

Reclaiming Sam for Ireland: the Beckett on film project

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RECLAIMING SAM FOR IRELAND: THE BECKETT ON FILM PROJECT

‘Tears and laughter, they are so much Gaelic to me’ (Samuel Beckett, *The Unnameable*).

‘Samuel Beckett is an Irishman but not an Irish writer (Vivian Mercier).

Brian Singleton recounts a telling incident that took place during an international academic conference organized to mark Samuel Beckett’s eightieth birthday in 1986 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Tom Bishop, the American organizer of the celebrations, was asked by Michael Colgan, Artistic Director of The Gate Theatre Dublin, if there was going to be an Irish presence in acknowledgment of Beckett’s country of birth. When the answer to this was a resounding negative, Colgan immediately made arrangements for Professor Terence Brown to deliver a lecture on the subject, and for the Irish actor Barry McGovern to perform his celebrated show *I’ll Go On*, based on Beckett’s prose work.¹ The story serves to illustrate two things about Michael Colgan and the subsequent *Beckett on Film* Project: firstly the importance he placed on Beckett as an artist, together with a driven and proselytizing regard to Beckett being acknowledged as a quintessentially Irish writer.

In 1991 the city of Dublin hosted another international Samuel Beckett festival. As producer, Michael Colgan was again behind the enterprise, whereby over a three-week period from 1 - 20 October, all nineteen of Beckett’s plays written for theatre were produced.² This ambitious theatrical event was seen in most quarters as being a genuine and worthwhile celebration of an important twentieth-century Irish dramatist held in the city of his birth, described as ‘an enterprise, which spiritually brought Beckett home after his death’.³ The event was also supported by Ireland’s state broadcaster RTE and by Beckett’s *alma mater*, Trinity College Dublin. From 1991 the Gate productions remained a permanent, if intermittent fixture on the theatrical landscape by way of a series of tours and revivals throughout the decade. In 1996 the cycle of plays was performed to American audiences at the Lincoln Centre in New York; the following year a truncated ‘mini-festival’ of selected plays was presented in Melbourne, Australia;

and a full-scale revival took place at the Barbican Centre in London during 1999. Alan Maloney, the co-producer of *Beckett on Film*, reveals that the idea for this next project first arose from plans to simply record the 1991 Dublin performances for posterity, in much the same way that Beckett's 1975 Schiller production of *Waiting for Godot* was filmed. This became more of a pressing concern following the festival's success and the various international tours that the Gate undertook: Michael Colgan wanted some sort of permanent record rather than the situation of a never-ending 'travelling circus'.⁴ Moloney recalled that discussions developed regarding the feasibility of trying 'to create a cinematic feel, rather than just filmed plays'.⁵ While the project's identity was inextricably bound up with its claims to promote Samuel Beckett's Irishness, its other major aim was to be a truly international enterprise in respect of the actors and directors such an enterprise might attract. This strategy had a somewhat paradoxical intention, whereby it could claim both validity as a lasting testament to a uniquely Irish voice, while also laying claim to Beckett's international / universal appeal.

In terms of its aspirations for cultural significance and the scale on which it offered a 'complete' canon, *Beckett on Film* had an influential historical antecedent. This was the BBC Shakespeare television series, which was broadcast from 3 December 1978 until 27 April 1985. Crucial to each project, and indeed the catalyst behind the making of each venture was the desire to produce a tangible record that would firmly establish the canonical status of each respective playwright. The similarities that *Beckett on Film* showed to the BBC series even extended down to the series being marketed as a definitive 'library' of the author's works, and made implicit a further important agenda that the producers of *Beckett on Film* wished to promote: namely, their endeavour in producing a complete set of the plays on film to mark Beckett out as the only twentieth-century artist ultimately to compete with Shakespeare's literary and cultural hegemony.

Michael Colgan in one interview made a telling comment that simultaneously revealed both the ambition of the project and its chief aim of canonization:

I think Beckett is the Shakespeare of the twentieth century, and I wanted to have one complete set of his plays that was going to be as faithful as possible.⁶

While earlier commentators such as Katharine Worth would doubtless agree (writing in 1986, she voiced the opinion that 'Beckett is acquiring the status of a modern Shakespeare')⁷ Colgan's insistence on Beckett's importance as Ireland's premiere dramatist can be challenged through empirical evidence in at least in one quarter. Drawing on Neil Taylor's study of the most produced dramatists on BBC television since 1936 until 1994,⁸ Jonathan Bignall comments:

When the works of dramatic writers throughout the span from the ancient classical world to the present day are considered, Shakespeare, Shaw and Ibsen have their works broadcast most, and Beckett drops down the list to the fortieth most broadcast playwright.⁹

While this statistic fails to take into account other factors such as number of stage performances and revivals, not to mention Beckett's well-known reticence in giving consent for television adaptations of his stage plays, it constitutes a rebuke to the assumption that Beckett occupies the same position as Shakespeare. The names of other Irish dramatists such as Sheridan, Shaw, Wilde and O'Casey rank higher on Taylor's list of most broadcast dramatists on television; and if that list is taken as definitive, Colgan and Maloney should perhaps more properly have been producing a series entitled *G.B.S on Film*.

One other unstated, yet nevertheless important consideration in the international marketing of the BBC Shakespeare series was the promotion of its quintessential Englishness. Despite American financial backing and a global marketing campaign that stressed the essentially 'universal' quality of Shakespeare, its directors and casts were drawn almost exclusively from Britain; and while the principal reason for this came from the intervention of the British actors union Equity, as Harry Fenwick sardonically observes, the whole undertaking from conception to execution was both 'gloriously British and gloriously BBC'.¹⁰ In turn, despite the fact that its actors and directors were drawn from a far wider international ambit, conceptually Ireland dominates *Beckett on Film* on a number of levels: most obviously, the use of Irish accents adopted in *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Happy Days*. This stands in direct contrast to the BBC

Shakespeare, where demands for a universalizing approach imposed a far greater linguistic tyranny, whereby the producers imposed a ban on British regional accents and only allowed received pronunciation; paradoxically, but not for the first time, the accent of Southern English upper-middle class became the measure of all human speech. However, before we can assess the degree to which *Beckett on Film* succeeded in its agenda, we should assess Beckett's place as a literary representative of Ireland. Whereas in Britain images of Shakespeare abound - from currency to beer mats - as a signifier of national identity, Beckett's relationship with Ireland is a far more problematic one.

Much of this comes from biographical incidents. In 1937 Beckett set up home in Paris, and afterwards rarely spent much time in Ireland. He wrote many of his novels and plays first in French and only later translated them into English. In fact Beckett did not return to Ireland in the last twenty-one years of his life. Vivian Mercier maintained that the banning of the short story collection *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934) by the Irish Free State was the crucial event that led to his alienation from Ireland.¹¹ This was compounded when Beckett refused to allow permission to have his plays performed there after an incident in 1958 at the Dublin International Theatre Festival where the Archbishop of Dublin opposed the performance of Sean O'Casey's *The Drums of Father Ned* and an adaptation of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Beckett's response was to withdraw permission for the festival to perform *Krapp's Last Tape* and two mime plays; he did not allow his plays to be produced in Ireland for the next two years. The practice of writing in two languages (and not including the self-translation Beckett undertook for his work in German) has also resulted in an anomalous situation where the origins and stability of Beckett's own nationality have become blurred and contested. Judith Roof for example notes this schizophrenic state of affairs in the MLA's decision in 1981 to categorize Beckett in its annals as both French and Irish literature. However, before this date the situation was even more bizarre: Beckett's Irish origins were ignored completely, and from 1955 onwards he was classed solely as a French writer.¹²

Admittedly there had been sporadic claims made for Beckett's Irishness: by the mid 1980s onwards, and especially following Beckett's death, a number of major critical works were published, all of which attempted to place his work as belonging to an essentially Irish as opposed to European tradition.¹³ This new approach to Beckett's work is apparent in James Knowlson's preface to the lavishly illustrated *Beckett Country*:

Though he left it for good in the 'thirties,' Ireland is present in Beckett's work not only in the localized settings of the early works or in the 'old scenes' revisited of the most recent plays or prose texts like *That Time* and *Company*, but also in some of the apparently more abstracted landscapes described in *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, and evoked in *Not I* and...*But the Clouds*.¹⁴

By the 1990s two distinctly opposing strands of criticism existed concerning Beckett's place within twentieth century Irish drama. While Anthony Roche maintained that 'the presiding genius... the ghostly founding figure, is Samuel Beckett',¹⁵ Christopher Murray's assessment of the same period saw Beckett forever destined 'to become the ghost at the feast of Irish drama'.¹⁶ According to Murray, Beckett's marginalized position came about because his own modernistic dramaturgy was at stylistic odds with the prevailing realism exemplified by writers such as Sean O'Casey and Brendan Behan, a form which has marked out so much of twentieth-century Irish drama; yet Murray also believes that from *Waiting for Godot* onwards Beckett belongs firmly to the pantheon of twentieth-century of Irish dramatists, 'engaged in a dialogue with Yeats and especially Synge'.¹⁷ Beckett himself was very familiar with this particular strand of Irish drama (having frequented the theatre while he was a student at Trinity; and he was also a close friend of Jack B. Yeats). In an often-quoted letter to Cyril Cusack about his reactions to Irish drama, Beckett made his allegiances perfectly clear:

I wouldn't suggest that G.B.S [George Bernard Shaw] is not a great playwright, whatever that is when it's at home. What I would do is to give the whole unstoppable apple cart for a sup of the Hawk's Well, or the Saints, or a whiff of Juno, to go no further.¹⁸

Judith Roof identifies this tradition as partly evident through 'the Irish cadence in Beckett's language...in other words the Irish detritus',¹⁹ while David Bradby observes that for the English translation of *Waiting for Godot* Beckett included several Irish idioms to locate the two tramps as

Dubliners.²⁰ He also notes Barry McGovern's assertion that, 'Beckett had not translated his French play into English, but had rather rewritten it in Irish English'.²¹ Anthony Roche argues that, given Ireland's status as a colonized nation, Beckett's decision to write in two languages would not have seemed overly out of place;²² and the majority of critics who reviewed the Dublin premiere of *Waiting for Godot* in 1956 had no problem identifying its Irish elements. A.J. Leventhal's view is typical: 'the whole conception...is Irish, a fact which the original French had been unable to conceal'.²³ Yet it is also interesting to note that it took until 1969 for the play to get a performance at the Abbey - an institution which likes to see itself as Ireland's own representative 'National Theatre.'

Moreover, blithe talk of Beckett belonging to some nebulous Irish dramatic tradition has also been questioned at a number of levels. The first of these concerns Beckett's common practice of writing the plays at first in French. Michael Colgan, in a comment that, once again, indicates how important the idea of Beckett's Irishness was in the formation of the film series, sees the practice as something far more radical than merely translation: 'When he [Beckett] translated from French into English, he didn't translate, he wrote a new play'²⁴ - in other words that an essentially Anglo / Gaelic work emerges from the embers of the French translation. Vivien Mercier however has pointed out: 'It should be stressed that when Beckett [wrote] directly in English, he rarely makes use of Irish dialect'.²⁵ Beckett's British publisher, John Calder, goes even further in arguing that he often used the 'precise and economical' French language as opposed to Irish English in his work because the latter ultimately sounds 'too flowery, too rich',²⁶ and might subsequently lock Beckett's work into Irish theatrical tradition. It is also worth considering that despite plays including *Waiting for Godot*, *All That Fall*, *Eh Joe* and *That Time* being identified as 'Irish' on grounds of colloquial idioms, there are still the vast majority of Beckett's dramatic works - around fifty - that contain little overt Irishness. Indeed, one - *Play* - makes explicit references to small towns in Kent. If any of these views are to be believed, then grand projects such as the 1991 Beckett Gate Festival and *Beckett on Film* could be seen as imposing a false

aesthetic on the work by effectively ventriloquizing an Irish voice for Beckett, whether one was intended or not. Yet although Beckett never clearly stated the accents he wished his characters to use,²⁷ two of his favourite interpreters were the Irish actors Jack MacGowran and Patrick Magee.

An alternative view of the Irish influence in Beckett's drama has come from those critics who see the plays as essentially vehicles by which Beckett evokes Ireland through memory. Ronan McDonald argues that even the late plays are 'crammed full...with names, topography and locutions from Beckett's birth place'.²⁸ J.C.C Mays sees these locations operating more on a subliminal basis: 'Ireland is there and not there, recalled and invented; it has a ghostly presence, more profound than reality'.²⁹ Judith Roof, despite recognizing the existence of these Irish reference points in Beckett's plays, sees their function as a way of detaching audiences from experiencing them in any broad Irish dramatic tradition or 'nation as a lost site and site of loss',³⁰ so that the place names in *Krapp's Last Tape*, for example, become evocations for the protagonist's estrangement from his country as well as from himself.

The other determining factor in Beckett's alienation from Ireland has been his refusal to let his drama engage on any level with the society or politics of Ireland. Beckett's wireless play, *All That Fall* (1957), the most explicitly 'Irish' of his works is dismissed by Christopher Murray as only ever operating 'on the level of parody',³¹ and so failing to 'engage with the conditions of Irish experience'.³² Although Donald Davie argues that the play requires a knowledge of 'the catholic majority in present day Ireland [and] Mrs Rooney's allegiance to the church of Ireland',³³ *All That Fall* is something of a Celtic anomaly in any assessment of Beckett's drama; the world invoked in the play owes more to the blackly parodic Ireland of the early prose fiction and especially to the opening pages of *Watt*. In an often-quoted letter in 1938 to Thomas MacGreevy concerning the Irish painter Jack Yeats, which is frequently used to show his detachment from Irish national life, Beckett expresses his 'chronic inability to understand as member of any proposition a phrase like "the Irish people."'.³⁴ Yet, Ronan Macdonald feels that it is unfair to cite this one letter continually as somehow proof that Beckett had completely disassociated

himself from Ireland, and comments that the enduring presence, if only subliminally, of Beckett's landscapes and settings might 'point towards the colonial *erasure* of history / identity rather than the transference of it'.³⁵ Even in the incriminating letter to McGreevy Beckett ends by using several broad colloquial idioms: 'God love thee, Tom and don't be minding me. I can't think of Ireland the way you do'.³⁶ It might also be noted that Beckett's comments on the Irish People are not in themselves unique; the same kind of apparent animus lies behind Flann O'Brien's dialogues with the 'plan people of Ireland' - a feature of his *Irish Times* column for many years.

Writing in the 1950s Vivian Mercier saw Beckett's dispassionate relationship with Ireland springing from his upbringing as a Protestant in a well-to-do suburb of Dublin:

The typical Anglo-Irish boy learns that he is not quite Irish almost before he can talk; he learns that he is far from being English either. The pressure on him to become either wholly English or wholly Irish can erase segments of his individuality for good and all.³⁷

Commenting much later in 1977 Mercier returns to the same theme, and continues in much the same vein, arguing that Beckett's muted Irish voice came about because his formative years were spent in a 'carefully insulated suburban community [which provided] little that was usable and durable'.³⁸ Katherine Worth argues that it is best to see Beckett as 'an Irish European',³⁹ but Mercier concludes that Beckett's 'universalism' cannot be located in arcane arguments revolving around competing claims of Irish / French nationality, but rather 'the paradox of a unique self that has found its bedrock in our common human predicament'.⁴⁰ Nowhere was this contested and schizophrenic position made more apparent than in James Knowlson's observation that with the announcement in 1969 that Beckett had won the Nobel Prize for literature, Ireland claimed him as its third recipient for the honour and France its eleventh.⁴¹ Moreover, the French also pre-empted the Dublin Gate Festival in 1991 with their own Beckett theatre festival held in Paris during 1970 at the Théâtre Récamier, as well as the ambitious Festival d'Automne in Paris in 1981 to mark Beckett's seventy-fifth year which combined a large scale theatrical presentation of

the plays alongside an international academic conference at the Centre Pompidou and a retrospective of film and television work.

Such a state of indeterminacy over Beckett's identity has provided fortuitous circumstances for an enterprise such as *Beckett on Film*, which not only set out to repatriate the dramatist, but also promote Beckett as a national literary figure who could also represent Ireland on the international stage. With the groundwork effectively laid by the Beckett Festival in 1991, which Campbell and Dackombe argued 'packages Beckett into a neat bundle of Irish national culture',⁴² the film series in some respects became the next logical step. Brian Singleton neatly summarizes the process of *festivalization* that he sees operating in Irish theatre, where certain key writers are picked out for the service they can provide internationally as arbiters for Irish culture. Singleton argues that the process also benefits the chosen writer by bringing about a fresh assessment of the canon:

Perhaps the simplest way of determining the canonical in Irish theatre is to isolate writers whose work has been 'festivalized,' embraced by the trend of single-author marketing which recognizes that great theatre writers are the mainstay of Irish cultural capital. These writers and their works are celebrated by international recognition, and so by festivalizing their opus their lesser-known and less popular works can be consumed on the international markets, thus reinforcing their canonical status.⁴³

In the case of Shakespeare, his status in representing notions of English / British identity both at home and abroad has always been assured. However the same situation has never been true in Ireland and it is easy to accept the argument that 'festivalization' through theatre productions, or preserving a set of works on film and television can help support and confer unifying and universalizing forces. In the case of Ireland this becomes particularly imperative if a literary figure such as Samuel Beckett can provide a focus for national identity. Whatever the criticisms of the film series, promoting Beckett's quintessential Irishness was at least a genuinely robust enterprise in offering a strong Irish milieu for the plays as opposed to the often defensive critical alternative from the mid 1980s, which attempted to link together disparate Irish locations to passages from Beckett's texts. In retrospect, the process that ultimately culminated in *Beckett*

on Film had been underway shortly after the authors' death in 1989 with the inauguration of the 1991 Dublin Beckett Festival. Anthony Roche saw the enterprise as a significant 'key step in the establishment of Beckett as an Irish (as opposed to English, French, international and nonspecific) playwright',⁴⁴ while Brian Singleton saw it more as an act of defiant nationalism on the part of Colgan and the other organizers, with the real intention behind the theatrical festival being 'to reclaim Beckett as Irish, a reclamation from the hijacking of Irish culture by both Britain and France'.⁴⁵ Whatever agendas may have been operating, the Beckett Festival established a new benchmark in appreciating the plays afresh through their performances in the city of the playwright's birth. Moreover, it did much to initiate a reappraisal which resulted in the *leitmotif* of Irishness being adopted into something of the received style in subsequent productions: hence Sir Peter Hall's 1997 production of *Waiting for Godot* saw the English-born actors, Ben Kingsley and Alan Howard, adopting Irish accents for Vladimir and Estragon. Hall repeated the approach more recently in his 2004 production of *Happy Days* in which Felicity Kendall (following on from Rosaleen Linehan in the *Beckett on Film* version) played Winnie with a genteel southern Irish accent.⁴⁶

Another major factor in the attempts of *Beckett on Film* to take Beckett back to his homeland came from one of the principal financial backers of the project: *Radio Telefís Éireann* (RTE), the official state broadcasting network for television and wireless in Ireland, which operates in broadly the same way as the BBC in Britain. RTE is also funded by a public licence fee, but with the important difference that it is also allowed to draw approximately half its funds from advertising revenue. The organization not only has a long history of promoting traditional Irish culture, but also at times of actively intervening in order to promote what is subsequently accepted *as* traditional Irish culture. Luke Gibbons gives the example of the *celi* band, which was promoted as traditional music in the 1950s by Seamus Clandillon, the station's first director,⁴⁷ even though it was not actually a long-standing Irish musical form. Such an organization, with its

ability to shape new forms into an unspoken sense of tradition, seemed ideally placed as the broadcaster of choice for *Beckett on Film*.

Another of their co-sponsors makes this intention even clearer: Blue Angel Productions, an Irish-based company and a major backer of the project, had in partnership with Tyrone Productions produced *Riverdance* in 1994. *Riverdance* had become nothing short of a phenomenon, apparently reawakening a shared sense of Irish culture, both nationally and internationally. It was originally planned as a way of providing a brief interlude between acts for the Eurovision Song Contest held in Dublin that year; but, as Lara Petitt observed, ‘in seven minutes, *Riverdance* produced a memorable moment in Ireland’s contemporary image-making’.⁴⁸ While perhaps coincidental, the producers of *Beckett on Film* may well have seen this association as at least a fortuitous talisman in their aim to use Beckett through a media event to galvanize mass audiences to a similar sense of shared Irish identity. In a sense, the *Beckett on Film* series could be thought of as *Riverdance* in reverse: one introduced a carefully constructed ersatz Irishness to the world; the other discovered a hidden (but arguably equally ersatz) Irishness in an already world-famous author. The involvement of the other principal financial backer for the series, namely the British commercial broadcaster, Channel Four, made for an odd bedfellow under all these circumstances. *Beckett on Film* subsequently became a curious Anglo-Irish alliance, especially when serious claims were made for the films as restoring Beckett to Irish audiences.

Yet it is also clear that RTE and the other producers of the film series were in part only responding to changes in perception that had taken place in Beckett’s work in Ireland since the 1950s. Anthony Roche observes that the plays have influenced a whole new generation of Irish dramatists in the 1980s and 1990s, and figures such as Sebastian Barry, Marina Carr and Martin McDonagh have appropriated Beckett into their own work.⁴⁹ This in turn also suggests another reason that underscored the importance of choosing Beckett as the representative figure for Irish drama. Such a figurehead, however tokenistic, becomes necessary when one considers Eileen Morgan’s point that since the 1960s the majority of Irish dramatists have by-passed their home

country in order to *première* plays in London and other European cities.⁵⁰ As a consequence, an odd situation has arisen in which Irish dramatists have repeatedly become appropriated by international audiences. The producers of *Beckett on Film* set out to redress this situation in no uncertain terms. For instance, Dublin Castle was chosen as the location for the series' launch party, with its guest list including *The Corrs* and U2 lead guitarist 'The Edge' representing a significant quota of international Irish celebrities; also invited were the English singers, Marianne Faithful and Lisa Stansfield, who had been resident in Ireland some years. The launch party echoed Michael Colgan's inaugural speech at the Beckett Festival in 1991, where he first expressed the intent 'to introduce a Dublin audience to this great writer who needs to be looked at in Ireland'.⁵¹ To this end, it is no mistake that Beckett's best-known plays were subjected to the most overtly Irish interpretation.

Many of the original actors and directors from the Gate Festival also appeared in *Beckett on Film*. *Waiting for Godot* was an amalgamation of past Dublin Gate productions and reunited (with the exception of the Boy) the Irish actors Johnny Murphy and Barry McGovern as Vladimir and Estragon.⁵² *Endgame's* director was the Irish playwright Conor McPherson; the Irish actress Rosaleen Linehan repeated her role as Winnie in *Happy Days* from the Gate / Barbican production; and *Not I* (despite its casting of the American film star, Julianne Moore, as Mouth) was directed by Ireland's Neil Jordan. The only well-known Beckett play that escaped this treatment was *Krapp's Last Tape*, where director (Atom Egoyan) and actor (John Hurt) had no direct Irish connection.⁵³

However, despite the eager intent to appropriate Beckett to an Irish milieu, in its actual execution the project sometimes fell far short of its ambitions. Even co-producer Alan Moloney observed:

I don't think Beckett is an Irish writer really, but the language he used is written in the rhythm of a Dublin accent. [...] Outside that, his writing is universal.⁵⁴

An illustrative case in point was the film version of *Endgame*. Its director was the playwright, Conor McPherson, best known still for his 1997 play *The Weir*, which enjoyed phenomenal Broadway and West End success; he has since gone on to write other well received plays as well as writing and directing two films. McPherson was an interesting choice of director for what is probably Beckett's best-known play after *Godot*. Despite McPherson's claim that his own involvement in the project came about because the producers wanted directors with experience in both film and theatre,⁵⁵ it is difficult to believe that this was the only reason he was chosen. It is probably nearer the mark to suggest that McPherson's true *caché* for Colgan and Maloney came from his status as one of Ireland's most celebrated young playwrights, who in this context could be seen as engaged in the task of reinvigorating the work of an older Irish dramatist.

McPherson's other strength as an Irish dramatist was that internationally his plays are somehow read as authentically 'Irish' in their sensibility and setting. If we look at McPherson in these terms, it soon becomes perfectly understandable why he seemed such an attractive proposition to the producers of *Beckett on Film*, who were looking for ways to reclaim a playwright still widely thought of as French and European. It is not difficult to imagine the reasoning that if McPherson as a successful contemporary Irish dramatist were to be associated with Samuel Beckett, then the alliance would rejuvenate the older dramatists' work through the process of association. McPherson was also keen to promote Beckett as a quintessentially Dublin writer; in interview he explained: 'The English that Beckett wrote is full of Irishisms, full of Irish inflections'.⁵⁶ However, the techniques employed in drawing attention to this facet of Beckett's writing were less convincing in practice, since they basically consisted of the actors, Michael Gambon and David Thewlis, speaking their lines with ersatz-Dublin accents.

Brian Singleton argues that the use of Dublin accents in Walter Asmus' 1991 Gate production of *Waiting for Godot* (repeated by the same two principal actors for *Beckett on Film*) becomes 'an act of reclamation from the received pronunciation of the English class system'.⁵⁷ However, one could argue that the presence of similar accents in *Endgame* ultimately failed to produce these

political resonances, becoming more akin to a mock-Irish pub, crammed full of fake signs of Irishness. John Harrington believes that, regardless of the reasons, imposing an Irish aesthetic on the play is misplaced: '*Endgame* is set in a vaguely European context which is not Ireland and not any other recognizable place'.⁵⁸ Gerry McCarthy, speaking in relation to McPherson's production, also commented that the odd Anglo-Irish mish-mash of cod accents was at best off-putting, and that 'the last thing we need in a film of Beckett's work is the distraction of hearing David Thewlis [who played Clov] mix up his Irish accents'.⁵⁹ The use of Irish accents in several of the canonical plays within *Beckett on Film* raises an interesting question. Writing of Peter Hall's production of *Waiting for Godot* in 1997 and its use of Irish accents by English actors, Anthony Roche noted that such interventions, 'may be taken as confirmation enough of the extent to which Beckett's Irishness is now universally conceded'.⁶⁰ However, it is difficult to argue that simply doing Beckett in other voices is sufficient radically to transform the plays into something authentically 'Irish'. In fact it could be argued that the very opposite effect is achieved - that it reduces the plays by associating them with the worst kind of stage Irishness. McPherson's justification of the mock Dublin accents in *Endgame* as functioning as a mark of authenticity borders on the farcical:

I made sure everyone had an Irish accent. Michael Gambon was born in Dublin so that was easy. David Thewlis is from Blackpool, but he picked up a South Dublin accent very quickly.⁶¹

Ultimately, McPherson's *Endgame* becomes at best an uneasy Anglo-Irish hybrid. Even Michael Gambon's Irishness needs to be qualified; despite being born in Dublin, his family left for England during his early childhood. It is telling that to establish its so-called Irishness, *Beckett on Film* was predicated on the dubious proposition of individual claims to birth. This might have worked for the Irish football team; but in this context, it simply will not do. The given impression is that the series wanted it both ways: not only to reclaim Beckett for Ireland, but also to make him an uncontested figure of international, even universal stature.

One other rather more obvious stumbling block remains in Beckett's work which prevents it from becoming another *Riverdance*: its deliberate eschewal of mass popularity. Beckett's work, after all, does not conform, either in content or style, to any media-industry standard. What *Beckett on Film* ultimately attempted to do was use the tactics of mass marketing and media to disguise the inherent difficulty of the plays. Brian Singleton observes that much the same process of making Beckett's inherent unpalatability palatable also happened in 1991: the Gate season was marketed as an 'event' through the simultaneous staging and celebration of the plays' essential Irishness, together with the hosting of a prestigious academic summer school:

Beckett's work outside such a huge marketing venture remains unapproachable. Perhaps it was only the caché of the event which was the success, rather than the work itself, as his plays like those of Yeats, still remain outside the contemporary repertoire.⁶²

Singleton argues that given the bubble of excitement temporarily created from the immediacy of the festival, it would be easy to jump to the conclusion that Beckett's work had suddenly been rediscovered as an exciting new cultural force. However, outside of the rarefied festival air, the demands that the plays make upon audiences were always liable to puncture the claims made for them. *Godot* might be a commercial standby, and *Not I* might have played to 87% capacity houses at the Royal Court during its first run; however it is hard to see mass audiences regularly turning out for *Come and Go* or *Ohio Impromptu*.

Beckett on Film looked to popularize Beckett. Frost and McMullan see such attempts as the "commodification" of the icon that is Samuel Beckett.⁶³ An enterprise such as *Riverdance* is suited to the internationalism of the Eurovision Song Contest, and its two Irish-American dancers successfully managed to combine traditional Celtic dancing with contemporary American styles to reinvent a traditional cultural form for global consumption as something definably 'Irish.' In contrast, Beckett's work cannot be so easily appropriated or made so overtly popular. And while his work and striking facial features are globally recognized, the drama contains inherent difficulties that Beckett seems to have deliberately built into their structure and which will always mitigate against them being seen as any form of 'brand'. It is perhaps this aspect of his work that

ultimately hampers its mass dissemination rather than any failing on the part of *Beckett on Film* itself.

This was found to be the case when the series *premiered* on Irish television from 19 March to 2 April 2001. A major irony loomed: the good intentions of presenting Beckett as national playwright were blocked in Northern Ireland, since broadcasts from the South were inaccessible via terrestrial television. Hopes that *Beckett on Film* would engender a shared sense of national identity, at least on a cultural level, came to little when viewers from the North could watch *Beckett on Film* only if they had access to cable and satellite connections. Suspicions about Beckett, based on religious and political prejudices, were clearly seen when David Trimble, then leader of the Ulster Unionist Party in Northern Ireland, was asked if he had seen any of the *Beckett on Film* series and gave the enigmatic reply: 'I am not well acquainted with Samuel Beckett. I come from Northern Ireland so it wasn't an obvious subject'.⁶⁴ Trimble subsequently admitted to seeing an amateur production of *Waiting for Godot* in his youth, but his initial comment, coming from someone who sees Ireland's destiny as ultimately bound to Britain, seems to imply that for many Northern Irish Protestants Samuel Beckett, despite also being a Protestant by birth, is both suspiciously nationalist and Fenian in sensibility. Yet further difficulties compromised the originators' ambitions: as would later be the case with its broadcast on Channel Four in Britain, decisions over scheduling became a major problem. Despite Colgan's hope that national interest would be aroused by a season of films that re-appraised the work of a Dublin-born playwright, RTE screened the series well outside peak viewing times. The earliest showing of 9.30 in the evening was for *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Act Without Words II*. The remainder of the films, including *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* were broadcast after 10 o'clock at night. Audience figures during the week of the Irish *première* also proved to be disappointing. The back-to-back screening of *What Where*, *Footfalls* and *Come and Go* attracted an audience of 121,000; *Happy Days* and *Endgame* attracted 87,000 and 92,000 viewers respectively, while *Krapp's Last Tape* was the most successful in attracting 136,000 viewers. On the night that the series began, the

largest recorded audiences (460,000) tuned in earlier at 8pm to watch the imported British soap opera *East Enders*, followed by a Dublin variation on the form called *Fair City*, which attracted even more viewers (743,000). By the time it came to *Waiting for Godot* at 10.30pm figures had dropped significantly to 87,0000.

One might also argue that, despite the film series' laudable attempt to preserve and canonize Samuel Beckett's drama, it perhaps does so at the expense of new work by living playwrights. Speaking in relation to the 1991 Gate Beckett Festival, Christopher Murray noted that Dublin theatre, rather like the Royal Shakespeare Company, tends to neglect new writing.⁶⁵ This concern with the enshrining of a past dramatic tradition might prove to be the true legacy of the *Beckett on Film* project; and, while it might have succeed in bringing new audiences back to Beckett, there is the potential danger that it did so at the expense of audiences experiencing new Irish voices at the Abbey and Gate that perhaps engage with a contemporary Ireland far more relevantly than Beckett ever did.

Notes

- ¹ Brian Singleton. 'The Revival Revised', *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, ed. Shaun Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 267-8.
- ² With the exception of *Eleutheria*, which has remained unperformed for copyright reasons.
- ³ S.E Wilmer, 'Introduction', *Beckett in Dublin*, ed. S.E Wilmer (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1992): 1.
- ⁴ Aleks Sierz, Unpublished Interview with Michael Colgan, January 2001.
- ⁵ Aleks Sierz, Interview with Alan Moloney. See the *Beckett on Film* website, <http://www.channel4.com/plus/beckett>.
- ⁶ Sierz, Interview with Michael Colgan.
- ⁷ Katharine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (London: Athlone Press, 1986): 264.
- ⁸ See Neil Taylor. 'A History of the stage Play on BBC Television', in *Boxed Sets: Television Representations of Theatre*, ed. Jeremy Ridgman (Luton: John Libbey, 1998), pp.23-37.
- ⁹ Jonathan Bignall, 'Beckett at the BBC: The Production and Reception of Samuel Beckett's Plays for Television', *Drawing on Beckett: Portraits, Performances and Cultural Contexts*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi (Assaph: Tel Aviv University, 2003): 178.
- ¹⁰ Harry Fenwick, 'Transatlantic row breaks over the BBC's most Ambitious Drama Series', *Sunday Telegraph*, 24 September 1978.
- ¹¹ Vivian Mercier, *Beckett / Beckett* (Oxford: OUP, 1977): 38.
- ¹² Judith Roof, 'Playing Outside with Samuel Beckett', *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage*, eds Eileen Morgan, Shakin Mustafa and Stephen Watt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000): 159.
- ¹³ The first major work in this reinterpretation was Eoin O'Brien's *Beckett Country* (London: Faber, 1986). Others include, John Harrington's *The Irish Beckett* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991); Mary Junker. *Beckett: The Irish Dimension* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1995); and Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), particularly the chapter, 'Beckett's texts of Laughter and Forgetting', (530-50).

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- ¹⁴ James Knowlson, Foreword to Eoin O'Brien, *Beckett Country* (London: Faber, 1986): xv-xvi. The relationship between Beckett's writing and his Irish background was not a completely new critical development. Writing back in 1971, Marilyn Gaddis Rose drew attention to the fact that even prose works such as *Texts for Nothing* (1950-2) and *How It Is* (1961), which seem to ignore time and space, in fact make deliberate topographical allusions to the Irish landscape. See 'The Irish Memories of Beckett's Voice', *Journal of Modern Literature*, (1971): 311 -17. One also cannot ignore Katharine Worth's *The Irish Drama of Europe: From Yeats to Beckett*.
- ¹⁵ Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama: From Beckett to McGuinness* (Basingstoke: Gill and Macmillan, 1994): 4. Like Katharine Worth's earlier book *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett*, Roche maintains that much of Beckett's drama comes from an older tradition, such as the detailed comparison he draws between *Waiting for Godot* and W.B Yeats's *At the Hawk's Well* (24-8).
- ¹⁶ Christopher Murray, *Twentieth Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1997): 148. Despite Muarry's reservations, the inclusion of a chapter on Beckett in the recent *Cambridge Companion to Irish Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) seems to suggest that his position is less marginalized than it was in the past.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ James Knowlson, *Samuel Beckett: An Exhibition* (London: Turret Books, 1971), p.23.
- ¹⁹ Roof, 147.
- ²⁰ Bradby, p.40. ADD MORE BIBLIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS PLEASE FOR THIS AND THE NEXT NOTE.
- ²¹ Ibid, 185.
- ²² Roche, 4.
- ²³ A.J Leventhal. 'Dramatic commentary', *Dublin Magazine* 31 (1956): 52.
- ²⁴ Alan Riding, 'Finding New Audiences for Alienation', *The New York Times*, 11 June 2000, section 2.
- ²⁵ Mercier, 42.
- ²⁶ John Calder, 'Remembering Sam,' *Beckett in Dublin*, ed. Steve Wilmer (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1992): 124.
- ²⁷ In her biography of Beckett Deidre Bair seems to imply that originally Beckett had required the actress Billie Whitelaw to deliver Mouth's lines in *Not I* in an Irish brogue. See *Samuel Beckett* (London: Vintage, 1990): 688.
- ²⁸ Ronan McDonald, *Tragedy and Irish Literature: Synge, O'Casey, Beckett* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002): 141.
- ²⁹ J.C.C Mays, 'Irish Beckett, a Borderline Instance,' *Beckett in Dublin*: 145.
- ³⁰ Roof, 159.
- ³¹ Murray, 148. Vivien Mercier also concurs: 'In *Watt* and *All That Fall*, only the working class characters - the railway-station staff and the man driving the cart loaded with manure - speak in dialect.' (42).
- ³² Murray, 6. Yet even here there are strongly opposing views. Ronan McDonald in *Tragedy and Irish Literature* sees it as 'fallacious to assume that [Beckett] occupies some sterile, evacuated imaginative site, in quarantine from its own historical context' (142).
- ³³ Donald Davie, 'Kinds of Comedy,' *Spectrum* (1958), 27.
- ³⁴ Cited in Patricia Coughlan, 'The Poetry is Another Pair of Sleeves': Beckett, Ireland and Modernist Lyric Poetry,' *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s*, eds Patricia Coughlan and Alex Davis (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995): 180.
- ³⁵ McDonald, 142.
- ³⁶ Cited in Coughlan, 180.
- ³⁷ Vivian Mercier, 'Beckett and the Search for Self,' *New Republic*, 13 September 1955: 20.
- ³⁸ Mercier, *Beckett / Beckett*, 38.
- ³⁹ Katharine Worth. 'Beckett's Irish Theatre,' *Perspectives of Irish Drama and Theatre*, eds Jacqueline Genet and Richard Allen Cave (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1991): 39.
- ⁴⁰ Mercier, *Beckett / Beckett*, 45. Harry Cockerham makes a similar point: 'Arguments over whether he [Beckett] is properly a French or an Irish writer are therefore necessarily sterile and it may indeed be that his example and the fact of his existence as a bilingual writer will do much to break down barriers between national cultures and encourage a trend towards a comparativism in literary studies. If any claim has validity, it is that this tidy categorization is excessively constraining, Beckett is the world.' See 'Bilingual Playwright,' *Beckett the Shape Changer: A Symposium*, ed. Katharine Worth (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975): xxiii.
- ⁴¹ Knowlson, Foreword, *Beckett Country*, xxi.

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- ⁴² Julie Campbell and Amanda Dackombe, 'The Beckett Festival at the Barbican Theatre, September 1999', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Spring (1999): 91.
- ⁴³ Singleton, 259.
- ⁴⁴ Anthony Roche, 'Pinter and Ireland', *The Cambridge Companion to Harold Pinter*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 175. Roche argues that such was the success of the Beckett festival that Michael Colgan attempted to do the same in 1994 with the English dramatist, Harold Pinter.
- ⁴⁵ Singleton, 268.
- ⁴⁶ Vivian Mercier has also commented that, 'I can't help thinking that Winnie in *Happy Days* might have gone to Alexandra School and College, Dublin like my own mother and countless other protestant young ladies down the years'. See McGory and Unterecker, *Yeats, Joyce and Beckett*, 147. **ADD MORE DETAILS PLEASE, as this is the only time of citing this volume.**
- ⁴⁷ Luke Gibbons, ed. *Transformations and Innovations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996): 73.
- ⁴⁸ Lara Pettitt, *Screening Ireland: Film and Television Representation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000): 177.
- ⁴⁹ Roche, *Contemporary Irish Drama*, 244 and 257.
- ⁵⁰ Eileen Morgan, Shakin Mustafa and Stephen Watt, eds. *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000): xviii.
- ⁵¹ Eileen O'Halloran and Susan Schreibman. 'Dublin Salutes Beckett,' *The Beckett Circle: Newsletter of the Samuel Beckett Society*, 13 (1990): 1
- ⁵² Alan Stanford, who played Pozzo, was also in the Dublin production. He is English, but resides permanently in Ireland.
- ⁵³ Although Hurt had played the role of Krapp when the Gate production came to the Barbican Theatre in London during 1999, the actor who originally played Krapp in the 1991 Dublin production was the Irishman, David Kelly. Familiar to British television audiences for playing a whole host of stereotypical Irishmen during the 1970s and 1980s (notably the role of Albert - the one armed dishwasher in the situation comedy *Robin's Nest*), Kelly first took on the role of Krapp at a remarkable young age in 1959, when he appeared in the Irish *première* of the play at Trinity College's Player's Theatre. Kelly was also involved in *Beckett on Film*, playing 'A' in *Rough for Theatre I*.
- ⁵⁴ Aleks Sierz. Unpublished interview with Alan Maloney. **IS THIS DIFFERENT FROM THE INTERVIEW CITED ABOVE (NOTE 5) ACCESSIBLE THROUGH THE BECKETT ON FILM WEBSITE?**
- ⁵⁵ Conor McPherson, Unpublished Interview with Aleks Sierz, 20 January 2001.
- ⁵⁶ Riding, *The New York Times*.
- ⁵⁷ Singleton, 268.
- ⁵⁸ John Harrington, 'Samuel Beckett and the Counter-Tradition', *Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, ed. Shaun Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 172.
- ⁵⁹ Gerry McCarthy, 'Screen Test', *Sunday Times*, 11 March 2001.
- ⁶⁰ Roche, 'Pinter and Ireland,' 175.
- ⁶¹ Riding, *The New York Times*.
- ⁶² Singleton, 269.
- ⁶³ Frost and McMullan, p.218. **MORE BIBLIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS PLEASE, AS THIS IS THE FIRST TIME YOU HAVE CITED THIS VOLUME.**
- ⁶⁴ 'Pandora', *The Independent*, 9 July 2001
- ⁶⁵ Christopher Murray, 'Introduction', *The State of Play: Irish Theatre in the 'Nineties* ed. Eberhad Bort, CDE Studies (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1996): 12. **CHECK SPELLING OF EDITOR'S NAME and should CDE be spelt out in full?**