Notes on Beckett’s Plays for an Intensive Theatre Course

Abstract: In Beckett’s works the medium-oriented “how” is inseparable from the “what” of the message. Therefore, the very performance of the piece does not describe but rather creates a new – fictitious as it may be – situation, a performative act, which is not “about” anything but is, first and foremost, that very thing itself. Beckett’s medium-oriented approach does indeed invite a fresh analytical perspective to the methodology of teaching his works, especially his plays. In place of McLuhan’s famous “the medium is the message”, Beckett posits the message as inseparable from the medium. I argue, that most of Beckett’s works intended for performance treat the typical tools and medium-oriented components of radio or television too, thus indeed presenting master-classes especially of theatricality itself as an existential mode of being.

Keywords: Performance, Medium, Theatre, Offstage, Self-reference

“Among those we call great artists, I can think of none whose concern was not predominantly with his expressive possibilities, those of his vehicle, those of humanity”¹. Beckett’s comment regarding the painter Bram Van Velde is also implicit advice to interpret his own works from the point of view of the creator, the medium and the recipient. Similarly, his comment on Joyce, “His writing is not about something, it is that something itself”², is equally true of his own work. In his note on Proust, “Man is the creature that cannot come forth from himself, who knows others only in himself, and who, if he asserts the contrary, lies”³, Beckett invites the reader to use the Socratic mode when studying and teaching his works, especially those meant to be performed – a mode mediated through actors, directors, designers etc., who must position themselves in order to know others – any others – theatrical, radiophonic and cinematographic, etc. Moreover, in Beckett’s works the medium-oriented “how” is inseparable from the message’s “what”. Therefore, the very performance of the piece does not describe but rather creates a new – fictitious as it may be – situation, a performative act, which is not “about” anything but is, first and foremost, that very thing itself.

¹ Samuel Beckett, Proust and Three Dialogues with George Duthuit (London: John Calder, 1965), 120.
³ Beckett, Proust, 66.
Beckett, a creative artist aspiring to reach beyond the discursive rationality of philosophical methodologies, was nonetheless well versed in both classical and contemporary philosophy, from the early pre-Socratic thinkers to Wittgenstein’s Logical Positivism and Sartre’s Existentialism. He also engaged with the Cartesian Body-Soul dilemma, following Jaako Hintikka’s argument (also Rudolph Steiner’s in the Philosophy of Freedom, 1894) that cogito ergo sum is a speech act rather than a syllogism\(^4\). I contend that in Beckett’s performative works the cogito is replaced by “I am present... hence I am” in his stage productions, since presence is the minimum any stage requires, by “I emit a noise hence I am” in his radio-plays, and by “I am photographed hence I am” in his film and television dramas. Beckett’s works are replete with exquisite examples of media-oriented, self-referential expressions. He seldom permitted the original medium of a particular work to be transposed, as by turning a radio-play into a film, a film into a play, etc. As Stanley Gontarski has rightly noted, Beckett’s medium-oriented approach does indeed invite a fresh analytical perspective and approach to the methodology of teaching his works, especially his plays. In place of McLuhan’s famous “the medium is the message”, Beckett posits the message as inseparable from the medium.

In the following presentation I focus on several of Beckett’s dramatic and theatrical expressive means as represented in some of his plays. With a few exceptions, he went from a relative wealth of expressively theatrical, radiophonic and cinematographic means to fewer and more self-reflexive (“meta-mediumal” or ars-poetic) ones in his later performative works. In Waiting for Godot (1952), for example, theatrical non-verbal means, such as movement, lighting, costume, usage of space, etc. are certainly “richer” than those in later plays such as Not I (1972), Footfalls (1975-6) or Rockaby (1980). Similarly, All That Fall (1956) is richer in radiophonic expressive means than is Radio II (1960). From Film (1963) Beckett moved on to writing and directing more “spiritual” – some say “ghostly” – and poetic TV scripts like …but the clouds… (1976), Nacht und Träume (1982) and others. Moreover, in many of Beckett’s performative works we detect the clear dominance of one or two particular medium-oriented expressive means.

If Waiting for Godot is “about” anything other than itself, then it is surely about Time because “waiting” obviously hypostasizes the passage of time, both on and offstage, as a still growing number of scholars and their legions of disciples justly and boringly continue to argue. Waiting for Godot is replete with notions of time, with notes and remarks on how it does or does not pass, on time as torture (as in “Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time?”), and occasionally, on time as entertainment (“It’ll pass the time”), the most typical theatrical time, the continuous present. In this context it is interesting to compare the treatment of time in Krapp’s Last Tape (1958) with that in Waiting for Godot. Beckett locates the play on a late evening in the future, thus dragging both dramatic past and future into the present – “Time past and time future

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/ What might have been and what has been / Point to one end, which is always present"\(^5\), to quote the words of T.S. Eliot, rather than his better known "Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future"\(^6\). Understandably, waiting is a safe theatrical mode of hypostasizing time, as suggested by the play’s title. Perhaps Beckett treats time in *Waiting for Godot* as the very plot of the piece and occasionally as a stage prop as well. This may also lead us to ask whether Godot is not only offstage, but also off-time.

Space, another Aristotelian basic dramatic unity, dominates the claustrophobic stage space of *Endgame*, Beckett’s second published play. The characters are enclosed in a room: Clov’s “private” space is the kitchen, Hamm’s is his wheelchair, while Nag and Nell are stuck in ashbins. Retrospectively, *Endgame* illuminates the open road of *Waiting for Godot*. Whereas in *Waiting for Godot*, movement – linking time and space – “feels” centrifugal since Didi and Gogo cannot leave and must come back and wait, in claustrophobic *Endgame*, it seems centripetal. “I’ll leave you”, says Clov; “You can’t” cries Hamm. And indeed Clov freezes on the threshold of offstage and does not leave Hamm.

In *Endgame* Beckett uses meta-theatricality, a play within a play, as a leading device. He begins with “me to play” and ends with the mutual thanks exchanged between the main protagonists. The opening consists of a slow, tragically ritualized series of mini-theatre curtains opening up, a masterpiece that gradually reveals the relevant acting areas on the stage. Clov draws the window curtains, removes the sheets, then the lids, from the ashbins and finally puts them back and takes Hamm’s sheet. Soon Hamm, like the stage, continues to unfold, removing the handkerchief, taking off his glasses, rubbing his eyes.

*Happy Days* lays a heavy weight on two theatrical elements: dialogue and stage-properties. The props in *Happy Days* gradually become highly significant once Winnie is no longer able to reach them in the second act. Words, therefore, become “things” and vice versa. Equally brilliant is Beckett’s stratagem for reflecting actor-audience relationships by having Winnie facing forward (to the audience) while speaking to Willie, who is actually behind her. In this way, Beckett succeeds in creating the illusion that it is Willie who witnesses Winnie’s dialogue with the audience rather than the audience witnessing her talking to Willie\(^7\). Should this subtle and highly poetic consideration of audience-actor relationships – the most important component in the theatre – not be clear enough, Beckett puts in Winnie’s mouth a little monologue quoting the real or imaginary dialogue of Shower and Cooker (German for “watching” and “looking”), who, like the real audience in the auditorium, gape at and speak about her:

“This man Shower or Cooker – no matter – and the woman – hand in hand – in the other handbags – standing there gaping at me – “ [...] What’s she doing?” he says – “What’s the idea!”


\(^6\) Ibid. 171.

he says, “stuck up to her diddies in the bleeding ground” – coarse fellow – “what does it mean?” He says – “what’s it meant to mean?”

The real protagonist of *Play* (1962–63) is certainly light, a technical device, a theatrical tool, usually silent but here active, talked-to and emphatically dominant as an open metaphor for the eye of the Other, of God? Of theatricality itself. As a good metaphor, light in *Play* is an image and a real thing at the same time. Is it “mere eye? No mind. Opening and shutting on me. Am I as much as […] being seen?” says M and gets no answer.

Light, perhaps the most delicate and sensitive theatrical means of expression, is treated by Beckett with particularly creative originality, from *Eleutheria* all the way to *What Where*. With a few exceptions, Beckett’s stages turn gradually darker and the lighting more focused until *Not I*. *Endgame* gets grey light; *Happy Days*, a very bright and scorching desert-like light referred to as “Hail Holy light”, on the one hand, but also as “Hellish light” by Winnie. There is little light in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, and only on *Krapp’s* table. Light appears only on the table in *Ohio Impromptu*; two lamp lights only on A and B’s desks appear in *Theatre II* and “soft light from above only and concentrated on playing area”\(^\text{10}\); the rest of the stage as dark as possible in *Come and Go*. “One sees little in this light”\(^\text{11}\), Flo says. The light on the strip in *Footfalls* must be dim, strongest at foot level, fainter on body, faintest on head, thus granting a sense of floating to the pacing M. A single bright spot appears on Mouth in *Not I*.

In *Play*, W1, W2 and M are lit by light, talk to it and talk only while they are lit; light is their motivating force. When it is dark they seem not to exist. Light here is a puppeteer, a mysterious force, divine, perhaps, or merely an eye? An inquisitor, a torturer, “the Other”? All the same, the focus is not simply on stage lighting; whoever has directed *Play* according to the playwright’s directions knows that the person in charge of lighting is more than a mere technician. Beckett’s treatment of light here is no less than a Copernican revolution. His light illuminates not only the stage characters and objects, but is itself lit, explored and questioned. By correcting our understandable mistake regarding what turns around what, the Polish genius situated the observing consciousness rather than the Earth or the Sun at the centre, and turned it into self-consciousness.

*Come and Go* (1965) focuses on the exits and entrances of three women, their faces in shadow, who resemble each other and sound alike except when uttering their three “ohs” and the two lines that follow. Their movement must be silent, their posture on their bench erect, creating a sense of floating. In this fascinating dramaticule, Vi, Flo and Ru constantly cross the line between here and there, onstage and offstage, light and darkness, life and death. Rather than puppets, however, the three women seem more like mock angels, sweet ghosts. The secret – and Beckett’s plays often contain one or more

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\(^9\) Ibid., 317.

\(^10\) Ibid., p. 356.

\(^11\) Ibid., 355.
secrets – is that none of the women knows that she is dead and seems equally stunned to learn this about her two friends. If this is the case, this ghost-play is both funnier and more serious than it might appear.

In *A Piece of Monologue* (1979), Beckett again revolutionizes traditional theatricality and turns his stage instructions – the so-called auctorial text – into the actual spoken text of the motionless speaker. Hence the audience is invited to complete the “action” and imagine it as “happening” and not “just being spoken” on a minimal but highly suggestive stage set that includes a skull-like lamp and pallet bed. The play’s text opens with “Birth was the death of him”\(^\text{12}\) and ends, hardly more cheerfully, with “The dying and the going […] the unaccountable. From nowhere. On all sides nowhere. Unutterably faint. The globe alone. Alone gone”\(^\text{13}\). One truly wonders how the stage instructions can turn into a monologue that activates an otherwise motionless stage.

*Not I* (1972) is considered a highly demanding play, technically, emotionally and conceptually. Having directed it in Hebrew, German and English with nine (different…) actresses between 1975 and 2016, I still wonder how much “I” there is in the many “Not I’s” of Beckett, his translators, the actresses, of course, and the character who vehemently rejects the first person singular. One of my tentative conclusions is that without an authentic investment of an actual biography – especially the biography of the actress – in the dramatic life story of Mouth, the play cannot and would not “work”. *Not I* – to repeat – is not about (theatrical) self-reference, but, is in fact that thing itself. It is the performative act of self-creation in Beckett’s texts that invites the audience to do the same.

Presented with a self-negating, self-avoiding or self-rejecting and almost fully disembodied dramatic character, the actors of *Not I* must indeed “drag up the past” and make it present in and for the here and now of tonight’s unique, never-the-same performance. They are practically conditioned to learn about their roles primarily from their physically immediate, often painful and confining surroundings on stage\(^\text{14}\). In such spaces they are virtually forced to harness their whereabouts vis-à-vis their selves. The actress must refer to a “She” while vehemently avoiding the first person singular. Is the circumscribed and denied “I” the actress’s “self”? Logically it is not because the actress is not a She (as in “What?.. Who?.. No!.. She!…”), and she, the actress, can therefore say so without lying. However, the “I” too cannot be determined to be the “I” of any given member of the audience. Yet tentatively, illusorily, or artistically it is indeed the “I” of whoever – be it author, director, actor, or audience – posits his or her I on the fictitious characters. In order to initiate this hermeneutic search for real or fictitious selves in the theatre, it must therefore be the “I” of the actress who starts the cycle during a live performance.

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\(^\text{12}\) Ibid., 425.

\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 429.

\(^\text{14}\) Similar to Nag and Nell in their ashbins or W1, M and W2 in their burial urns in *Play*. 
Directing as a metaphor for oppression

The manipulated, puppet-like, perhaps tortured or made up to look tortured protagonist at the beginning of *Catastrophe* (1982), one of Beckett’s relatively optimistic plays, is transformed into an almost redeemed actor at the end. This intensely meta-theatrical piece serves as a snide metaphor on directing theatre as an act of oppression, though also — in the end — offers the actor a great deal of light, and thus is and is not metaphorical at the same time. I must also confess that I dragged the last fade-out on the actor’s slightly smiling face for a long twenty seconds. I also wonder whether Beckett was recalling Brecht’s words “moegen Andere von Ihrer Schande reden, ich rede von der meine” (“let others talk of their shame, I talk of mine”)\(^\text{15}\) when he used theatre as an honest means as well as an image to protest against the political oppression of Vaclav Havel, to whom he dedicated *Catastrophe*.

The space is an empty stage, but the active element here is again undoubtedly the light. Due to a series of instructions passed from a tyrannical director to an (almost?) obedient assistant, who undresses P (protagonist) and changes his position on a plinth, the audience is gradually provoked into deciding which of the characters is the morally worst: the director, the assistant, the quasi-amoral light technician — here indeed a mere technician, uninterested in “what” he is lighting — or the asinine protagonist-actor who allows “them” to pester him. Or perhaps it is us since we allow human degradation, albeit fictitious and theatrical, to happen right before our eyes, in our presence and, therefore, with our tacit consent? *Catastrophe* is “about” the ethics of standing by, of watching evil without intervening. Finally, however, the bad guys — director and assistant — disappear offstage, leaving the actor alone to face his real as well as fictitious audience.

Though Beckett found *Eleutheria* (1947), his first full-length play, “seriously flawed”\(^\text{16}\), it offers a sophisticated theatre workshop, in which many motifs and typically Beckettian dramatic techniques that appear in his later plays can already be clearly detected. *Eleutheria* may at times be overly explicit or even somewhat laborious, as Beckett himself probably thought, but its dramatic text offers a surprising, indeed revolutionary number of highly coherent (meta-)theatrical devices harnessed to the main theme – personal freedom – as does *Catastrophe*, one of Beckett’s last plays.

*Eleutheria* is full of revealing stage instructions that relate to space. In it Beckett already employs offstage — a major theatrical break-through of his later works — and combines it with what can conveniently be viewed as a hermeneutical circle of Author, Actors and Audience, in its self-referential aspect, as the very foundation of the theatrical situation. Of the three Aristotelian dramatic unities, Space is the principal non-verbal theatrical element of *Eleutheria*. As Beckett describes in over three pages:

“[…] a split set, with two very different decors juxtaposed. Hence there are two simultaneous actions: the main action and the marginal action. The latter is silent, apart from a few short phrases,

\(^{15}\) From an epigraph to the poem “O Germany, Pale Mother!” (https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/o-germany-pale-mother/ [accessed: 10 October 2019]).

the stage business there being confined to the vague attitudes and movement of a single character. In fact it is not so much a place of action as a site, which is often empty.

The text [in Eleutheria] is almost – S. L.] exclusively concerned with the main action. The marginal action is for the actor to determine, within the limits of the indications in the following note.

[...] the two rooms share the whole width of the rear wall as well as the same floor, but when they pass from Victor to his family they become domesticated and respectable. Like the water from the open sea becoming the water in the harbour. The theatrical effect of this dualistic space, then, should be produced less by the transition than by the fact that Victor’s room takes up three quarters of the stage, and by the flagrant discrepancy between the furniture on either side.\(^ {17}\)

In Eleutheria, Beckett prepares his unique usage of offstage for his plays to come. In many, especially modern, plays, offstage is both a technique and “content”, a medium and a message, a concept and an image, a theatrically active element that manages to escape the paradox of “expressing the inexpressible”, and present void, nothingness and emptiness, as well as more emotionally charged notions such as “seclusion”, “loneliness”, “being there” etc. without refuting them. A shadowy doppelgänger, offstage in Eleutheria is clearly designed to function as a major rather than “a marginal” partner.

Some of Beckett’s works reveal a unique brinkmanship between an intellectually sceptical, often sardonic rejection of religiosity, and an equally prevalent yearning for the “beyond”, whatever “that” may be – spirituality, one dares to assume. Notions of the “beyond” hover in and above Beckett’s drama like a restlessly re-appearing Godot, or even more so the child in the eponymous play, about whom Beckett told his friend Gottfried Büttner in Berlin in 1975 when directing Waiting for Godot at the Schiller Theater, “He is not from here”. This asymptotic tendency towards the “beyond” is already manifest in Eleutheria, presented – or represented – in the black aura offstage.

Beckett the playwright is strongly implied in Victor and even explicitly so in the text: “Samuel Beke, Beke … he must be a cross between a Jew from Greenland and a peasant from the Auvergne”.\(^ {18}\) Victor/Beckett’s refusal to disclose his reasons for his recluse behaviour, or actually for maintaining his quest for spiritual freedom, often recurs as a main motif in his later plays, beginning with the Waiting for Godot, according to certain interpretations, and in the “mole” (the term also used in Eleutheria, p. 161!) in Radio II. Is it Beckett himself who is represented as C in Theatre II? In Cascando, the “story” motif is connected with the “extrication” process and with life itself: “He opens nothing, he has nothing to open, it’s in his head”.\(^ {19}\) The Victor theme appears more explicitly in Cascando:

“They say, that is not his life, he does not live on that. They don’t see me, they don’t see what my life is, they don’t see what I live on, and they say, that is not his life, he does not live on that. [Pause.] I have lived on it… till I’m old. Old enough”.\(^ {20}\)

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18 Ibid., 136.
20 Ibid., 300.
The audience, the third important theatrical element, is represented in *Eleutheria* and is actually invited onstage as “spectator” in a role often more serious than it might seem to the audience in light of Beckett’s critical, entertaining remarks. The “audience” also becomes an implied character too in his later plays. Didi and Gogo are Lucky and Pozzo’s audience, and vice versa. A similar on-stage audience-actors device is used for Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*, as well as for Winnie and Willie in *Happy Days*, as noted above. Some Beckett plays end with an almost explicit gesture to the audience: the handkerchief in *Theatre II*, Willie’s hand stretched toward Winnie in *Happy Days*, the auditor whose “four brief movements” show helpless compassion in *Not I* and thus invite the audience to experience as outsiders what goes on inside “the play”. Finally, Victor, a distant relative of Melville’s Bartleby, Dostoyevsky’s Prince Mishkin, and several of Kafka characters, turns his “emaciated back on humanity” 21. In a brilliant stage instruction that follows those related to Victor’s movement in the marginal action, Beckett foreshadows Victor’s turning his back on humanity and describes a passage as coming to an abrupt end, “as if overcome by a feeling of fatigue and fatuity” 22, which is perfectly in line with the opening note of Act III: “Krap family side swallowed up by orchestra pit” 23, in which both space and acting-style/action fall offstage into inertia, passivity and nothingness.

In *Eleutheria*, Beckett seems to deal with the most important theme in his creative life – freedom – through self-referential meta-theatricality and offstage, leaving people – his audience – free to respond as they wish. Perhaps *Eleutheria* is not Beckett’s best play, but it is certainly one of his most interesting. Its “flaws”, even more than some of its revolutionary achievements, are highly revealing, at least insofar as they show Beckett coping with his creative if not personal freedom.

**Bibliography**


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22 Ibid., 140.

23 Ibid., 118.