TOWARDS THE ORIGINS OF PERFORMANCE: SAMUEL BECKETT

Among the fundamental models that have most influenced dramaturgy and all theatrical developments in recent decades, Samuel Beckett clearly occupies a prominent place, with his work first as playwright and then director clearly making a significant impression. His influence is central to the trend in contemporary theatrical practice towards the conception of performance that favours the actor’s experience of being on stage before the audience at the expense of the narrative and mimetic elements. This conception of performance escapes from the conventions of canonical duration and the development and unfolding of a plot; it undermines the very concept of character and puts a severe strain on the actor’s stamina and technical training.

Before the challenge to the physical limits of the body posed by the work of Marina Abramović, one of the most famous performers (who experimented with self-injury and burnout in the seventies, when Gina Pane was also practising body art centred on the dimension of physical pain), Beckett was already engaged in a radical exploration of the expressive potential of the body on stage, at the limit of “torture” which becomes in fact the essence of an actor’s work. This theme had already been broached by Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty and then, in about the same years that saw the Irish author increasingly active in the theatre, the training of Grotowski and Eugenio Barba’s approach to the discipline of acting.

I have tried elsewhere to demonstrate the quality of Beckett’s work in training actors, both on the stage and through the texts of the plays and the director’s notebooks in print. Here I would like to briefly examine the points I find most significant in relation to the emergence of performative theatre, with this paper seeking to make a small contribution to an understanding of its roots and premises.

Significantly, while some elements of what we might call Beckett’s teaching were immediately identified and recognized and therefore had a direct influence on subsequent developments in the theatre, actively contributing to take it in its present direction, other elements that bring Beckett’s work closer to contemporary performative theatre were not in fact immediately grasped and accepted. Critical studies and the reception of Beckett’s plays clearly show that some lines taken by the Irish author were anticipations,
in part prophetic, that only the historical and critical distance enables us to identify as
elements of continuity with subsequent developments in the theatre. Suffice it to say that
while performative theatre (or at least the influence of performance on the theatre) is
credited with the shift of centrality in spectacle from text to image and action\textsuperscript{2}, the idea
has long been established that Beckett’s theatre is concerned with the supremacy of an
inviolable dramatic text (though he actually modified it for every staging) and a lack of
freedom and creativity for actors and directors engaged in the production of his plays.
His first, controversial but widely read biography represents him wanting his work to be
free from actors, with overtones suggestive of Pirandello:

> the best possible play is one in which there are no actors, only the text. I’m trying to write
one\textsuperscript{3}.

This vision of Beckett as a man of letters reluctantly stooping to active involvement
in the theatre can be clearly shown to be partial and substantially erroneous by the
statements of actors themselves, as well as illuminating essays like those by Stanley
Gontarski or a comparison between Beckett’s work (on the page and the stage) with the
teachings of Barba’s Theatrical Anthropology. The theatre actually became increasingly
central and essential to him in the course of his life, as well as foundational for many
subsequent developments in performativity\textsuperscript{4}.

Among the distinctive features of performance identified by Josette Féral, whom I
take as my main reference, following a suggestion by Marco De Marinis at the confer-
ence, we find three that the French-Canadian scholar presents as “the essential foun-
dations of the genre. The first is the manipulation to which the performance subjects
the body of the performer, a foundational and indispensable element in every performative
act; secondly the manipulation of space that the performer hollows out and dwells in,
down to its furthest recesses; and, finally, the relation that performance establishes be-
tween the artist and the audience, the viewers and the work of art, the work of art and
the artist”\textsuperscript{5}.

We can examine Beckett’s theatre in relation to these three points.

In the “manipulation of the performer’s body”, we cannot help noticing that Beck-
ett’s plays are formidable achievements, almost a point of arrival rather than of depa-
ture. With the exception of the most extreme practices of body art, rarely has the body
been so “manipulated” as by the Beckettian actor.

Emblematic in this respect is one of the last plays Beckett wrote, which I see as


Pirandello, as is well known, said “the performance should go by itself”. Clearly there is an interesting
comparison, here of course impossible for reasons of space, between the positions of these two important
playwrights. Here my point is only to emphasize, notwithstanding many differences, the common contradic-
tion between the conventional image (although sometimes, especially in the case of Pirandello, constructed by
himself) and their actual work on the stage with the actors.

\textsuperscript{4} The reader is again referred to my contributions cited above. As for the work of Gontarski, which
is fundamental in this respect, in his very full bibliography on Beckett I wish to mention at least “Revising

\textsuperscript{5} Féral, \textit{Théorie et Pratique du théâtre}, 183. See below M. De Marinis, \textit{Performance e teatro. Dall’at-
tore al performer, e ritorno?}, 29-46.
almost the culmination of his idea of the theatre. This is *Catastrophe* (1982), whose Protagonist (in name and in fact) is an actor who is literally “manipulated”\(^6\) by the Director’s Assistant (except in the climax, when, independent and rebellious, he turns his inquiring gaze on the public). But if we browse through the plays of the great Irish dramatist we note that from his earliest work, *Waiting for Godot* (1952), the bodies of the actors on stage are already no longer the healthy, beautiful and attractive bodies the theatre normally displays. It is rare to find such and so many forms of bodily suffering as are found in Beckett’s œuvre, where they can appear as metaphors of the human condition, but concretely and above all they are arduous conditions of work for the actors.

Estragon opens the play by announcing the pain in his foot; Vladimir has prostate problems that make his movements stiff. In Beckett’s second work, *Endgame* (1956), Clov is unable to sit down while Hamm is unable to walk, being blind and paralysed in a wheelchair, with beside him, stuffed into rubbish bins, the mutilated remains of his parents, one of whom, his mother, dies in the course of the play but almost without our realising it. The gray faces of the three protagonists of *Play* (1963) gaze out from jars/urns, following the unforgettable image of Winnie, the central character in *Happy Days* (1961), buried in a mound up to her waist and then up to her neck. At the extreme of virtuosity in *That Time* (1976), from the dark stage there is a “fade up to LISTENER’S FACE about 10 feet above stage level midstage off centre”\(^7\).

In the transition from one act to the next of *Waiting for Godot*, Pozzo is struck blind and Lucky dumb. In *Happy Days*, Willie’s body is shown lying at the foot of the mound where Winnie is half-buried only to reveal a wound inflicted on him by the empty bottle recklessly thrown by his wife. The body, already mortified, paralysed, reduced to the bust or head alone, in *Not I* (1973) comes to consist of nothing but a mouth, so giving the actor the laborious task of having to act swathed in black cloth which leaves only the mouth uncovered, unseeing and immobilized so as to ensure that the light falls on the only part of the body that is illuminated.

The actor’s score in Beckett’s plays becomes increasingly precise, going so far as to determine even the choice of the first foot to step on a path, as in *Footfalls* (1976), or the exact points of the stage at which to stop with carefully defined poses of the head in *What Where* (1984), and requiring the actor to control even imperceptible bodily expressions, including those that are normally independent of the will, being involuntary bodily movements like blinking. Joe (in *Eh, Joe*, 1965) is forced to keep his face “practically motionless throughout, eyes unblinking during paragraphs, impassive except in so far as it reflects mounting tension of *listening*”. Again in the concluding part of *Ohio Impromptu* (1981), Listener and Reader must simultaneously lower their right hands on the table, raise their heads and look “unblinking, Expressionless”.

The difficulty, even on the phonatory level, is already evident in Lucky’s tongue twisters and logorrheic monologues in *Waiting for Godot*. They rise to the almost insurmountable difficulty of articulating comprehensible sounds at the speed prescribed by Beckett in *Not I*, and in the end even the correspondence between body and voice fails (*Footfalls, Rockaby [1981], Eh Joe, That Time...*), in a dramaturgy that carefully

\(^6\) He is totally passive, subject to scrutiny and correction under a strict directorial control, reduced to silence, manipulated and disguised: his face is covered by a black wide-brimmed hat, he does not even move his arms and hands which are in fact positioned by the Assistant, regardless of his possible discomfort (“He’s shivering”).

calibrates synchronisms and even the number of seconds a pause lasts. (For the woman’s voice in *Eh Joe*, for instance, Beckett prescribes: “between phrases a beat of one second at least. Between paragraphs about seven, i.e. three before camera starts to advance and four for advance before it is stopped by voice resuming”). As can be seen, the corporeal slips into phantasmatic videoplay and a hybridisation of languages and signs is foreshadowed as the important path of development for the stage of the future.

The second characteristic identified by Féral in performance concerns the manipulation of place. Here again we find a clear example of the disruption of the pairing of reality/pretence, central to the development of the performative theatre and powerfully present in Beckett’s plays. What clues are we given to identify the location depicted in Beckett’s plays? Beyond the possible metaphorical readings, if the place represented does not exist, and the references to it are contradictory⁸, while there are extensive metatheatrical emphases⁹ that continually reiterate the fact that the action is taking place on a stage, it is clear that the location of Beckett’s plays is quite simply the theatrical space, that of the relation between actors and audience in which a performance is staged concentrated in the here and now.

A number of directors, including those on the Italian scene, have enhanced this complicity with the audience. Think of Carlo Cecchi’s *Endgame* (1995), which acquired “the hallmark of a parody of representation”¹⁰ with its continual emphasis on the fact that we are in a theatre, the improvisations, the interpolation of theatrical jargon and the metronome on stage. Or the production, again of *Endgame*, by Franco Branciaroli (2006), in which in his “tour of the world” in the wheelchair pushed by Clov, Hamm addresses the line “Beyond is the ... other hell”, with his hand raised in the air towards the stalls, instead of against the end wall.

The theatrical situation is placed at the centre: the here and now consisting of an actor on the stage subjected – as evidenced, for example, by Billie Whitelaw and Jack MacGowran, incomparable performers¹¹ – to extreme hardships, to the fatigue and physical enervation involved in a Beckettian performance (under the author’s own direction).

Finally, the effectiveness of these plays introduces another of the central themes of performance: the plane of reception, the relationship with the audience (the third polarity in Féral’s scheme).

Beckett was ahead of his time because he offered the public not so much a representation of a story as the orchestration of the signs on a stage, where what happens is not always reducible to rational verbality. There is always a passage of energies that come from the enormous use of energy that the actor is forced to invest in this type of performance and reach the audience, which does not find itself having to decode a mes-

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⁸ Even the tree in *Waiting for Godot*, which, though stylised, could be interpreted as naturalistic, becomes covered with leaves in one night, not to mention the mounds of sand or jars that engulf characters who really are found inhabiting the space “down to its furthest recesses”.

⁹ See, to cite only one example from the texts, when in *Endgame* Clov points the telescope at the audience saying, “I see ... a multitude ... in transports ... of joy”, and, with his usual sense of humour, after the canonical pause, adds, “That’s what I call a magnifier”.

¹⁰ A. Cascetta, *Il tragico e l’umorismo. Studio sulla drammaturgia di Samuel Beckett*, Florence: Le Lettere, 2000, 287 (this is the *Appendice sulla Fortuna scenica*, in which the Author analyses various productions, including Cecchi’s *Finale di partita*).

sage but to submit to an experience that, by involving different planes, not only verbal, puts it under a pressure perhaps deeper than it is accustomed to.

The audience (which is never the direct butt of practices openly aimed at it, as in happenings) is yet deeply disquieted by a discourse that provokes and baffles it, arouses laughter and questions it, strikes at its nervous system and stirs memories, feelings and capacities, heightened through the apt use of music, compositional schemes, figurative models and biblical, poetic and literary allusions.

When Knowlson, in the introduction to the first of Beckett’s production notebooks he edited, speaks of “choreography” with reference to the Beckett’s writing for the stage, he is bringing out that sensitivity to the composition of the signs of the stage that anticipates much recent work. Beckett himself worked on this dimension. The study of his Notebooks clarifies his steadily increasing focus on the performative phase, on the actors on the stage, not just as individuals-characters but as signs.

While in performance art the actors often appear on stage without the masks of characters, but as themselves, in his dramaturgy Beckett erodes the psychological dimension of characters that have increasing difficulty in finding even a physical and psycho-physical integrity. And even from the start in Beckett’s theatre it was clear that not even the uniqueness of the names would be unchangeable, not to mention the weakness of memory that at the height of the early seventies led the character in Not I to be unable even to recognize herself: “What? ..Who? ..No! ..She! ..”.

Again Catastrophe is the epitome of how the centrality of the actor is wholly concentrated in the performative phase, in the relation with the audience. What counts is not so much the actor or the events he interprets, narrates or represents, but the way he relates to the audience, his being there at that moment, with an audience before him, to whom he turns a provocative glance: the performative phase is the sole generator of meaning, in spite of any author or director, however despotic they are (or are thought to be).

By undermining, with a great sense of irony, himself and his working method, but even more radically the directorial function itself in this 1982 play Beckett, the celebrated “tyrant-director”, reveals the sole concrete reality of the production: that it is the realm of the relation between actor and audience, ultimately out of the supposed control of a director who would not normally be present when the play is performed. (Not even as a member of the audience, and in any case certainly not actively present, except in experimental work which is significantly also one of the origins of performative theatre, as in Kantor’s stagecraft).

In this work the director is engaged (as a stage direction makes explicit) in “re-

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14 See, in Waiting for Godot, the wordplay “Pozzo/Bozzo/Gozzo” at Pozzo and Lucky’s entrance, and then “Godet, Godot, Godin” in Pozzo’s words. Vladimir further confirms to the Child that he is “Mister Albert” at the end of both Acts I and II.

15 Showing himself also on this level fully in line with the distinctive trait of performance art as identified by Féral who speaks of the “relationship the performance establishes between the artist and the audience, the viewers and the work of art, the work of art and the artist”, perhaps without need to emphasize that in this case, as always in the theatre, the term “artist” can include, in addition to the author of the dramatic text, also the director, actors and every member of that creative cooperative that is ultimately responsible for, and therefore the author of, every spectacle.
hearsal. Final touches to the last scene”. He is projecting his own imagination into this moment of the performance, and his last line is:

Stop! (Pause) Now... let’em have it. (Fade-out of general light. Pause. Fade-out of light on body. Light on head alone. Long pause) Terrific! He’ll have them on their feet. I can hear it from here.

But it is the actor who is capable of seizing the moment, who exploits the relationship which transforms the rehearsal into a performative moment, focusing his gaze on an audience that the director ignores. So while we hear a “distant storm of applause”, “Phaises his head, fixes the audience”.

Of course the game of pretence posits that the play is set during the rehearsal of a production and there should be no audience, but it is significant that the very fact of being an actor proves capable of going beyond the frame and the boundary, deploying the irreplaceable resources of the theatre in relationship. The here and now shared between actor and audience is the only meaning, and the only invincible possibility of freedom, as shown by that final, dense, gaze turned on the audience by P, the protagonist (the more he is humiliated the more powerful he becomes!). This is the meaning – highly political, I believe, and not just because of the dedication to Havel in his imprisonment\(^\text{16}\) – that the seventy-six year old author has left us: the road lying open to performance as action in a relation between stage and life, pretence and reality, possibility and actuality, that increasingly challenges the present of the theatre and the world.

SUMMARY

Among the fundamental models that have most influenced contemporary theatrical practice, Samuel Beckett clearly occupies a prominent place. His example is of paramount importance for the trend towards the conception of performance that favours the actor’s experience of being on stage before the audience at the expense of the narrative and mimetic elements, and of the canonical conventions regarding duration, characters and a plot that has to be unfolded.

With a useful comparison with performance art and artists and theatre theorists and an emphasis on Beckett’s true medium of theatrical expression, the body, the essay highlights how prophetic as well as influential Beckett’s radical exploration of the expressive potential of the body on stage, at the limit of “torture”, has been. The argument is developed by following Josett’s Feral’s scheme of three distinctive features of contemporary performance which the author shows are central to Beckett’s theatre: the manipulation of the body, the manipulation of space and the relation between the artist and the audience.

\(^\text{16}\) As related by Knowlson (\textit{Damned to Fame. The Life of Samuel Beckett}, London: Bloomsbury, 1996, 800 and f.), Beckett wrote this text in response to the appeal by AIDA (the International Association for the Defence of the Artists who are victims of political persecution), to be performed during the \textit{Nuit pour Václav Havel} at the Festival d’Avignon in July 1982.