

BECKETT THE PLAYWRIGHT

John Fletcher and John Spurling

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Beckett

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(Third, expanded edition)

JOHN FLETCHER *and* JOHN SPURLING

Previously published under the title
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(*Photo: Roger Pic*)

The cartoon of *Endgame* by Vicky on p. 46 is reproduced from the *New Statesman* (31 July 1964) by permission; the cartoon by Vicky of *Waiting for Godot* is reproduced on p. 154 by arrangement with the trustees and the *Evening Standard* © *London Express*; the photomontage of *Play* reproduced on p. 115 is by courtesy of the Industrial Development Authority of Ireland. The photograph of Samuel Beckett on the front cover is by John Haynes.

Foreword

We have composed this essay (which stresses throughout Beckett's success as an innovator in the theatre) in close collaboration. John Fletcher wrote the Chronology, Chapters 3, 5, 7, 8, 12 and 13, and John Spurling the rest.

Norwich and London, September 1984

J. F.
J. S.

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Samuel Barclay Beckett

- 1906 Born at Foxrock near Dublin on 13 April (Good Friday), second son of William Frank Beckett, a quantity surveyor, and his wife Mary, *née* Roe. Middle-class Protestant family, comfortably off. Kindergarten: Miss Ida Elsner's Academy, Stillorgan. Prep. school: Earlsfort House School, Dublin. Public school: Portora Royal, Enniskillen; excellent academic and sporting record.
- 1923-7 Trinity College, Dublin, first as pensioner, then as foundation scholar. In BA examinations placed first in first class in Modern Literature (French and Italian); awarded large gold medal and Moderatorship prize. Active in Modern Languages Society, Cricket Club, Golf Club; keen chess player. Summer 1926: first contact with France (bicycle tour of the châteaux of the Loire).
- 1928 Spends first two terms teaching at Campbell College, Belfast.
- 1928-30 Exchange *Lecteur* at Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, almost contemporaneously with Jean-Paul Sartre. Meets James Joyce. Summer 1930: Beckett's first separately published work, the poem *WHOROSCOPE*, issued by Nancy Cunard's Hours Press in Paris.
- 1930-2 Assistant Lecturer in French, Trinity College, Dublin. Resigns after four terms. 19-21 February

- 1931: performance of Beckett's first dramatic work, *LE KID*, a parody sketch after Corneille written in collaboration with Georges Pelorson, French *Lecteur* at Trinity.
- 1931 PROUST, his first and last major piece of literary criticism, published by Chatto and Windus.
- 1932-7 *Wanderjahre* culminating in the decision to settle permanently in Paris.
- 1933 Death of his father, who leaves him an annuity which forms the bulk of his slender income until the royalties from *GODOT* twenty years later.
- 1934 Chatto and Windus publish *MORE PRICKS THAN KICKS* (short stories).
- 1935 *ECHO'S BONES AND OTHER PRECIPITATES* (first collection of verse) published in Paris.
- 1938 MURPHY, his first novel, published by Routledge. An Oxford undergraduate, Iris Murdoch, deeply influenced by the book.
- 1942 Resistance group in which Beckett is active is betrayed to the Gestapo; he escapes to the unoccupied southern zone with only minutes to spare.
- 1942-5 Ekes out a living as an agricultural labourer not far from Avignon ('... we were there together, I could swear to it! Picking grapes...', *WAITING FOR GODOT*, p. 62). Writes *WATT*, his last English novel.
- 1945 Returns to Ireland at Easter to see his family, then in order to get back to France, accepts in August a post as interpreter and storekeeper at the Irish Red Cross hospital in Saint-Lô (Normandy).
- 1946-50 Back in Paris, burst of creative activity. Writes in French the essential works of the canon, the trilogy of novels (*MOLLOY*, *MALONE DIES*, *THE UNNAMABLE*) and the play *WAITING FOR GODOT*, which was preceded by *ELEUTHÉRIA*.

- 1950 Mother dies.
- 1951 MOLLOY and MALONE DIES published in Paris ('getting known . . .', *Krapp's Last Tape*, p. 17).
- 1952 WAITING FOR GODOT published in Paris.
- 1953 World première of WAITING FOR GODOT in Paris, 5 January, director Roger Blin.
- 1954 Beckett's English translation of GODOT published in New York.
- 1955 World première of the English GODOT in London, 3 August.
- 1957 First broadcast of ALL THAT FALL by BBC (13 January), director Donald McWhinnie. Creation of ENDGAME (French text, with ACT WITHOUT WORDS 1) in London, 3 April, director Roger Blin.
- 1958 World première of KRAPP'S LAST TAPE in London, 28 October, director Donald McWhinnie.
- 1959 Hon. D.Litt., Dublin University. EMBERS wins Italia Prize.
- 1961 World première of HAPPY DAYS in New York, 17 September, director Alan Schneider. International Publishers' Prize, shared with Borges.
- 1962 First broadcast of WORDS AND MUSIC by BBC (13 November).
- 1963 Creation of PLAY (in German translation) at Ulm, 14 June, director Deryk Mendel. First broadcast of CASCANDO by RTF, 13 October, director Roger Blin.
- 1964 FILM made in New York, director Alan Schneider.
- 1965 Creation of COME AND GO (in German translation) in Berlin, September, director Deryk Mendel.
- 1966 EH JOE televised by BBC (4 July), production by Michael Bakewell.
- 1969 Nobel Prize for Literature. First independent production of BREATH (originally incorporated by Kenneth Tynan as the opening sketch in OH! CALCUTTA), Glasgow, October, director Geoffrey Gilham.

- 1972 World première of *NOT I* at the Lincoln Center in the Forum (Vivian Beaumont Theater Building), New York, 22 November, with Jessica Tandy as Mouth and Henderson Forsythe as Auditor, directed by Alan Schneider.
- 1976 In celebration of Beckett's seventieth birthday, first broadcast by B.B.C. Radio 3 of *ROUGH FOR RADIO*, and world première of *THAT TIME* and *FOOTFALLS* at the Royal Court Theatre, London; *FOOTFALLS* was directed by Beckett himself.
- 1977 *GHOST TRIO* and . . . *BUT THE CLOUDS . . .* televised by the B.B.C., 17 April, with Billie Whitelaw and Ronald Pickup, directed by Donald McWhinnie.
- 1979 *A PIECE OF MONOLOGUE* performed by David Warrilow at the La Mama Theatre, New York, 14-31 December.
- 1981 *ROCKABY* performed by Billie Whitelaw, directed by Alan Schneider, at the Centre for Theatre Research, State University of New York at Buffalo, 8 April; *OHIO IMPROMPTU* performed by David Warrilow and Rand Mitchell, directed by Alan Schneider, at Ohio State University, Columbus, 9 May. Both premières were in honour of Beckett's seventy-fifth birthday.
- 1982 *QUAD* televised by B.B.C. 2, 16 December; *CATASTROPHE* performed at the Avignon Festival.
- 1983 *NACHT UND TRÄUME* televised by Süddeutscher Rundfunk, 19 May; *WHAT WHERE* premièred at the Harold Clurman Theatre, New York, 15 June.

I

Introduction

In the popular imagination Samuel Beckett conjures up tramps, dustbins and prolonged inactivity. To the commentators – and seldom can a writer within twenty years of his first success have given rise to such a formidable heap of interpretation – he is the occasion, like the forest of Arden to the banished Duke in *As You Like It*, for ‘tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones’. The irony inherent in this double view of him must have given Beckett – more of a lover of the joke for its own sake than perhaps either the popular or the academic party will allow – much quiet pleasure. All the same, the two views, that there is nothing to Beckett beyond dustbins and that there is everything conceivable beyond dustbins, quite clearly suggest, taken together, the nature of his dramatic method. What I hope to show here is that the Beckettian demonstration is a thoroughly dramatic one; that, in other words, though he set out as poet and novelist and was quoted quite recently as seeing himself as a novelist who also writes plays, the point at which his public found him and he found his public was the right one. Samuel Beckett was waiting for the theatre as the theatre was waiting for Samuel Beckett.

Camillo's Memory Theatre

Although it would be unwise to try to pull together in a few pages the history of the theatre, it is necessary, before

closing in on Beckett's theatre, to have some idea of its context, if only so as not to confuse it with literature. And since Beckett himself is in many ways the last heir to the Renaissance, an heir who has religiously devoted himself to selling off every last stick and stone of his inheritance, it is appropriate to begin with an illustration drawn from the Renaissance. In Chapter Six of *The Art of Memory*, Frances A. Yates describes 'The Memory Theatre of Giulio Camillo'. This amazing contraption was built in Venice and visited, in 1532, by a friend of Erasmus in the company of its inventor. The spectator stood on the stage before an auditorium divided into seven grades and seven gangways and intended to contain the sum of wisdom and knowledge, classified according to the stages of creation and the planetary gods, and furnished with an elaborate system of 'memory images' drawn from classical mythology, under each of which were placed drawers or boxes filled with written material relating to the 'memory image'. 'It begins', as Dr Yates says, 'to look like a highly ornamental filing cabinet. But this is to lose sight of the grandeur of the Idea – the Idea of a memory organically geared to the universe.' Erasmus' friend described his visit to Camillo's Memory Theatre as follows:

He calls this theatre of his by many names, saying now that it is a built or constructed mind and soul, and now that it is a windowed one. He pretends that all things that the human mind can conceive and which we cannot see with the corporeal eye, after being collected together by diligent meditation may be expressed by certain corporeal signs in such a way that the beholder may at once perceive with his eyes everything that is otherwise hidden in the depths of the human mind. And it is because of this corporeal looking that he calls it a theatre.

Apart from giving us a remarkably clear view of the Renaissance frame of mind, the belief that it is possible to know and do everything (a belief which Beckett turns precisely on its head), Camillo's Memory Theatre helps us to see,