

Samuel Beckett's scenographic collaboration with Jocelyn Herbert

Article

Accepted Version

McMullan, A. (2012) Samuel Beckett's scenographic collaboration with Jocelyn Herbert. *Degrés*, 149-150. pp. 1-17. ISSN 0770-8378 Available at <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/31236/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: Ministère de la communauté française de Belgique

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online



Anna McMullan

Film, Theatre and Television, University of Reading

Citation: Anna McMullan, 'Samuel Beckett's Scenographic Collaboration with Jocelyn Herbert', *Degrés: Revue de Synthèse à Orientation Sémiotique* (2012) Nos 149-150, (d) 1-17.

SAMUEL BECKETT'S SCENOGRAPHIC COLLABORATION WITH JOCELYN HERBERT

As a director, Beckett's meticulous work with actors is legendary: his theatrical notebooks and accounts of his rehearsal processes emphasize the development of a precise choreography of speech, movement and gesture, such as the patterned movements of Estragon and Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot*, or Krapp's glance over his shoulder towards the sensed presence of death lurking in the shadows in *Krapp's Last Tape*¹. However, when involved in the staging of his plays as director or advisor, Beckett was concerned not only with the actor's performance but also with visual and practical details of the stage design which defines the stage world for both the actors and the audience. This essay will focus on the importance of the stage environment (particularly set and costume) in the *mise en scène* of several of Beckett's plays at the Royal Court Theatre in London. In some of these cases Beckett worked with a director such as George Devine or Donald McWhinnie, and in others he directed the plays himself². However in all of the productions of his theatre at the Royal Court, and in the 1964 British premiere of *Play* by the National Theatre Company, directed by Devine, he worked with the British theatre designer Jocelyn Herbert (1917-2003). In various ways she influenced what we now think of as the visual or scenographic aesthetic of Beckett's theatre.

Scenographic Perspectives

Scenography refers to the construction of a stage environment for performance, and, as Christopher Baugh notes, the term 'scenographer' is now frequently used instead of

¹ See Knowlson, 1994 and Knowlson and McMillan, 1992: xvi.

² In 1962 Beckett noted to the American director, Alan Schneider, that Devine "will always let me be in on production" (Harmon, 1998: 131).

‘stage designer’ or ‘theatre designer’, to describe “the artists who have responsibility for all the visual and aural contributions of theatre and performance: the stage setting and properties, costume design, lighting and sound design” (Baugh, 2005: 131). Rather than simply a backdrop to the action, the art of scenography exploits the entire “physical vocabulary of the stage” (Aronson, 2005: 7) in order to communicate the vision of the playwright, or the concept of a particular production, in concrete, sensory terms³. Indeed, many of the major dramaturgical innovations of the last century or so have involved collaborations between playwrights or directors and scenographers: for example, the director Stanislavski, who worked with Chekhov at the Moscow Art theatre, collaborated closely with the designer Viktor Simov, and Bertolt Brecht worked with scenographer Caspar Neher (Baugh, 2005: 84). Likewise, Beckett’s radically minimalist dramaturgy necessitated a new, distilled scenographic approach, one attuned to his intense focus on the performing body in an almost bare stage, where every detail of the costume, props, visible environment and lighting signifies and resonates.

Beckett increasingly incorporated the staging of his plays into his texts, revealing, according to Joslin McKinney and Philip Butterworth, a highly scenographic imagination:

Perhaps the most scenographically inventive playwright, Samuel Beckett has concerned himself with space and image to the extent that words and scenography are inextricably intertwined from the start of the play. Beckett’s concern is with staging plays and not just the text on the page. The operation of scenographic elements, particularly spatial ones, is deliberately mobilised by Beckett’s texts. Stage directions and descriptions of the settings of his plays are precise and the objects on stage are seen to be as fundamental to the text as the words given to the characters. For him, use of stage space is a primary element in dramatic construction. (McKinney and Butterworth, 2009: 88)

³This wholistic concept of theatre design was pioneered at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966) and Adolphe Appia (1862-1928) as part of a Modernist reclaiming of theatre as a medium for imaginative creation rather than commercial entertainment. Exploiting the technological possibilities of electric lighting, Craig and Appia rejected two-dimensional conventions of scene painting in favour of a more abstract, sculptural space that integrated the actor’s body into the kinetic design of the performance (See Baugh, 2005).

Therefore, although Beckett was profoundly influenced by the visual arts, even, as James Knowlson has demonstrated, drawing on motifs and gestures from particular paintings⁴ in his stage images, his theatre in fact foregrounds *scenographic* space, which is affected by the phenomenological presence of the actors on stage, by the animation of the space by voice, other sounds and lighting, and by the audience in the auditorium. Indeed, we might argue that scenography translates Beckett's interest in the visual arts into the plastic medium of the stage⁵.

James Knowlson has analyzed Beckett's frequent use of 'frozen gestures' or 'frozen postures' when he directed his own work, as in *Krapp's Last Tape*: "At the beginning and then again at the very end of the play, Krapp sat transfixed, like a figure captured on canvas in a painting, with his hands outstretched on the table in front of him". Nevertheless, Knowlson continues: "Beckett knew perfectly well that a flesh-and-blood actor is not, and can never be, a wholly static or still-life image, although at times he may be made to resemble one: in even the stillest of postures, eyes blink, lips quiver, hands tremble" (Knowlson and Haynes, 2003: 126). Even minimal movement affects the interaction between the performing body and the particular spatial arrangement of the stage, creating shifting areas of light and darkness, volume and depth. Moreover, the relationship between the actor's body and his or her costume, the kinetic as well as visual interaction between the actor and elements of the set and props such as Winnie's mound and bag in *Happy Days* or the rocking chair in *Rockaby*, all affect the audience's overall impression of the performance.

Therefore, although the staging of his plays is already envisaged in his texts, Beckett was dependent on the expertise and creative empathy of his designers to realize the scenic environment of particular plays in production. Scenographer Pamela Howard comments that, though in plays like *Krapp's Last Tape* "there appears to be nothing on stage, there is a huge amount of work to achieve that nothingness, and to find the right table and chair, and objects for the actor that are both practical and poetic" (Howard, 2002: 98). Beckett was very aware of the impact of the set on the audience's experience of his plays, writing to Alan Schneider of Jacques Noël's set

⁴ See in particular, James Knowlson and John Haynes, 2003.

⁵ The interconnections between Beckett's *oeuvre* and the visual arts are well established. See, for example, Lois Oppenheim, 2000; Daniel Albright, 2003; James Knowlson and John Haynes, 2003; and Mark Nixon, 2011.

for the French language premiere of *Fin de partie* in 1957 at the Royal Court: “I felt very strongly in London how completely wrong and damaging to the play the Noël set is” (Harmon, 1998: 52). He also disliked Peter Hall’s set for the London premiere of *Waiting for Godot* in 1955, describing it as “overburdened” (Courtney, 1993: 219). This raises the question of the extent to which the visual and scenic aesthetic of Beckett’s theatre in particular productions was shaped by the scenographers he frequently worked with, such as Jocelyn Herbert or the French designer Matias (Charles Henrioud 1926-2006) and the theatre / design cultures they worked in.

Productions of Beckett’s plays in which he was involved are already fading into theatrical history, and for many researchers the primary material for analysis of these designs is photograph stills and sketches, and in some cases video material and maquettes. Barbara Hodgdon describes the theatre still as “the visible remains of what is no longer visible, a fragment that steals theatre, stills it – and dis-tills it. Considered as performance in pieces, the theater photograph undertakes a visual conversation with performance” (Hodgdon, 2003: 89). Although the theatrical still is only ever a partial, fragmentary image which “seizes appearances, violently severs them from their original context” (*ibid.*), it often becomes a “stand-in” (*ibid.*, 96) for performance. Photographs of productions of Beckett’s plays by John Haynes, for example, many of which feature Herbert’s set and costume designs, have indeed become icons of a Beckettian theatrical aesthetic. Hodgson notes however, that such photographs can be supplemented by various forms of anecdote and narrative, which reveal the “ideological and historical frames” (*ibid.*, 98) through which the photographs are circulated and interpreted (as author-directed or authorized *mises en scène* in Beckett’s case), and which also flesh out their two-dimensional documentation of performance.

In addition to visual documentation and gathering textual and anecdotal material on individual productions (such as critical analyses, reviews and interviews), examining design materials can contribute to a more complex conversation about performance and give a sense of the texture of the *mise en scène* as well as its visual composition. Sketches of set and costume designs have a multi-layered relationship with performance, since they often reveal a process of trial and discovery, as images are discarded and amended conceptually and practically until they are materialized in the production. In Herbert’s case, some of her sketches are extremely detailed and reveal a profound engagement with Beckett’s work, constituting compelling, resonant

aesthetic objects in their own right. They establish a dialogue with other documentary materials about specific productions, and with the text, through their realization of set, props and characters' costumes. A scenographic perspective emphasizes the importance not only of an actor's performance to the live impact of a Beckett play, but of the details of the scenic environment which depends on collaboration between the director and the design and technical team. Just as Beckett preferred to work with actors and directors with whom he had built up a working relationship, he also worked repeatedly with particular scenographers such as Jocelyn Herbert.

Samuel Beckett, Jocelyn Herbert And The Royal Court Theatre

Herbert's first involvement with Beckett's theatre was in 1957, when, on behalf of the English Stage Company, the director George Devine invited the French language production of *Fin de partie*, directed by Roger Blin, to the Royal Court after arrangements to present it at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris fell through⁶. Herbert had initially joined the Royal Court as a scene painter, and was responsible for painting and assembling Jacques Noël's set, rather than creating the design (Courtney, 1993: 27). However, the next year, in 1958, she designed the double bill of the English language premiere of *Endgame* at the Royal Court, directed by George Devine who also played Hamm, and the world premiere of *Krapp's Last Tape* directed by Donald McWhinnie. Thus began an important collaboration not only between Herbert and Beckett, but between Beckett and the Royal Court Theatre, often referred to as 'the Court'. While the Court is central to British theatre history, the mutual impact between Beckett and the theatre cultures of the Court (and other theatres where Beckett directed his work) requires further research.

The Royal Court Theatre⁷ was acquired by the English Stage Company which had been founded in 1954 with Devine as the Artistic Director, and the first season opened in April 1956⁸. Devine had a strong vision for the Court as a writer's theatre,

⁶ See Knowlson, 1996: 429-434.

⁷ The theatre building, the New Court Theatre, originally opened in 1888 on the site of an earlier theatre. Its heyday was the period 1904-7 when Harley Granville-Barker managed it with J.E. Vedrenne and produced several premieres of George Bernard Shaw's plays there, in addition to a progressive programme of British and European playwrights. After 1935 it no longer operated as a theatre until it was reconstructed in the early 1950's after having been damaged in World War II.

⁸ Devine was already an influential stage director, had worked at prestigious theatres such as the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Sadlers Wells and the Old Vic, and had founded the London Theatre Studio, the Old Vic Theatre School and the Young Vic company with Michel St Denis and Glen Bynum Shaw. See Philip Roberts, 1999; Ruth Little and Emily McLaughlan, 2007, and Irving Wardle, 1978.

but in order to achieve this, he insisted that theatre design needed also to be revised:

In fact we have once more to sweep the stage clear as Copeau did with his *Trétau* [sic] *nu*, and to rethink the whole conception of the stage as an acting space. In what kind of space can the words of a dramatist both live and create the poetic world of the drama? The stage must have space and air and freedom from the trappings which are used to pretend that it is something which it is not. (Roberts, 1999: 24)

Beckett therefore came into contact with the Royal Court at a relatively early stage in his playwriting career, and at a time when Devine and his company were developing a particular vision for the Court and the kind of theatre they wished to create and support: Devine was pursuing a dual strategy of supporting new British writing and also introducing his audiences to European plays such as those of Brecht, Ionesco and Beckett (*ibid.*, 56-7). Just as Beckett was developing an important relationship with the radio drama department of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) around this time⁹, the encounter between Beckett and the Royal Court occurred at a formative moment in both of their histories. In particular, the performance and visual aesthetic which Devine and his team were developing at the Royal Court coalesced with Beckett's spare, iconoclastic and poetic theatre.

Devine invited Jocelyn Herbert to join the English Stage Company at the Court in 1956. Born into an artistic family (her father was the writer and independent member of parliament, A.P. Herbert), Herbert initially studied painting in Paris. Many years later, Beckett would emphasize their mutual interest in painting, and remember a Pierre Bonnard exhibition that they went to together and "admired the same things" (Courtney, *op. cit.*, 219). After Paris, Herbert studied theatre and costume design at the Slade School of Art. In 1936, she enrolled in the London Theatre Studio, where she trained with the Motley design team – Margaret Harris, Sophie Harris and Elizabeth Montgomery – and with directors Devine¹⁰, and Michel Saint-Denis (nephew of the French actor and director, Jacques Copeau), all of whom had a formative influence on her. She took time out to devote to her family before taking up

⁹ See Zilliacus, 1976; Esslin, 1982; Frost, 1997; and Bignell, 2009.

¹⁰ Devine married the theatre designer Sophie Motley in 1939, but from the late 1950's lived with Herbert until his death in 1966 (see Wardle, 1978).

theatre design again at the Royal Court. From then onwards, Herbert played a central role in developing the Court's distinctive scenic aesthetic and became one of Britain's most respected and influential designers. Because of her attention to every aspect of the stage design, the theatre space and how the actors inhabit and perform in the stage environment, she has been described as "the first British scenographer"¹¹.

Endgame and *Krapp's Last Tape* were among the first plays that Herbert designed at the Royal Court: prior designs included Ionesco's *The Chairs* for its London premiere at the Court in May 1957, Yeats's *Purgatory* in July 1957, and Ann Jellicoe's *The Sport of My Mad Mother* in February 1958. She approached the challenges of these avant-garde works by developing a "more or less abstract set" (Courtney, *op. cit.*, 25) which cleared the stage of a specific naturalist setting, and allowed for a more poetic visual aesthetic. Playwright David Storey has identified Herbert's "visual lyricism" as "the unifying element in all her designs, even in those which are simple and austere" (*ibid.*, p. 217). Like Devine, she wished to create a scenic environment which would serve the text and the actors:

This meant leaving space around the actors, and that meant the minimum of scenery and props, ie only those that served the actors and the play: nothing that was for decorative purposes only, unless the text, or the style of the play, demanded it... Perhaps it was the beginning of what I call 'considering the actors as part of the design'; considering where the actors will be on the stage and what they will need as the basis of the design; not creating an elaborate picture and then sticking the actors in it. (Herbert, in Findlater, 1981: 84-5)

It is not surprising that Beckett was drawn to Herbert's dedication and spare, visually poetic style. He acknowledged that "she has great feeling for the work and is very sensitive" (Courtney, *op. cit.*, 219)¹². Indeed, just as Jonathan Kalb described Billie Whitelaw as an interpreter of Beckett in both the performance and conceptual senses (Kalb, 1989: 9-23), Herbert was a skilled interpreter of Beckett's theatre, creating sets and costumes attuned to the sensory and affective impact Beckett was

¹¹ Herbert designed internationally for film and opera as well as for theatre, working with leading directors and playwrights such as Lindsay Anderson and Tony Harrison.

¹² This interview took place between Beckett and Cathy Courtney on March 2, 1985, at the Hotel PLM, 17 Bld St Jacques, Paris (email from Cathy Courtney, 28 November 2011).

seeking to create with each production. Her scenography intensified the modes of perception provoked by Beckett's plays, which work through the visual, aural and plastic elements of the *mise en scène* as much as through the spoken word.

Jocelyn Herbert's Designs For Selected Productions Of Beckett's Plays At The Royal Court And The National Theatre

Not I: Notes after talking to Sam.

Visual image very important – very simple and direct but very important¹³.

Herbert's interest in opening up an abstracted stage space that highlights the visual and kinetic relationships between actors, set and props, is evident from her first Beckett designs. As its title suggests, *Endgame* refers specifically to the final moves of a chess game, evoking a world winding down towards extinction, but in which its players are arrested in stalemate, without hope of a definitive ending. The stage directions describe a bare interior, inhabited by the blind Hamm on a central wheelchair, his factotum, Clov, and his legless parents, Nagg and Nell, incarcerated in ashbins. Herbert described the Jacques Noël set for the original French production of *Fin de partie* at the Court in 1957 as "very dour, rather like a tower made of stone" (Courtney, *op. cit.*, 28). Though the 1958 programme states that her *Endgame* design was based on that of Noël¹⁴, her set, while spare and bleak, had a much lighter, painterly quality¹⁵. She initially experimented with a narrow, deeply recessed space, and with a triangular design¹⁶ but Herbert's detailed sketches for *Endgame* and photographs of the production show a circular set which exploited the limited width

¹³ Uncatalogued notes by Jocelyn Herbert, *Not I* folder, c The Estate of Jocelyn Herbert, Jocelyn Herbert Archive, Wimbledon College of Art, University of the Arts London. I am very grateful to Sandra Lousada for permission to include this quotation.

¹⁴ The Samuel Beckett Archive, Special Collections, the University of Reading, MS 3186.

¹⁵ Almost all of the originals of Herbert's designs are in the Jocelyn Herbert Archive, Wimbledon College of Art, University of the Arts London. Several of the designs mentioned below can be found in Courtney, *op. cit.*, which includes commentary from Herbert and some of the writers, directors and actors she worked with. I am most grateful to Cathy Courtney for her help in accessing and discussing Jocelyn Herbert's designs at the Jocelyn Herbert Archive. A sketch of George Devine as Hamm (S.1049-1983) and one of the set designs of *Happy Days* (S. 1052-1983) are held in the Theatre Museum Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum, Blythe House, Olympia, Kensington.

¹⁶ JH 1454 and JH 1455, Jocelyn Herbert Archive, Wimbledon College of Art, University of the Arts London.

of the Court stage with the ashbins at the very edge of the stage audience left, and its height, accentuated with beams across the top of the set. Contrasting with the circular set, the walls were composed of rectangles in mottled shades of dull browns, yellows and greys, with lines crossing the set horizontally towards a central focus above Hamm's chair. The effect was perceptually disorientating, creating an abstracted space which recalled cubist painting, and echoed the sense of highly patterned repetition of speech and movement in *Endgame*.

On the same programme, *Krapp's Last Tape* was played on the forestage in front of the *Endgame* set. The *mise en scène* of *Krapp's Last Tape* was the first time Beckett had used lighting to define the performing area on stage against darkness. George Devine was particularly interested in lighting at a time before it was usual to have a lighting designer¹⁷, and lighting was a major concern at the Court, as Herbert notes:

Above all we discovered *light*. The enormous development in the quality of lighting equipment has been prompted not only by the increasing demand for control, precision and brilliance, but also by the fact that as naturalistic scenery was less widely used, so lighting became an increasingly integral part of the design [...]; We got rid of borders and exposed the lights: not just by chance, to the first four rows of the stalls, but on purpose to the whole theatre. Out of this grew the luxury of designing a lighting grid to suit each play, i.e. the grid to echo the contours of the set which made it possible to light an acting area leaving darkness all around, thus creating a surround out of light. (Herbert, in Findlater, *op.cit.*, 85)

Herbert's sketches for the staging of *Krapp's Last Tape* show her concern with the visual relationships established through lighting between the area occupied by the table (where Krapp listens to the recordings of his past selves and attempts to record a 'last tape') lit by an overhead lamp, the shadows cast by the table, and the den or cagibi into which Krapp retreats to fetch his recording paraphernalia or to drink, indicated on stage by a narrow strip of light.

¹⁷ James Knowlson discussed this in his interview with Jocelyn Herbert. Transcript of interview with Jocelyn Herbert, July 1992. UoR Beckett Collection JEK A/7/34.

The experience of working on *Krapp's Last Tape* led Beckett to a much greater reliance on the use of lighting to define the stage space and the boundaries of the performing body or part of the body in his subsequent plays. The most extreme example of this is *Not I*, with its disembodied, babbling mouth suspended in darkness, watched helplessly by the silent figure of the Auditor. For the British premiere of *Not I* at the Royal Court in 1973, Herbert designed the torture chair-like apparatus into which Billie Whitelaw, playing Mouth, was strapped during the performance, but her sketches also reveal an understanding of the visual composition of Mouth and Auditor across the space of the stage, with the Auditor faintly but hauntingly lit, which has proved difficult to achieve in many productions¹⁸.

As frequently happened with the diverse premieres of his plays in the United States, France, Germany and London, what Beckett learned from one production would inform subsequent productions¹⁹. Since many of Beckett's plays had their British premiere at the Royal Court²⁰ Herbert was responsible for some design decisions that both reflected and in some cases influenced shifts in Beckett's envisioning of particular plays. For example, Herbert designed two productions of *Happy Days* at the Royal Court some fifteen years apart, and when she returned to the play for the second time she made some significant changes. The actress Brenda Bruce had been brought in at a late stage for the first production in 1962, directed by Devine, while for the second in 1979, Beckett directed Billie Whitelaw with whom he had already built up a close working relationship. The first production followed the American world premiere which was directed by Alan Schneider and designed by William Ritman²¹. Beckett didn't participate in the rehearsals or attend any performances of the American premiere, but from his correspondence with Schneider it is evident that he had a precise concept of the *mise en scène* and the challenges it posed, such as how the actress is to be placed inside the mound: he suggests a high stool in Act I and a low one in Act II²². However, there was scope for Herbert to

¹⁸ See Courtney, *op. cit.*, 88-91.

¹⁹ The Directors Notebooks series published by Faber and Faber record many of these amendments.

²⁰ Beckett writes to Alan Schneider in November 1962 that he has decided to give the Royal Court first option on all his work in the future. In a letter to Jocelyn Herbert in October 1981, he again refers to giving the Court first refusal of his shorter plays out of loyalty. The Samuel Beckett Archive, Special Collections, The University of Reading, CORRS/HER, 104. Tangier, 20.10.81.

²¹ The American premiere of *Happy Days* opened at the Cherry Lane Theatre, 17 September, 1961, with Ruth White playing Winnie.

²² Harmon, 1998: 89.

introduce some modifications that heightened the sense of intense “heat and dessication”²³ of the world of the play.

In his correspondence with Schneider, Beckett refers to “Hot blue sky (if blue can be hot which I doubt) and yellow-brown scorched earth”²⁴. The text refers to Winnie floating up “into the blue” (Beckett, 1986: 151), if she were not held in the earth. Some of Herbert’s sketches for *Happy Days* feature a brownish mound, with Winnie in a mustard coloured dress, an orange parasol and blue sky²⁵. However, Herbert had “a terrible problem with the blue sky... I just couldn’t make it work with the yellow sand although I tried three or four different drawings” (Courtney, *op. cit.*, 54). She then tried a more yellow-orange sky which matched the dull yellow brown of the mound and surrounded the small figure of Winnie. Compared to the other drawings, these depict the sky and the mound as a single expanse entrapping Winnie, and create a sense of intense, oppressive heat. Herbert comments: “I sent them all to Sam and said did he think orange was better because it gave the idea of more concentrated heat? He wrote back and agreed” (*ibid.*). Several reviews of the production convey the strong impression created by the set, which was described as “blinding”²⁶, and as “a bare blazing arena of scorched grass [which] has the atmosphere of a primitive altar”²⁷. In *The Guardian*, Philip Hope-Wallace praised Brenda Bruce’s ‘*tour de force*’ performance, which he described as “supported” not only by Peter Duguid as Willie, but by Herbert’s set: “a pile of earth marvelously designed in a tawny blasted heath” (Hope-Wallace, 1962, THM/273/7/2/101).

Beckett’s correspondence with Schneider reveals that the dimensions and image of the mound were central concerns:

Mound: I see it extending across entire opening, sloping down to a few inches above stage level at either side [Beckett includes a drawing]... i.e. less hump than undulation. Texture: perhaps a kind of brown canvas with something to

²³ *Ibid.* p. 94.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 94.

²⁵ JH 4363 and JH 4364, Jocelyn Herbert Archive, Wimbledon College of Art, University of the Arts London.

²⁶ Alan Brien, “Theatre”, *Sunday Telegraph*, 4th November 1962. Review folders of Beckett productions at the Royal Court are held in the Theatre and Performance Archives, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. THM/273/7/2/101.

²⁷ “One Sided Dialogue by Half-Buried Wife. Royal Court Theatre: *Happy days*”, *The Times*, 2nd November, 1962. THM/273/7/2/101.

suggest scorched grass – but smooth, ie no stones sticking up or such like, nothing to break monotony of symmetry. (Harmon, *op. cit.*, 94)

Though the first production at the Court did feature a smooth, regular mound covered in a kind of brownish turf, Herbert was unhappy with it:

The mound I did for this was a failure as far as I was concerned. In the drawings I had a perspective of sand dunes going away, but you could only see it properly from the Circle because the mound got in the way. Unfortunately it was too egg-shaped, and it should have been covered so that it wasn't so smooth but somehow that never got done. (Courtney, *op. cit.*, 54)

Beckett was in fact delighted with her design, writing to Schneider: “Excellent set by Jocelyn Herbert” (Harmon, *op. cit.*, 94). However, by 1979, Herbert suggests that “Beckett had changed his attitude to the mound too and thought we should have it more broken up with bits coming off” (Courtney, *op. cit.*, 55). Her later design features a much larger mound, very similar in shape to Beckett’s drawing in his 1961 letter to Alan Schneider, but much rougher and more layered and textured. Indeed, by 1979, this detail and texture had become a characteristic of Herbert’s designs for Beckett’s plays, including the urns in *Play* (1964) and May’s dress in *Footfalls* (1976). Herbert commented on the scenography of the Berliner Ensemble’s production of Brecht’s *Mother Courage* which she saw in 1951: “The props the Berliner Ensemble used had a quality of reality and truth and ‘usedness’ about them which wasn’t just painted; it was actually worked on. Their clothes were marvellously padded, old, frayed and darned” (Courtney, *op. cit.*, 106). She worked personally on the construction of her designs for Beckett’s productions, and they materialize this sense of layers of time, repetition and ‘usedness’.

Herbert designed several of Beckett’s most iconic late plays: *Play*, *Come and Go*, *Not I* and *Footfalls*. Beckett mentioned to Alan Schneider after the world premiere of *Play* in 1963 in Germany directed by Deryk Mendel, that the urns were one of the major features of the play that needed to be rethought: “Deryk’s urns have their unpleasant bulging shape because the actors are sitting. The ideal is urns trapped and actors standing. If this not possible I am coming round to the idea of actors standing and full-length urns as closely fitting as possible and mounted or not on

hollow plinth about knee height” (Harmon, *op. cit.*, 144). The British premiere, a National Theatre production at the Old Vic Theatre in London in April 1964, directed by Devine, also followed the United States premiere directed by Schneider in New York in January 1964. Though Beckett did not see these productions in person, he was in communication with both Schneider and Mendel, and his wife Suzanne attended Mendel’s production of *Spiel*. Beckett therefore brought his knowledge of these two productions to bear on the Royal Court *mise en scène*.

As in New York, the urns were narrowed, and Herbert’s design denaturalized the audience’s perception by not having the urns conform to the normal height of the human body, but also accommodated the physical needs of the performer: “The urns had to be high but not as high as the actors, who couldn’t really squat because their knees would have come out too far, so I built the urns up on a platform and the cast stood below it. ... The actors were given something to hold onto during the performance” (Courtney, *op. cit.*, 108). One of the most remarkable elements of her design was the appearance of the faces which had been “excessively made up and characterized” in the German premiere (Harmon, *op. cit.*, 145). For the National Theatre production, Herbert materialized Beckett’s stage directions: ‘*Faces so lost to age and aspect as to seem almost part of urns* (Beckett, *op. cit.*, 307) by making the actor’s faces look like graveyard statues:

We chose dessicated wigs made as if they were the actor’s own hair but thinning and gone to seed. We made make-up out of oatmeal mixed with water and a little glue – the kind you use to stick on moustaches – and put ordinary make-up in first and then covered the actors’ faces with the mixture. Lastly we added grey and white pancake. They looked like old stone and the surface of their skin appeared to flake off during the performance. The urns were textured so that the actors seemed to be continuous with them. (Courtney, *op. cit.*, 98)

Although Herbert herself insisted that she was “always primarily interested in the set and how it works on the stage” (Burian, 1983: 217), her costume designs have been crucial to the presentation of Beckett’s characters in particular productions. Herbert’s sketches for the premiere of *Krapp’s Last Tape* in 1958 create a portrait of the character not only in his clothes, but in his bodily posture, expression and facial features. Herbert was involved in the metamorphosis of the character’s appearance

from the rather clown like figure described in the stage directions to a more neglected, shabby old man:

Our Krapp was the first performance ever. When Sam Beckett first wrote it he described Krapp as looking more like a clown and I remember doing a clown-like drawing, but when he saw it he didn't really like it so we just made Krapp an old man in raggedy clothes; he wasn't exactly a tramp, he had fairly formal clothes that had gone to seed, very shiny black trousers that didn't fit well, an old shirt and an old waistcoat. (Courtney, *op. cit.*, 29)

Herbert's initial design for Krapp as clown shows a striped brownish waistcoat too long for him with large pockets, a white shirt with a blue patch, ragged, narrow dark trousers considerably too short for him, and white boots. He has a very clown-like red nose, and a bald head with hair sticking out on both sides. The outline of his eyebrows and mouth are exaggerated²⁸. Subsequent designs erase the overt clown-like features, as Beckett did in his own production of *Krapp's Last Tape* at the Schiller-Theater Werkstatt in Berlin several years later, in October 1969²⁹. In Herbert's sketch of the actor Pat Magee playing Krapp the nose is reddish rather than the clown's red circle, but he still has a bald patch, and the trousers are narrow and a little short³⁰. The third portrait in this 'series' is very detailed and demonstrates a keen engagement with interpretation of character as part of the costume design. Krapp is wearing dark trousers, a dark waistcoat and a white shirt with an open collar and dark shoes. His hair is unkempt rather than the clown-like bald pate with sprouting hair on either side. The portrait of Krapp's face is remarkably expressive with drooping mouth and eyes, and sunken shadows on his face. Through the production process, the clown like elements of design and character have become an affecting image of the aging, introspective, memory obsessed Krapp.

Herbert's designs for *Happy Days* demonstrate an understanding of Winnie's performance of femininity through costume: Winnie's hat goes through many metamorphoses in her design sketches for the first Court production in 1962, from a simple cloche or beret shape to a much more elaborate structure with ruched material

²⁸ JH 1750. Jocelyn Herbert Archive, Wimbledon College of Art, University of the Arts London

²⁹ See James Knowlson, 1992: xvi.

³⁰ JH 1751. Jocelyn Herbert Archive, Wimbledon College of Art, University of the Arts London.

echoing Brenda Bruce's dress, a bow and several types of feather³¹. For Billie Whitelaw in 1979, she designed a tightly fitting, corseted bodice, exposing the "opulent flesh" that, according to Beckett, the audience will miss in the second act when Winnie is buried up to her neck³². In contrast, in *Come and Go* the dresses of the three female figures hide their flesh, and convey their lack of individuation and an ambiguity about age or time period: "*Full-length coats, buttoned high, dull violet (Ru), dull red (Vi), dull yellow (Flo)*" (Beckett, *op. cit.*, 356). Herbert's early designs for *Come and Go* presented in a triple bill (*Come and Go*, *Cascando* and *Play*) in 1970 at the Theatre Upstairs and directed by William Gaskill³³, are quite elaborate with nineteen twenties-style wrap-over coats. Gradually the costumes are simplified, retaining individual details such as the collars and veils. The design included a wind machine to increase the sense of the costumes as gossamer-like and the bodies as insubstantial. David Gothard who worked on the production described the emotional impact of this in performance: "In *Come and Go*, the breeze that moved the ladies' veils and the plumes on their hats was terribly important to the design. Jocelyn spent a great deal of time and care with the technician to get that just right, to achieve the right emotional frisson" (Courtney, *op. cit.*, 227). Beckett refers to this effect in the Schiller-theater Werkstatt production of *Come and Go* that he directed in Berlin in 1978: "Hats: flimsy, broadbrimmed, beflowered – ribboned – feathered, to stir in draught" (Gontarski, 1999: 231), and recommended that if a ventilator were used there should be screens to the left and right.

Perhaps Herbert's most striking costume design was for the world premiere of *Footfalls* at the Royal Court Theatre in 1976, where Beckett directed Billie Whitelaw. In *Footfalls* the *mise en scène* not only focuses on the visual, though this is extremely important, but also on the multisensory synaesthetic interchange between sound, image and kinesthetics – the sound of May's dress and the chime, the movement of May across the stage, and the gradual diminution of all of the audible and visible elements of the stage: the reduced lighting and fainter chime and echoes. The darkness surrounding May is also animated by the recorded voice of her mother in sections 1 and 2, so that its absence is noted in section 3 (like the flesh of Winnie in

³¹ JH 4348, JH 4347 and JH 4349, Jocelyn Herbert Archive, Wimbledon College of Art, University of the Arts London.

³² Harmon, *op. cit.*, 94.

³³ William Gaskill took over as Artistic Director of the Court in 1965, as Devine was suffering from ill health. Devine died the next year, in 1966.

the second act of *Happy Days*). The costume not only conveys May's ghostliness and agelessness, but also contributes to the sensory systems of the play:

In *Footfalls* the swishing noise of the figure's dress was very important so I made a taffeta petticoat. After that, I went to the Portobello Road and bought a very old lace evening dress with long sleeves and a lot of lacy net curtains which I dyed different greys and shredded. I took the sleeves off the dress and left a bit at the top to rag and gradually imposed torn bits of net in layers on top. Originally the shoes were going to be noisy but in the end we left it as just the swishing of petticoats. (Courtney, *op. cit.*, 92)

Herbert's sketches for *Footfalls* try out various concepts, from a very simple full length tunic, to a dressing gown with pocket or long shawl. The actual dress for the premiere created an essential element of the ghostlike, uncanny image of May and, like many of Herbert's designs, had an aesthetic presence in itself. Billie Whitelaw described the dress as "the most extraordinary costume I've ever worn on the stage" and suggests that May almost *is* her costume: "Like May, this costume was *never quite there*. It grew, it became organic, starting with bits of old lace and things Jocelyn had picked up in various markets. She dipped these bits in different shades of grey, then tore them to give the costume depth" (Whitelaw, 1995: 227). In an interview for *Jocelyn Herbert: A Theatre Workbook*, Beckett remembered "the trouble she took over the costume for *Footfalls*... She took endless pains to get it right". He stressed that when they worked together they were "wholeheartedly in harmony and I thought I was lucky to have her" (Courtney, *op. cit.*, 144).

Conclusion

This essay has explored Jocelyn Herbert's scenographic contribution to the sensory and affective impact of Beckett's plays in performance and her important role in shaping many of the iconic stage images we associate with Beckett's theatre. Herbert's approach to design emphasized the need for intricate attention to detail when the stage is not encumbered with elaborate scenery or spectacle:

Everything on the stage had to be even more carefully designed and made, as they would be so exposed on a comparatively bare stage, not supported by the trappings of a naturalistic set. . . . Props suddenly became very significant: every book, lamp, chair or table – possibly the only visual elements in a scene. What they looked like, what they were made of, where they were placed on the stage, all these became very important. (Herbert in Findlater, *op. cit.*, 8)

Her design processes also reveal and in some cases influenced Beckett's reconception of aspects of the *mise en scène* of his plays. Indeed, Herbert's designs emphasize that Beckett's concept of his plays in performance continually evolved, as he experienced different productions at different stages in his life and writing. These shifts suggest that, however precise the stage directions of Beckett's plays, there remains plenty of scope for scenographic reinterpretation in the changing conditions of each production.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ALBRIGHT, Daniel; *Beckett and Aesthetics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

ARONSON, Arnold, *Looking into the Abyss; Essays on Scenography*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2005.

BAUGH, Christopher, *Theatre, Performance and Technology: The Development of Scenography in the Twentieth Century*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2005.

BECKETT, Samuel, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London, Faber and Faber, 1986.

BIGNELL, Jonathan, *Beckett on Screen: The Television Plays*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009.

BURIAN, Jarka M., "Contemporary British Stage Design: Three Representative Scenographers", *Theatre Journal*, 35: 2, 1983, pp. 212-234.

COURTNEY, Cathy ed. *Jocelyn Herbert: A Theatre Workbook*, London, Art Books International, 1993.

ESSLIN, Martin, *Mediations: Essays on Brecht, Beckett and the Media*, New York, Grove Press, 1982.

FROST, Everett, "A 'Fresh Go' for the Skull: Directing *All That Fall*, Samuel Beckett's Play for Radio", in Lois Oppenheim, (ed.), *Directing Beckett*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1997, pp. 186-219.

FINDLATER, Richard, *At the Royal Court: 25 years of the English Stage Company*, Ambergate, Amber Lane Press, 1981.

GONTARSKI, S.E. (ed.), *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, Vol IV: The Shorter Plays*, with revised texts for *Footfalls*, *Come and Go* and *What Where*, London, Faber and Faber, 1999.

HARMON, Maurice (ed.), *No Author Better Served: The correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, Cambridge, Mass & London, England, Harvard University Press, 1998.

HODGDON, Barbara, "Photography, Theater, Mnemonics; or, Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Still" in W.B. Worthen with Peter Holland (eds.), *Theorizing Practice: Redefining Theatre History*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 88-119.

HOPE_WALLACE, Philip Hope-Wallace, "Review: *Happy Days* at the Royal Court", *The Guardian*, 2nd November, 1962. THM/273/7/2/101.

HOWARD, Pamela, *What is Scenography?*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002.

KALB, Jonathan, *Beckett in Performance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

KNOWLSON, James, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, London, Bloomsbury, 1996.

----- (ed.), *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, Vol III Krapp's Last Tape with a revised text*, London, Faber and Faber, 1992.

KNOWLSON James and John Haynes, *Images of Beckett*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

KNOWLSON, James and Dougald McMillan, (eds.), *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, Vol I: Waiting for Godot*, London, Faber and Faber, 1994.

LITTLE, Ruth and Emily McLaughlan, *The Royal Court Inside Out*, London, Oberon Books, 2007.

MCKINNEY Joslin and Philip Butterworth, *The Cambridge Introduction to Scenography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Revue d'esthétique, numéro spécial hors série (Samuel Beckett), Toulouse, Éditions Privat, 1986.

NIXON, Mark, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries 1936-1937*, London, Continuum, 2011.

OPPENHEIM, Lois, *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2000.

ROBERTS, Philip, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

WARDLE, Irving, *The Theatres of George Devine*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1978.

WHITELAW, Billie, *Billie Whitelaw... Who He?*, New York, St Martin's Press, 1995.

ZILLIACUS, Clas, *Beckett and Broadcasting: A Study of the works of Samuel Beckett for and in Radio and Television*, Abo, Abo Akademi, 1976.