

Introduction: staging Beckett at the margins

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Introduction: Staging Beckett at the Margins

Anna McMullan and David Pattie

The Beckett community of scholars and theatre practitioners is a truly global one: for decades, Beckett's plays have been produced across the world in major metropolitan centres from New York to Tokyo and in regional theatres from Birmingham to Bengal. Individual accounts of those productions have been published in journals¹ and edited volumes, and *The International Reception of Samuel Beckett* (2009) edited by Mark Nixon and Matthew Feldman includes reception histories of Beckett's theatre in particular cultural contexts, though it has a broader focus on Beckett's work in general and its shifting cultural and academic reception. Beckett's own directorial decisions or his collaborations with directors such as Roger Blin or Alan Schneider in Paris, New York, Berlin or London have been documented and analysed.² This volume turns its attention both to the margins of some of those capital centres, and to lesser known production contexts, such as Romania, Turkey and Korea, for example, which have not been addressed in any detail in Beckett criticism. In several cases, relatively recent productions are discussed here, updating previous accounts of production histories in, for example, Poland or Japan.

This special issue of *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui* on 'Staging Beckett at the Margins' arose out of a United Kingdom Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project on 'Staging Beckett: the Impact of Productions of Beckett's Drama on Theatre Practice and Cultures in the United Kingdom and Ireland,' which was a collaboration between the Universities of Chester and Reading and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and ran from 2012-15.³ Though the main focus of that project as its title indicates was on the UK and Ireland, the project included a number of international conferences,⁴ at which we heard accounts and analyses from very diverse theatre cultures across the globe of the power of Beckett's plays, especially

but not only *Waiting for Godot*, to act as a barometer of profound shifts in the cultures in which they were produced and debated.

What do we mean by margins? The borders between the mainstream and the margins, like any other border, is subject to change and re-definition. We have tried to keep our remit flexible and wide-ranging, incorporating the marginal spaces of metropolitan cities such as New York (Duerfahrd,) Dublin (McMullan) post-Katrina New Orleans (Rose) or London (McFrederick) as well as national and regional cultures beyond the Euro-American cultural axis. Sinead Mooney contextualises productions of Beckett's plays in the English midlands, where they might have been programmed between a popular farce like *Charlie's Aunt* (Brandon Thomas) and the Christmas pantomime. David Pattie looks at how attention to marginalia like theatre programmes or reviews enable us to reconstruct the significance of particular cultural moments in which productions or festivals of Beckett's work took place, as in Glasgow in 2000. Both Mooney's and Pattie's essays raise issues about the marginal place of the theatre archive and its ephemera, especially the regional archive, in relation to authorial or authorized archives.

As Pattie notes, focusing on diverse contexts of production of Beckett's plays not directed by Beckett involves a shift of focus from the creative processes and aesthetics of the author-director to a more centrifugal attention to the economic, political and cultural structures and networks that define the place of theatre and how it is produced in specific cultures, and what constraints it operates under. For example, productions which take place away from the European or north American metropolitan centres are less likely to come under regulation by the Beckett Estate. As Ewa Brzeska notes, *mises en scène* that depart from the author's stage directions may be self-indulgent expressions of the director's own vision, but they may also be creative re-imaginings that go to the heart of the play in order to re-present Beckett's vision and aesthetics for a particular culture at a particular moment.

Several essays investigate productions of Beckett in European countries which were subject to censorship under communist governments (Rakoszy, Ewa, Traian,) while Burç Dincel investigates recent productions of Beckett's plays in Turkey and Shimon Levy looks specifically at the figure of Godot as a shifting signifier of

Israel's trajectory as a nation since the 1950s. A number of essays investigate the significance of particular productions or theatre makers, where their interactions with Beckett's work becomes a lens through which a specific theatrical and cultural histories may be constructed: Priyanka Chatterjee interviews and introduces the work of theatre group Ashani Natyam, who adapted *Godot* in 1970s West Bengal; Rina Kim discusses the seminal production of *Godot* by Young-Woong Lim for the Sanwoollim theatre company and its significance for twentieth and twenty-first century Korean theatre. Kumiko Kiuchi analyses *Zero Hour – Tokyo Rose's Last Tape* by the theatre practitioner Miwa Yanagi, presented in 2013, following the East Japan Earthquake in 2011. Kiuchi opens up a dialogue between Beckett's work and that of Yanagi, and also between the incorporation of the tape recorder in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* and the use of radio in *Zero Hour* as ways to incorporate other temporalities, voices and modes of listening into live performance.

Of course, this is inevitably a very small selection of perspectives and national contexts, given the huge number of global productions of Beckett's plays every year. Production histories of Beckett's plays in any specific cultural context will always be work in progress. There are many significant omissions in this volume. In some cases, as in the work of Antonia Rodríguez-Gago in relation to Spain, for example essays or publications focusing on that context can be located elsewhere (see Rodríguez-Gago 2010). Nixon and Feldman's *Samuel Beckett: An International Reception* was an inspiration for the Staging Beckett project and includes histories of Beckett's reception in France, Germany, Spain, Portugal and in Australia and New Zealand. A recent publication by Patricia Kokori (2016) focuses specifically on the production history of Beckett in Greece. In relation to other cultural contexts, productions in Africa for example, there is much work to be done in gathering information and accessing existing research.

Some of our contributors are both scholars and practitioners (Penciu) or include the voices of practitioners through interview (Chatterjee). We have therefore included a range of different styles and research approaches in order to maintain a dialogue between theatre making and critical reflection on specific productions.

Finally, to what extent do the national frameworks we are employing offer a distorted view of productions of Beckett's plays that may tour to many different cultures or indeed involve creative personnel from different cultures. This is an important issue that is raised also by Beckett festivals such as the series of Gate Theatre Festivals and the Happy Days Festival in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland. However, this would constitute another study or collection of essays. Nixon and Feldman note that: "while Beckett's work was often perceived as expressing universal and humanist values, it was simultaneously subject to national, even regional or local specificity. [...] [T]here exist many 'Becketts,' read through specific cultural, historical and political situations" (2009: 6). Theatre productions are always situated in a particular place and time, even though they may resonate far beyond those co-ordinates. Therefore, this special issue acknowledges the different theatre funding structures and cultural histories and contexts of the productions analysed here, and gives a sense of the ways in which Beckett's drama became part of a key dialogue with audiences about changing cultural shifts, crises and values. We hope that this selection of essays inspires further research into production histories of Beckett's theatre in many other cultural contexts as part of a celebration and analysis of the extraordinarily wide ranging legacy of Beckett's theatre in performance.

Notes

1. *The Journal of Beckett Studies*, for example, includes production reviews in each issue.
2. For Beckett as director, see, for example, *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*, published by Faber & Faber under the general editorship of James Knowlson, or Asmus 1975. For Beckett and Blin see Taylor-Batty 2007, and for Beckett and Schneider, see Harmon 2000 and Bianchini 2015.
3. For more information on the Staging Beckett project including its database of UK and Irish productions of Beckett's plays and its publications, please see the project website:

<https://www.reading.ac.uk/staging-beckett/> (accessed 27 April 2017). The project researchers included Matthew McFrederick, University of Reading (UoR,) Anna McMullan (UoR,) Trish McTighe (UoR,) David Pattie, University of Chester (UoC), Graham Saunders (UoR,) and David Tucker (UoC).

4. Staging Beckett: Constructing Performance Histories (UoR), 4-5 April 2014, Staging Beckett at the Margins (UoC), 11-12 September 2014, and Staging Beckett and Contemporary Theatre and Performance Cultures (UoR), 9-11 April 2015. Details are on the project website.

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