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Decayed Drama, Increased Inclusivity: Beckett's Theater in the 1960s

RYAN DILLER

FOR MANY SCHOLARS and most casual theatergoers, Samuel Beckett's signature work came in the 1950s, the decade of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, a period of male-dominated pieces that alluded to Shakespeare and existential philosophy. Despite the fact that Beckett's best-known roles are for men, many critics would argue that a Billie, not a Billy, stands as Beckett's signature actor. Billie Whitelaw became Beckett's muse, frequent collaborator, and favorite actress from 1963 until his death, and her work on late period Beckett plays such as *Rockaby* and *Not I* remain arguably some of the most famous performances of Beckett's work. How did a female thespian become such a crucial figure for Beckett? For starters, his focus shifted dramatically during his experimentation in the 1960s. During this period, Beckett became less concerned with the grandiose speculations of larger-than-life men—such figures as the Lear-like Krapp and Hamlet-like Hamm—than with actions in the personal, domestic sphere, particularly futilities of the archetypal female experience¹². As a result, he began to depict how ordinary people cope with the meaninglessness and

1 David H. Hesla, "[Metaphor in *Endgame*]," in *Critical Essays on Samuel Beckett*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986), 173–180.

2 James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull: Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove, 1980), 83.

absurdity his early characters had simply observed. In short, Beckett's focus shifted from concern with the philosophy of survival to the very act of survival itself.

As a result of his new subject matter, Beckett engaged further with minimalism and abstraction, particularly in his characters' speech. After 1958's *Krapp's Last Tape*, Beckett's language underwent a rapid transformation, becoming increasingly rooted in cliché throughout the 1960s. Rather than the intellectual speech of characters like Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett wrote in a vernacular, attempting to craft plays rooted in the ordinary. As a result, his characters became more universal. By also removing a sense of a familiar location from his plays—for example, replacing sitting under a tree with standing in urns that come up to peoples' necks—Beckett paradoxically makes audience members recognize their daily realities in unknown settings. Rather than focusing on the abstract absurdities of reality in concrete locations, he exposed the concrete futilities of life in abstract settings. For example, whereas the survival of Vladimir and Estragon in *Godot* is attached to the existential hope that a person of god-like significance will come, in *Happy Days* Winnie's is rooted in a practical hope that connects to the ugly fact of being female in a patriarchal culture: her need for a man's approval and assistance. Moreover, she must also endure a more pressing concern that most audience members would find unfamiliar: the reality of her being slowly more and more submerged in sand.

Beckett tested the endurance of these characters by paring down theater to its most minimalistic form. This decay revealed the essence of the human struggle in the face of existence. His theater became so reduced that “it was on the verge of becoming something” other than theater: genre, like Beckett's characters, was “under stress.”³ Beckett's theater teetered on the edge of survival. The form of his work decayed rapidly—rather than gradually, as many critics have argued—in the 60s. By 1969, plot and character had become heavily deemphasized, perhaps even to the point of non-existence, in Beckett's work.

This transformation, of course, did not occur immediately. Beckett's

3 Enoch Brater, *Beyond Minimalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3.

first 60s work—*Happy Days*—appears similar to *Waiting for Godot* insofar as it depicts a struggle to maintain hope in the face of futility. Nevertheless, the play represents a pivotal moment in Beckett’s oeuvre; for the first time, a female voice—and with it a conflict rooted in daily struggles—would guide his work. From *Waiting for Godot* to *Krapp’s Last Tape*, Beckett depicted just one female character, focusing almost exclusively on male voices. During that period, he contributed to a mainstream theater tradition of portraying men examining grandiose aspects of life, from the essence of perseverance (*Godot*) to the challenge of dying gracefully (*Krapp’s*).

With *Happy Days*, Beckett shifts his focus to the common struggles of common people, from the despair of characters who can intellectually engage with the meaninglessness of their endeavors to the plight of ordinary people, who often fail to recognize their absurd situation. Billie Whitelaw describes the work as illustrating “the universal human task of getting through the day.”⁴ Beckett depicts how Winnie, the protagonist of the play, fills “the time between ‘the bell for waking’ and ‘the bell for sleep.’”⁵ She performs several routine, recognizable actions, including brushing her teeth, praying, and cleaning her glasses, all intricately outlined step-by-step in Beckett’s stage directions. This attention to detail captures the monotony of Winnie’s existence and finds a ritualistic aspect in daily life. Here, Beckett suggests that average people attempt to cope with existence by tethering themselves to repetition. These people ground themselves in the repetitive not only through action, however, but also through language. Far from directly engaging with the uselessness of going about “just another day,” as *Godot’s* Vladimir would, Winnie attaches herself to optimistic, banal clichés, which dance around the futility of her struggle: “Another happy day!” “No better, no worse,” etc.

Though these elements seem to deemphasize the despair of absurdism in Beckett’s earlier works, the playwright still holds to his existential concerns through the play’s set-up. As Winnie grounds herself in her op-

4 Billie Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw... Who He?* (New York: St. Martin, 1995), 148–149.

5 Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw*, 149.

timism, she becomes slowly more buried in sand. The play begins in the middle of this submersion, as the sand has already come up to her waist. By the play's conclusion, the sand has risen up to her neck, implying that death soon awaits her. In spite of her optimism and hopefulness, Winnie faces a powerless, horrifying situation of impending death and inescapable stasis. In fact, Hugh Kenner characterizes Winnie's "chattering...through the formulae of cheerful utterance" as a forced attempt to cope with her reality.⁶ He emphasizes the parallel between Winnie's dilemma and the plight of living within the genteel society of England, which expects people "to cherish small mercies" and identifies not lapsing into gloom as "a duty."⁷ Oddly enough, Kenner identifies a familiar cultural reality in *Happy Days* despite the work's placeless, unfamiliar setting. This recognition occurs because Beckett augments the surreal stasis of Winnie's physical entrapment with an everyday stasis, depicting her difficulties as a housewife figure. She desperately seeks the attention and love of her husband figure, Willie, who constantly ignores her and says little over the course of the play. Unlike Winnie, Willie can move freely, as none of his body is covered by sand. In this way, the work reveals how society permits men the ability to pursue their desires and maintain autonomy, whereas women remain trapped in the domestic sphere, unable to pursue autonomy due to the intrinsic structure of their reality. Though Beckett employs an unrealistic set-up, he uses it in order to highlight a pedestrian experience. For Beckett, the absurd is no longer conceptual but a daily reality for women.

Beckett continues to explore the absurdity of the archetypal traditional female experience in his next 60s work, *Play*. The work revolves around the complications that arise when a man cheats on his wife. As James Knowlson and John Pilling have observed, this set-up has "long formed the staple diet of much domestic drama."⁸ Their analysis relies on the play's undeniably clichéd language and use of stock characters.⁹ Indeed,

6 Hugh Kenner, *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 147.

7 Kenner, *A Reader's Guide*, 147.

8 Knowlson and Pilling, *Frescoes*, 112.

9 Knowlson and Pilling, *Frescoes*, 112–113.

these characters demonstrate so little uniqueness in their personalities that Beckett refers to them only as m (man), w1 (woman 1), and w2 (woman 2). Commenting on Beckett's subversion of theatrical conventions, these two critics refer to Beckett's title as "plainly descriptive."¹⁰ Though it is tempting to view the title *Play* as meta-theatrical given how much the meta-theatrical informs the work itself, such an interpretation dismisses the use of the word within the work's dialogue. M refers to the hysterics of the women and his participation in the affair as "just play."¹¹ In this context, Beckett's title points out the despair of the female experience. Whereas women must invest their lives in the domestic due to societal structuring, men view sex and the marital institution with triviality while dismissing the subsequent reactions of women as pure dramatics. Rather than combatting the oppressive male in the play, however, these women deride and attack each other; in one instance, w1 calls w2 a "bitch," while w2 insults w1's appearance.¹² Far from fighting patriarchy, these women bolster it by using its oppressive jargon and upholding its notion of attractiveness as a crucial measure of women's value. Though these plot points speak to Beckett's preoccupation with the absurdity of the mundane, he heavily deemphasizes plot in this work, reinventing himself as a playwright whose works foreground visuals and sounds. By spotlighting these elements, however, Beckett further highlights the absurdity of his characters' situation and, hence, the absurdity of infidelity in general.

Beckett uses speech as a monotonous element to obscure plot, demonstrating the vapid quality of adultery. Though the plot of *Play* comes across clearly on the page, the way in which Beckett calls for the actors to deliver their speech—with toneless voices, rapid tempo, and impassive faces—makes the play nearly impossible to comprehend in performance.¹³ The actors' passivity and mechanical-like delivery emphasizes the characters' lack of soulfulness, as they lack both autonomy and empathy. For specta-

10 Knowlson and Pilling, *Frescoes*, 113.

11 Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1986), 313.

12 Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 308.

13 Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 307.

tors who had become accustomed to Beckett as a playwright focused on language, *Play* alienated some of its initial viewers. Capturing this reaction, Billie Whitelaw describes the frustration of Kenneth Tynan when viewing the rehearsal process of *Play*'s first production in English:

He said: "It's going so fast nobody can understand a word of the dialogue. This is poetry and I can't hear any of it. It's beautiful poetry, I want to be able to hear the damn thing." Standing at a distance, I thought, Oh God, Ken, you've got it wrong, you've got it quite wrong.¹⁴

Tynan failed to recognize that Beckett had no interest in heightening the gossip of adultery to a language of beauty. Beckett instead presents this gossip, already clichéd in the theater and commonplace in life, as a maddening babble; he frames his characters' speech in this manner perhaps to indicate the meaninglessness of their actions, how they fail to alter their situations and repeat the actions of others before them. Here, adultery is not a taboo act but a piece of the mundane. Rather than a break from the status quo, it is a banal continuation of it. Beckett further indicates this repetitiveness by calling for the play to be performed again after its final line, with the repeat possibly being "an exact replica of" the first performance.¹⁵ This repeat makes the form of theater seem broken, like a scratched record, and the situation of adultery seem rote.

These characters are stuck in a loop without progress, an absurd state Beckett depicts through his visual indications of stasis. Beckett's stage directions call for *Play*'s characters to stand in urns that come up to their necks, preventing the characters from moving or interacting with each other. Rather than engaging with each other, they blankly look straight ahead. Their lack of realistic interaction, blankness, and engulfment in urns makes them seem almost dead. These characters demonstrate so little originality that Beckett likens their existence to death, the ultimate state of stasis. Beck-

14 Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw*, 79.

15 Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 320.

ett supports the idea of their death-like state by engulfing the characters in darkness unless they are speaking. A character speaks only when illuminated by a spotlight, the response to which is immediate.¹⁶ The spotlight, here, continues the idea of repeated action since when one character stops speaking, the light transfers immediately to the next face.¹⁷ In his next work, 1966's *Come and Go*, Beckett would expand cyclical action from a device to the center of the work itself.

In *Come and Go*, Beckett represents the way in which people relate to one another as cyclical. Identical actions that are immediately repeated form the basis for the piece. Three old friends—all women in outfits that are identical except for their colors—sit next to each other. One woman attempts to broach the topic of the “old days,” but all just want to sit in silence with one another, so the conversation does not continue.¹⁸ One woman exits; one then asks the other remaining woman if she finds their old friend changed. When the other woman replies that she does not, the gossiping woman moves to the center seat and whispers in the other's ear, resulting in the woman being appalled and asking if the absent woman is aware of the factor that remains undisclosed to the audience. The other woman briefly says she hopes not, with some sort of reference to God always being made in the response (“God grant not,” “God forbid,” “Please God not”).¹⁹ The absent woman returns. This sequence of events is repeated three times until all women have gossiped, heard gossip, and been gossiped about. Through this sequence of events, Beckett suggests that all people (or at the very least all women) communicate about each other's experiences, hear about other's experiences, and have their own experiences talked about, suggesting that all human beings share the same essence of experience and are united by their shared, cyclical experience. Beckett has captured something even more commonplace than the mundane: the universal.

Beckett indicates this unity optically, furthering his preoccupation

16 Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 307.

17 Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 307.

18 Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 355.

19 Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 334–35.

with the symbolic power of visuals. At the play's conclusion, the three women join hands "in the old way," with "the three pairs of clasped hands [resting] on the three laps."²⁰ The women both appear powerful joined together and tender with their hands on each other's laps. Unlike the women of *Play*, who hardly know each other and undermine each other, these women continue a lifelong friendship and appear to support one another. The intimacy of this position suggests that the gossip of these women is not motivated by maliciousness, but rather by their genuine care for each other. Thus, Beckett suggests unity among people is possible when motivated by loyalty. In this work, three women warmly support each other, whereas men coldly fail to support a woman in Beckett's previous two 60s plays. The women of *Come and Go*, Kenner points out, respect each other's dignity, insisting that nothing "untoward shall be said" about the others, "no cattiness, no gloating."²¹ Beckett appears to suggest that women can achieve autonomy if they do not live isolated from other women and support rather than tear down each other. This play, furthermore, departs from the absurdism of Beckett's previous work, as it does not depict these women's situation as meaningless and futile. These women's repetition, in fact, affirms the durational quality of their unity, a friendship so stable its actions happen instantly and consistently. These women are joined together in the meaning of a shared life, as Beckett indicates through his notes about how the women should dress. All women wear "full-length coats, buttoned high" and "drab nondescript hats with enough brim to shade faces."²² The women can only be distinguished by the differing colors of their coats; "apart from colour differentiation," the three women look "as alike as possible."²³ The differing colors distinguish each woman from the others, but the otherwise identicalness of their dress suggests one unit and an experience of life shared by all of them. Significantly, these women dress in a nondescript manner, suggesting that these women could be anyone, further framing them as universal symbols.

20 Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 355.

21 Kenner, *A Reader's Guide*, 174.

22 Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 356.

23 Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 356.

Beckett further suggests the commonplace, universal experience of these women through their language. These women speak exclusively in mundane language, using colloquial expressions like “God forbid.”²⁴ The similarity of their speech further suggests their unity. Since nearly all human beings, at some point, speak in rudimentary, colloquial phrases, Beckett points towards the universality of these women’s experience. However, by representing these characters visually, we can notice their gender, body type, ethnicity, etc., making identifying with them not entirely possible for some viewers. Beckett eliminated such distinguishing factors in his final 60s play, 1969’s *Breath*.

In *Breath*, Beckett affirms the universal essence of human experience by virtually eliminating plot and character. By writing a play consisting only of a single breath inhaling and exhaling, Beckett eliminates the alienating factors of voice, language, and appearance. The breath could belong to anyone, regardless of gender, class, etc. He further separates the breath from specificity by depicting no plot points beyond the inhale and exhale. He no longer wishes to portray individual characters or even women in general, but the essence of the acts of human beings in general, perhaps even of animals in general, as breath is not indigenous to humans. Beckett, then, has expanded his interests from existential men to ordinary women to all human beings (and perhaps even a larger diversity of life forms than just human beings).

In a massive shift from his former depictions of humans’ powerlessness within the grand scheme of life, Beckett depicts the ability of human beings to create their own life. As the breath inhales, the stage lights reach their highest setting; with the decrease on the exhale, the lights adjust down one setting at a time. It is the breath of life that determines the stage image. Whereas light determines the movement of life in *Play*, life determines the setting of light in *Breath*. By showing how life manipulates the workings of theater rather than the other way around, Beckett at last demonstrates hope rather than depicting hope’s absurdity; he has found an aspect of life human beings have control over. Though this action is typically involuntary, it is

24 Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, 354.

still one that human beings can consciously manipulate. This very idea of manipulating theatrical settings and depictions of human life would fuel Beckett's further experimentations.

Breath reveals a Beckett who was becoming more active in the actual production of theater. He refers to specific light board settings in *Breath*, demonstrating his preoccupation with technical theater. Whereas the Beckett of the 50s was more concerned with language than theatrical techniques, the Beckett of the 60s became interested in how theater was produced. As Knowlson and Pilling note, this interest "brought him into much more active participation in actual production."²⁵ While working on productions of *Play* in Paris and London, Beckett became "intensely preoccupied" with the artistic effects of "varying the intensity and the speed of both speech and lighting."²⁶ Additionally, he directed *Come and Go* himself in Paris in 1966.²⁷ His active participation in productions reveals how the 1960s transformed Beckett from head-centric to practical. He realized the control that human beings have over the presentation of life and played with these elements as a result. From simply showing "a mouth from which words issue" to representing the thoughts of one character through the sounds of three voices coming from "three distinct sources at both sides of the stage and directly above [the face of the character]," Beckett began to manipulate the essential aspects of the human body itself to immerse viewers in "the mind of one human being."²⁸ The end of the 60s represents a moment of growth and inclusivity for Beckett, as he recognized the unity of all human beings in the struggle for survival.

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25 Knowlson and Pilling, *Frescoes*, 128.

26 Knowlson and Pilling, *Frescoes*, 112.

27 Knowlson and Pilling, *Frescoes*, 128.

28 Martin Esslin, "A Theatre of Stasis—Beckett's Late Plays," in *Critical Essays on Samuel Beckett*, ed. Patrick A. McCarthy (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986), 192–198.