonisingly lonely life, yet also feared. The voice seemed to be calming the old lady, drawing her, almost enticing her into death, to which she eventually submits, surrendering to the soothing, steady rhythm of voice and rocker. The indivisible unity of figure and chair, the echo between the rhythm of the rocking, and that of the voice, reinforced the poetic intensity, and musical unity of the piece. In the text, though this did not seem to be reflected here in F's attitude on stage, there is a sense of self-reconciliation, or 'recueillement.' Denied any response from the external world, F. (in English

W.) eventually turns to herself, to the voice of herself, and to death for comfort. The journey down the stairs is also a descent into the self, almost a descent back into the womb—in the final ‘quartet’ her image fuses with that of her Mother, who, like her, ‘*de son plus beau noir vêtue,*’ at last sought the arms of the rocker—‘*des bras enfin*’. Towards the end, the light shifted to concentrate on the face, and the haunting rhythm drew us steadily to the final moment, when with a sudden and surprising last burst of energy (like the final effort which gives birth), conveyed in the much harsher line—‘*aux gogues la vie,*’ F’s head slowly fell forward, and after some seconds of silence, the image gradually faded into darkness.

In *L’Impromptu d’Ohio*, the lighting (subtle, almost intimate), again gradually brought into view two identically dressed figures, bent over a table. Each face was partially hidden by a hand over the forehead, indeed that of the Listener (Jean-Louis Barrault), behind the table, head lowered, was almost completely obscured. The light shone downwards, illuminating quite a narrow circle, including the two figures, the open book, on which the light seemed to be concentrated, and a large-brimmed black hat on the table towards the edge of the circle. Michael Lonsdale, reading the final pages of the book, adopted a rather halting, fatigued tone, pronouncing each word with equal, and deliberate emphasis, which evoked the strain of repeated nocturnal readings, and drew our attention to the words which the Reader is trying, sometime with difficulty, to decipher. However, I felt this monotone, somewhat laboured voice, lost some of the subtlety of Beckett’s rhythms, which constantly challenge, and redefine the meaning and suggestivity of the words, creating waves of statement, echo, and re-statement, counterpointing and interweaving sound and meaning, emotional and intellectual response.

The text in fact describes the final stages of a life, identifiable as that of the Listener, through certain motifs common to both stage and text—the long, black coat, the old-fashioned hat. The protagonist attempts to escape the painful memories of a once-shared intimacy. He moves to unknown surroundings, which cannot remind him of the past, thereby, it seems, deserting the ‘*cher visage*’ who warns him in a dream to stay, and promises him comfort, as Christ promised to send his Spirit, the comforter, to his disciples—‘*mon ombre te consolera.*’

He is subsequently overcome by solitude, yet in the extremity of his suffering, the promised consolation appears, in the form of the Reader, whether sent by the former loved one, or, as S. E. Gontarski suggests, ‘generated from or by Listener himself.’ From this point onwards, the text comes to reflect more and more closely the actual stage scene before us, though complete reflection does not occur till the words have ended, and the heads of Listener and Reader are raised in a simultaneous and identical movement, to meet each other’s eyes. Any action or direct speech, apart from the final movement, and the Listener’s intermittent taps on the table signalling the Reader to pause, and repeat certain phrases, takes place in the text, suggesting the division between subject and object, self and its existence in space and time, which has been a principal structural pattern in all of Beckett’s drama. Here, Listener and voice are no longer alienated (as are Mouth and Auditor in *Pas Moi*), but, as the text tells us, ‘*ils devinrent comme un seul.*’

Their relationship was echoed scenically in the identical dress and pose of the two figures and the Listener’s series of slow, but authoritative taps which control the Reader’s reading. The growing sense of closeness between them was conveyed visually at one point, when the Listener’s hand stayed that of the Reader, raised to find a previous reference, and both hands fell slowly together.

The final image of *L'Impromptu d'Ohio* came across very strongly onstage. As the text reached its end, announced by the repetition of 'Il no reste rien a dire,' the light narrowed to concentrate on the faces, particularly that of the Listener, now fully revealed, as both hands were lowered, and both heads raised, facing each other in a complete mirror image. The past, with its images of a solitary and suffering life, dissolved into the silence of a timeless present, in which Self and Self, or Self and Comforter (whether Memory, or Creation), or perhaps Life and Death, at last face to face, become indistinguishable. There was no signal of ending, as when F.'s head dropped forward; instead, the image was held for a few seconds, before fading slowly into darkness.

Both of the shorter plays occupied a small area of the stage, the rest remaining in total darkness. *Berceuse* was placed to the audience's left, *L'Impromptu* to the audience's right, the depth of the stage space having been closed off by a screen of black velvet. This gave a certain softness and richness to the surrounding darkness, which contrasted sharply with the cold, stark, grey walls of the stage, which were revealed for *Catastrophe*, after the interval.

The figure of the Metteur-en-scene (Michael Lonsdale) lounged in a chair towards the front of the stage, and was wrapped entirely in a light grey fur coat and hat, contrasting with the slight, white-coated and upright figure of the Assistante (Catherine Sellers) at his side (on the left of the audience). The Protagoniste (Jean-Louis Barrault), standing on a pedestal towards the back of the stage, diagonally opposite the Director, was covered, apart from his bare feet, by a coat and hat (large-brimmed, completely hiding his face), of a cold, almost metallic grey.

Lonsdale convincingly created a dogmatic, self-satisfied and petulant Director, whose bullying, though menacing in its total lack of sympathy, and sensitivity, inspired laughter and contempt, rather than awe. This was emphasised by the Assistante, whose fixed smile, and exaggerated gestures of obedience, incongruous with the stark setting, and again provoking laughter, were in fact a form of mockery, and gave way to antagonism, the moment his back was turned. Her brisk movements contrasted both with the slow, rather sensual gestures of the Metteur-en-scene (fingers caressing fur, moustache), and with the statue-like immobility of the Protagoniste. She was the mediator between these two extremes, and her movements traced lines of antagonism or sympathy, depending on their object. In a moment of respite, when the Director left the stage, she collapsed into the chair (after wiping it vigorously, as if to avoid contamination), looking frail and worn, reminding us that this Assistante was another victim, rather than a collaborator, of the Director. Her sympathy with the Protagoniste was brought out in the gentleness and awe with which she approached and touched him, while adjusting his pose (which she afterwards unconsciously, and momentarily echoed—hands clasped at waist, then higher). Although the lively gestures and rather smug, indeed comic tone of the Metteur-en-scene at times threatened to distract from, rather than highlight the suffering and silent dignity of the Protagoniste, the contrasts between the three characters, and the web of tensions and relationships between them, across the stage space, heightened the dramatic force of the play, and contrasted with the greater subtlety of the previous plays.

After the Director had put the finishing touches to his human 'catastrophe', from his omniscient position off-stage, he ordered the lights to focus on the now denuded figure of the Protagoniste, then on the face alone. Since this is a technique frequently used by Beckett himself in many of his

recent plays, and particularly in the preceding two plays in this programme, one had a vivid impression of watching the familiar figure of an essentially vulnerable, suffering human being, not, however, gradually approaching a longed for release in death, but fallen into the hands of this contemptible manipulator, whether director, dictator, or anti-god. The political dimension of the play was underlined by the Director's phrase '*Fais vite j'ai un comité.*' The play is dedicated to Vaclav Havel, the Czech playwright placed under house arrest by his government for his 'subversive' activity, and writing. The use of the (self-conscious) stage metaphor, also emphasised the director/dictator's control and exploitation not only of the individual, but of the expressive potential and function of Art.

Yet the figure of the Protagoniste, humiliated, treated like a window dummy, is not broken. Far from becoming de-humanised, (the Director refers to him in strictly anatomical terms—'*Les jambes. Du tibia.*')—his essential and unquenchable humanity emerges all the more strongly in the final defiant gesture (executed with great force and dignity by Jean-Louis Barrault), of raising his head amid the clamour of recorded applause. There were echoes of the soon-to-be-crucified Christ, facing the mocking multitude—though the implied audience of the recording may not be aware of their mockery—they too may be 'manipulated' by the Metteur-en-scene. Indeed the "real" audience hesitated before breaking into applause at the end of the play. A single, central point of light, which in this production, rose to a glow as the rest of the stage was plunged into darkness, seemed to symbolise, or celebrate the stubborn, courageous, and inextinguishable will of the spirit to continue, under the most impossible conditions which society, or life in general may impose.

The three plays of the evening were carefully chosen to complement and contrast with each other in tone, and in visual impact. The sensitive lighting played an essential part in the production, and helped, particularly in *Berceuse* and *L'Impromptu d'Ohio*, to capture the visual poetry of Beckett's theatre.

Review: *Company*, Los Angeles Actors' Theatre, February-March 1985. Directed by S. E. Gontarski

Martin Esslin

Company (published in 1980) belongs to a group of Beckett's works which combine meditation about the nature of the voices that constitute the self with clearly autobiographical fragments, mainly of recollections of childhood. These, undoubtedly, are among the most personal of texts in all of Beckett's output.

Closest perhaps in affinity to *Company* is *That Time* (1974/5), the play in which voices emerging from three distinct sound sources are heard by a Listener, whose face alone is visible ten feet above stage level, seen from above, surrounded by darkness. This face of a white haired old man, therefore, is clearly part of a body lying on its back in the dark.

That exactly is the situation of the protagonist of the novella *Company* who also is 'on his back in the dark' and listens to a voice or voices recounting fragments from his past life. The close resemblance of these two works, one a piece of narrative prose, the other a stage work, illustrates the fluidity of the boundaries between narrative prose and drama in Beckett's work, all of which, ultimately, can be seen as a series of 'monologues with voices.'

Hence it was less surprising, as might have been expected in view of Beckett's reluctance to transfer works of his from one medium to another, that in the case of *Company* he not only consented to a stage adaptation of the piece, but even actively collaborated with the French actor and director, Pierre Chabert, and the American Beckett scholar and director S. E. Gontarski in turning the prose narrative into a stage piece.

The French version of *Compagnie* opened at the Théâtre du Rond-Point (Petite Salle) in Paris on 15 November 1984, the English version [*Company* was originally written in English] under Gontarski's direction, with Alan Mandell in the only part, at the Los Angeles Actors' Theatre (Half-Stage) in February 1985.

Essentially the adaptation consists in dividing the text (after certain passages have been cut) into those sections that are spoken by the protagonist live, and those fragments of memory that emerge from several points in the darkness. There are fifteen such passages in all. The sixteenth voice-over is the final word of the piece. 'Alone.'

The main problem facing the director is that of the nature of the image that the protagonist presents to the audience. The protagonist muses about the voice of voices he hears while lying on his back in the dark. The obvious solution would be to repeat the image of *That Time*, namely to show the protagonist in that position, either full length, or merely, as in the earlier play, his head.

Gontarski, for obvious reasons, avoids repeating the image. He shows the old man, sitting in a chair—in the act of imagining that situation, following the indication of the first words of *Company*. 'A Voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine.' The protagonist here, therefore, is in the

situation of the dramatist in the act of writing a play like *That Time*, re-creating the experience of the supine listener in the dark, recollected in tranquility.

There is, thus, not much scope for design in the piece. A chair on a dark stage. Timian Alsaker, the designer, nevertheless went for a radical solution. Not being able to design the stage, he re-designed the auditorium, breaking up the conventional rows of seats and dotting the chairs in the small auditorium about in an arbitrary arrangement which resulted in nobody actually sitting next to anyone else. In other words: the individual spectators were meant to be as isolated from each other, as alone in the dark, as the protagonist. I personally do not think that this subtle psychological effect was achieved. Thirty people in a small room cannot feel isolated, even if the next chair is not as near as the convention of rows in a theatre demands.

But this is a minor point. The lighting, so essential in this piece, for which Alsaker also signs, is superb.

Alan Mandell has opened into a bony Beckettian figure and has become ideal casting for a Beckett protagonist, the haunting image of an old man whose life-long sufferings are etched in the lines of a face of resigned spirituality. He masters the difficult text with sovereign command of variation and nuance and lends it the gravelly texture of his voice. If anything I found his delivery a little too clear, a shade too loud for the Beckettian voice, which should never rise above a faint murmur. In a passage cut in this adaptation the protagonist speaks of 'words *murmured in his ear.*' But I admit that keeping it so fast and so low might well tax the patience of audiences. (Which, of course, is precisely what Beckett aims at!)

Is anything gained by seeing this text performed over merely reading it? Something, I surmise, is gained, something lost. The gain lies in the image, the ease with which the spectator-and listener—can rely on getting the correct phrasing and rhythm inherent in the text and which he himself would have to puzzle out when merely reading it. There is also the gain in the image itself, although here the reader with imagination might come up with more vivid images. A gain also lies in the relentlessness with which a performance drives towards its fore-ordained conclusion, the compulsion to take the text without interruption, as a whole. And here the performance is a triumph: never, for a moment, does this text, with its almost manic repetition, and continuous returns to the starting point become boring, the tension, the suspense is miraculously maintained from beginning to end—paradoxically in a piece that has no story to speak of. As so often Beckett—and his interpreters in this case—performs the seemingly self-contradictory feat of creating drama of a high order out of material that by all rules of the art should be, by definition, totally undramatic.

And so another dramatic piece has been added to the Beckett canon. It is to be hoped that this adaptation which bears the imprimatur of the author himself should be made available as a text for performance by others. Apart from everything else this would put a stop to unauthorised adaptations and performances of *Company* (of which there have already be a number).

Review: “Godot in Israel”

Linda Ben-Zvi

Without any preliminaries, the play begins. Two Arabs wearing knit and cotton caps, open-necked work shirts and baggy pants arrive singly at a construction site, one of the many that dot the landscape of Israel in the 1980s. They have probably been brought from their homes in the occupied lands to what is commonly referred to in Israel as “the slave market”—an area skirting major cities where Arab workers wait to be hired by Israelis for day labor, most often to work on housing projects and settlements in the territories from which the workers come.

Behind the pair there is a steel skeleton of the concrete column they will pour that day, and a few cinder blocks on which they occasionally sit or stand. While they wait, the pair talk in Arabic: trading stories, telling jokes, making small talk. Finally, the Israeli foreman—in white shirt, blazer, khaki pants and sunglasses—strides in. He is preceded by his carrier, a poor Arab who is attached to his master by a retractable ruler fastened to his neck and who is carrying his paraphernalia of construction: surveyor’s equipment and blueprints, as well as an attaché case and luggage.

With the arrival of the builder, the language of communication shifts from Arabic to Hebrew—his language. He talks to the workers in the slow, labored form one uses with those unfamiliar with a language and they answer him in broken Arabic-accented Hebrew phrases. The carrier, however, in the one set speech he recites, speaks in literary Arabic, a variation of the spoken vernacular form. Aside from this speech and brief verbal exchanges, little happens. The group stands for a period of time, and then the latter pair depart while the original workers remain and wait.

There is nothing extraordinary about the general outline of the play. It resembles a number of works written by Jewish and Arab Israeli playwrights during the past decade: plays which condemn the government’s handling of Arabs, illustrate the evils of occupation and its effects on the occupier as well as the occupied; mourn the failure of the Zionist dream about the dignity of work and the commitment to self-help; abhor the class distinctions that have emerged in the society, and the material acquisitiveness of the new generation. The dialogue echoes words and ideas found in modern literature, the media and on the street. When one worker says, “We’ve lost our rights” the other replies, “We got rid of them.” Although the foreman asks the pair what they are doing, “Here? On my land?,” he grudgingly admits, “The road is free to all.” The pair recoil from his treatment of his carrier—“To treat a man... like that... I think that... no... a human being... no... it’s a scandal!”—yet they feel impotent and incapable of intervening, and they are not even certain who is ultimately to blame for the condition. When one asks, “Well? What do we do?” the other answers, “Don’t let’s do anything. It’s safer.” Both repeat the hope, “Tomorrow everything will be better,” and echo the phrase—the most common expression in modern Hebrew—“Nothing to be done” (*ain ma l’asot*).

The play offers a comment—a painful, familiar comment—on the muddled mess of the Middle East in the 1980s, but it does so through highly unusual means. It never once mentions the combatants, Jews and Arabs; the words “Zion,” “Palestine,” or “Israel” do not appear. It also offers no solutions to the stark realities it presents, ending as it begins with the workers frozen in place,

still waiting. It is not even a contemporary creation nor written by an inhabitant of the region. It was composed in 1948—the year the state of Israel was established—by an Irishman writing in French, a man who had never been to the area but knew instinctively that here “they crucified quick.”

The transportation of *Waiting for Godot* to Israel was the idea of the young, talented Israeli director Ilan Ronen, who had previously won Israel’s Producer of the Year award for C. P. Taylor’s *Good*. His cast, members of the Haifa Municipal Theatre, reflect the racial mix of the sponsoring city: Makhram Khouri and Youssuf Abu-Warda, who play Vladimir and Estragon, are two leading Arab Israeli actors; Doron Tavori and Ilan Toren, Lucky and Pozzo, are both Israeli Jews (Toren having played Lucky in the 1968 Habimah production of *Godot*). The original conception, described above, was 80 percent Arabic with the audience, predominantly Hebrew-speaking, required to read the distributed mimeographed translations of the play if they wished to understand the words. This alone was a daring act for the theatre company, replicating for the audience the experience of confronting an unmastered language in their own country—something Arabs face in the nominally bilingual but traditionally Hebrew-speaking society of Israel. In a second version of the production, which ran after the close of the first—and was perhaps a response to the confusion that the mimeographed form engendered—Vladimir and Estragon speak Hebrew, one in an Ashkenazi or European accent, the other in a Sephardic or Levantine form, and both revert to Arabic when in the presence of the Hebrew-speaking Pozzo. Lucky continues to declaim in literary Arabic, with his monologue reproduced in Hebrew for the audience to read. In this form of the production the emphasis shifts slightly from racial and political to economic and class confrontations among the characters. However, the central image—Pozzo the Jewish master and Lucky the Arab slave—remains undiluted.

It is this second version of the play that I saw in a labor union hall in the small town of Nes Tziona, near the center of Israel, in the summer of 1985, eight months after the original production had opened to wide acclaim.

Following a tradition in Israeli theatre, the Haifa group had traveled there, as they travel to all sections of the country, to bring people outside of urban areas the experience of professional theatre. This audience, comprised of the mixed ethnic working population of the area, received *Godot* unreservedly: they laughed, whispered running comments, sat in rapt albeit pained attention as Lucky spoke in a language few knew, and applauded strongly—not always a gratuitous response of Israeli audiences—as the lights faded on the last tableau. Most important, no one in the sold-out house left, something Beckett audiences in far more sophisticated venues still do; and no one I overheard asked the often parroted question of Shower/Cooker: “What’s it meant to mean?” They knew.

The production was a great success; on this point audiences and critics agreed. It made Beckett and *Godot* accessible in ways the five previous major productions in the country had not; it focused on actual situations to which the audience could relate, but it did so without sacrificing the universality of the work. Ronen had posed a question: If characters trade bowler hats for three variations of Arab headdress, if they stand in front of building apparatus instead of a tree, if they speak in two languages, is the play still *Waiting for Godot*? In this production, at least, the answer is “yes.” The director and his translator, the bilingual Anton Shamas, did not add a single word to Beckett’s

original text; they only altered dress and props to indicate how the universal words and actions can fit a particular place and time. They did make excisions, particularly of references to Christian imagery, perhaps since such expressions would be alien to the Semitic characters in the production and the Semitic audiences that viewed them. They did not, however, try to offer commensurate religious references. The use of the steel skeleton for concrete is particularly effective, since, at the beginning of Act Two when it “grows,” it is clear that the expansion breeds further misery, not hope, something the tree/leaf imagery does not always immediately convey to audiences. And even the blend of languages, the most overtly experimental aspect of the production, seems acceptable once it is acknowledged that *Godot* is translated into numerous languages so there is some logic in using two languages simultaneously in a bilingual society.

The Israeli *Godot*, however, provides more than an interesting reading of the text; it illustrates one response to the problem facing any director who wishes to produce the play in the '80s: how to relate to a work designated a “classic,” how to breathe life into a text that comes trailing countless repetitions, and more countless criticisms and explanations behind it. A classic can be a dangerous beast in the theatre, Peter Brook argues in *The Empty Space*. Shakespeare productions, for example, can easily become what Brook calls “Deadly Theatre,” when slavish repetitions occur, variations are discouraged, the audience is excruciatingly bored, and the scholar alone emerges happy from a routine performance “smiling because nothing has distracted him from trying over and confirming his pet theories to himself, whilst reciting his favorite lines under his breath.”

No one would wish such a fate for *Godot*. Yet the possibilities are there—and growing—as each now version moves further in time and memory from the original performance. It is already thirty-three years since the first *Godot*, and ten years since Beckett’s own direction of the work. Despite first-hand accounts and photographs, video tapes and recordings, the images begin to fade. And perhaps they should, for as Brook reminds theatre people, the meaning that each fresh production must convey “can be checked in each man’s own present experience” (p. 15), and there is nothing worse than imitations of imitations “a sound that in turn was a memory of a predecessor’s way” (p. 12). Yet, Brook—and Beckett—recognize the invariable “on the other hand,” in this case the submerging of a play in the trendy fashion of the moment, foisted in the name of “present experience.” One need only think of the unsuccessful variations of Shakespeare’s works—The Tempest on Cape Canaveral, in Brazil, at the shore, on Plymouth Rock, or accompanied by Hard Rock—to recognize the dangers and possible trivializations of modernity.

Between slavish reproduction and complete annihilation of the original, some point will have to be sought. It seems to me that in the Israeli production a model may be found: small adjustments made for locale and relationships without any additions to the text, particularizations that enhance not detract from the universality of the work. If the play is performed in Israel, it should follow that the characters can be Jews and Arabs. For it is Vladimir who says, “But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not.”

NOTES

1. A version of this article appeared originally in *Beckett: Waiting for Godot, A Casebook*. Ed. Ruby Cohn. London, Macmillan, 1987.

2. Peter Brooke, *The Empty Space* (London, 1972), p. 10. All further references will appear in the text.

**Review: MUESTRA SOBRE LA VIDA Y LA OBRA DE SAMUEL BECKETT,
CIRCULO DE BELLAS ARTES, Madrid 1985**

Antonia Rodriguez-Gago

Spain was, for the first time, the scene of a Beckett Festival—from the 28 March to the 5 May—organized by the “Circulo de Bellas Artes” of Madrid. All the theatres in the “Circulo” were showing Beckett’s plays for over a month. The Festival included a photographic exhibition of Beckett’s life through his work, with material provided by the University of Reading—BeckettArchive—and from “Le Centre Georges Pompidou” of Paris. There were also lectures, panel discussions, readings from Beckett’s novels, video radio and T.V. shows, together with a bibliographical display of the Beckettian “oeuvre” in English, French and Spanish.

The main attraction of the festival were, of course, the theatrical productions. Ten plays, covering almost all periods and styles of Beckett as a dramatist were preformed—the only exception being the theatre of the ‘70’s. The Festival opened with the 1975 “Théâtre D’Orsay” production of *La Dernière Bande*, with Pierre Chabert as Krapp directed by Samuel Beckett, and closed with the “Los Angeles Actors Theater” Production of *Company*, with Alan Mandell as protagonist, directed by Stanley Gontarski. To show Beckett as a bilingual writer was one of the central aims of this “Muestra,” another was to present his most recent plays, that were totally unknown to the Spanish public. This last aim was also achieved by the “Teatros del Circulo” production of *Nana (Rockaby)*, *Impromptu de Ohio (Ohio Impromptu)* and *Catástrofe (Catastrophe)*, which I translated into Spanish for this occasion.”¹ These plays were directed by Pierre Chabert and interpreted by Maite Brik, Francisco Vidal and Jose Lifante.

Apart from the three short plays, there was another Spanish premiere, the dramatization of the short novel *Primer Amor (First Love)*, in a production of the “Teatro Fronterizo” of Barcelona, directed by Jose Sanchis Sinisterra and Fernando Grifell, with Luis Miguel Climent as protagonist. The rest of the productions included the two *Acts Without Words, Acto Sin Palabras I y II*, directed and acted by Julio Castronuovo with Miguel Angel Sanchez and Carlos Zabaleta. These two Mimes and *Va y Ven (Come and Go)*, were also produced by “Teatros del Circulo.” The “dramaticule” was directed, in a rather peculiar setting, a church pew, by Angel Facio, with Concha Gregory, Isabel Navarro and Charo Pardo as the three female protagonists. *Qué Hermosos Dias (Happy Days)* directed by José Sanchis Sinisterra with Rosa Novell as Winnie and Luis Miguel Climent as Willie, completed the theatrical program. This last play was a Catalan production—though acted in Spanish in the Festival—which obtained a great success in Barcelona in its Catalan premiere as *Oh Els Bons Dies!*

Although I was a member of the organising committee I think it is only fair to acknowledge the quality and professionally of all the productions taking part in the Festival, some of them were really outstanding. This fact has been almost unanimously recognized by public and press, and the “Circulo de Bellas Arles” has to be praised once again for placing art before profit.

NOTE

1. I believe my translations are the first authorised, into Spanish, of these plays.

Review: *Waiting for Godot* in the People's Republic of China

Irving Lo

On January 11, 1987, my wife and I attended a performance of *Dengdai Geduo*, the first Chinese version of *Waiting for Godot*, in Shanghai's Changqiang (The Yangtze) Theatre, given by the students of the Shanghai Drama Institute. The play was at the end of the opening week's run. According to the printed program the public performance had been preceded by several dress rehearsals on the campus of the Institute, and at Shanghai Jiaotong University, in December of 1986.

Chanqiang Theatre is located on a narrow sidestreet around the corner from the famous landmark Park Hotel on the crowded Nanjing Road East, near the People's Park—formerly the Race course in Shanghai's International Settlement. Before the Communist Revolution, the theater had been known as the Carleton, and its now somewhat seedier appearance belies the fact that it used to be a prestigious Shanghai address in the nineteen thirties. The premiere of this Beckett play in China, therefore, was fraught with a great deal of symbolic significance, beginning with the location of the theatre itself.

The bold heading of the program's title page (illustrated as well in black and white) proclaims the play to be "the representative work of the Theatre of the Absurd," a genre known in Chinese as the *huangdan pai xiju*. The play was directed by Chen Jialin, with music and lyrics by Ouyang Zhazhi; the text was translated by Shi Xianrong. The translator, Mr. Shi, lives and works in Beijing. A member of the Institute of Western Literature, this veteran translator is a former student of the noted scholar Qian Zhongshu, Vice president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

The cast of the performance included Zhang Baode as Estragon, Li Zhiming as Vladimir, Zhang Ping and Gong Ziaoguang alternating as Lucky (in Chinese, "the Lucky One"), Zheng Rugao as Pozzo, and Peng An-na alternating with Chen Xiayun as the Boy. The cast also included several "dancers" (see below).

The stage for the performance was sparsely but effectively set with a stunted willow tree at one end, substantial enough to have a rope thrown across the bough later. The costumes were Western, including the tight boots and the various hats. The entrances and exits for Pozzo, the elaborate gestures with the whip, the bustle with the bags and basket were all staged in the grand manner, which, together with the music and even the appearance of dancers, betrayed an unmistakable affinity to the tradition of the Peking Opera. In this sense the Chinese *Godot*, while presented as a work set in the Western world, was at least partially assimilated into the Chinese cultural orbit. One minor effect was particularly apt: as many scholars realize, in Chinese Gogo and Didi mean "elder brother" and "younger brother" respectively, and the terms are commonly used between friends, according to their ages. This overtone, generally lost on Western audiences, gave a natural closeness to the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon on the Chinese stage. Since the actors were all from the Drama Institute, a training school for actors, most of them looked older than the average college student in an American University, and they played their parts quite professionally.

The performance was lively and spirited, and the audience, consisting chiefly of young, educated college youth, gave it rapt attention throughout, and a warm reception at the curtain.

The printed program offered the following introductory notes to the play:

Dengdai Geduo, first performed during the fifties in Paris, is now more than thirty years old. The title is now a household word in the West, and the play is required reading for every college student in the humanities in the Western world. This is proof of the play's profound influence, which propelled its author Beckett to the first rank of the world's dramatists. And yet this play is a total stranger to us, since this is its first performance in our country.

Why is this play considered the representative work of the Theatre of the Absurd? Because it incorporates all the classic features of this literary genre: there is neither a lively plot nor an attempt at complete characterization; there is neither a clearly delineated topic nor the use of dramatic conflict. Even the dialogue is often illogical.

The one action in the play—"Waiting"—is advanced by a combination of realistic and abstract methods; either by ideas or through the subconscious; by means self-contained or extended; through life's small incidents or by philosophical reflection; all of this through the circular movement of its simple structure. Thus the play is transformed and expanded until it achieves for "Waiting" a goal that transcends time and space, transcends national boundaries, and even transcends timelessness itself in its artistic effect—in order to reflect mankind's shared emotions. And the two tramps in the play become mankind's "representatives."

The effect so produced shows the great power of pure art and its classic value.

This play has had over a thousand performances in the United States. Once, when the author was asked by a director, "Who is the Godot that everyone is waiting for in the play?" the author's reply was that he himself did not know. We can perhaps offer the following attempt at an answer:

"So long as mankind has expectations, an equivalent degree of 'waiting' will exist; so long as that degree of 'waiting' exists, it will be matched by an equal number of 'Godots' in the world.' We hope that the performance of *Dengdai Geduo* will help advance our understanding of the West and, at the same time, provide a new direction for our theatrical enterprise.

It is no accident that translated masterpieces of Western drama have been enjoying immense popularity in the People's Republic of China during the past five years or so. The successes scored in Beijing by the gifted translator-cum-director-cum-actor Ying Ruocheng in his productions of *Measure for Measure* (also translated by Mr. Ying), *Death of a Salesman* (co-directed with Arthur Miller), and *Amadeus* are still fresh in the minds of Chinese audiences. The Shakespeare anniversary year alone saw as many as sixteen different productions of Shakespeare's plays in

China, translated into various genres, including a Peking-opera style *Othello*. Translations have proved to be a much easier mode of escaping the censors than attempting to produce original scripts on controversial subjects in China—a glum and mute testimony to a lackluster legitimate stage, in spite of the welcome increased activity it has meant for translators.

It is all the more ironic that a play as darkly pessimistic as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* should have been staged in Shanghai during the harshest Winter of Discontent in China since the fall of the their so-called "Gang of Four." Following widespread student demonstrations in fourteen cities across China in November and December, demanding "freedom" and "democracy," several outstanding scientists and educators, as well as leading journalists such as Liu Binyan and Wang Ruowang, were dismissed from their posts and deprived of their party memberships in January. And in spite of the spirit of hope which permeates the program notes for the Chinese version of *Waiting for Godot*, no one, including the director and the translator, expects the play to enjoy more than a short run.