

# *Special issue on staging Beckett and contemporary theatre and performance cultures*

Book

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**Editorial: Staging Beckett and Contemporary Theatre and Performance Cultures<sup>1</sup>**

**Anna McMullan and Graham Saunders**

Once the epitome of experimental, ‘difficult’, avant-garde drama, at the edge of what is possible in the theatre, the plays of Samuel Beckett are now likely to be presented and indeed to sell out, in international Festivals<sup>2</sup>, West End, Broadway or national venues with high profile actors such as Michael Gambon, Ian McKellen, Fiona Shaw or Mark Rylance.<sup>3</sup> Tracing the history of this trajectory was one of the aims of the AHRC-funded research project *Staging Beckett: the Impact of Productions of Samuel Beckett’s Plays on Theatre Practice and Cultures in the UK and Ireland* that ran from 2012-2015 as a collaboration between the Universities of Reading and Chester and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Beckett is now a highly marketable, cultural icon with global brand recognition, but

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<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK [AHRC grant number: H5147000]. This special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* is one of the outputs of the AHRC-funded project *Staging Beckett: the Impact of Productions of Samuel Beckett’s plays on Theatre Cultures and Practices in the UK and Ireland 1955-2010*. For more details see the About Us section on the *Staging Beckett* project website: <https://www.reading.ac.uk/staging-beckett/> [accessed 3 March 2017]. The Investigators were: Anna McMullan (University of Reading), David Pattie (University of Chester), Graham Saunders (now University of Birmingham), and the researchers were: Trish McTighe and David Tucker (PDRAs) and Matthew McFrederick (PhD researcher).

<sup>2</sup> Such as the Dublin Gate Theatre Beckett Festival launched in 1991, the Happy Days Enniskillen International Festival inaugurated in 2012, or the Barbican Beckett International Festival in June 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Gambon played Hamm in a production of *Endgame* at the Noel Coward Theatre in 2004, and Krapp in *Krapp’s Last Tape* in the Duchess Theatre in 2010; Ian McKellen played Vladimir with Patrick Stewart as Estragon in the 2009 West End production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Haymarket, that subsequently toured to Broadway in 2013; Fiona Shaw performed Winnie in *Happy Days* directed by Deborah Warner in a touring production which included the National Theatre’s Lyttelton in 2007; and Mark Rylance played Hamm with Simon McBurney as Clov in Theatre de Complicité’s *Endgame* at the Duchess in 2009. Further details of these and other UK and Irish productions can be found by searching the *Staging Beckett* database on <https://www.reading.ac.uk/staging-beckett/> [accessed 3 March 2017]

this does not adequately account for the legacies of his work for contemporary theatre and performance practices and cultures, whether national, international, regional or fringe.<sup>4</sup>

The Staging Beckett project set out to bring a range of contemporary practices and critical discourses from theatre and performance studies into dialogue with Beckett's theatre. Beckett's plays remain an important medium for what Herbert Blau termed 'thinking through' theatre and performance,<sup>5</sup> asking fundamental questions about the interrelations between self and other, human and non-human, theatre and the other arts, and between the performing body, voice, technology, space, time and the ethics of witnessing. Beckett's work therefore has the potential to open up new creative practices and vocabularies for testing the languages and boundaries of theatre in the twenty-first century. Individual productions, whether through testimony or archival remains, tell us a great deal about shifting practical and cultural interpretations of Beckett at different historical moments and locations. Beckett's work therefore remains a vibrant presence and inspiration for scholars, practitioners and audiences of contemporary theatre and performance.<sup>6</sup> This issue, though inevitably covering only a small selection of case studies mainly from British and Irish contexts which was the stated focus of the project, aims to explore some of Beckett's living legacies for the discipline of theatre and performance, from his impact on actors, designers or directors, on theatre cultures at national and local levels, and on theatre and cultural programming, to the

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<sup>4</sup> See Nicholas Johnson's meditation on the writer's legacy in 'A Theatre of the Unword: Censorship, Hegemony and Samuel Beckett' in *Ireland, Memory and Performing the Historical Imagination*, eds by Christopher Collons and Mary P. Caulfield (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 36-54 (p 38): 'the true legacy of a writer is only contained in the durability of his or her living thought, and the rest is branding'.

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Herbert Blau, *Sails of the Herring Fleet* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Full details of our outputs including articles, edited books and public exhibitions can be found on the website as above: our publications include, in addition to this special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, the twin volumes *Staging Beckett in the UK* and *Staging Beckett in Ireland and Northern Ireland*, co-edited by Trish McTighe and David Tucker and published by Bloomsbury Methuen Drama in 2016, and a special issue of the bi-lingual journal, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 29.2 (2017), co-edited by McMullan and Pattie, on Staging Beckett at the Margins, which includes analyses of productions of Beckett's work in the marginal spaces of cities such as London, Dublin or New York, as well as national and regional cultures beyond the Euro-American cultural axis, including Korea and Turkey.

generation of new approaches to theatre and interdisciplinary or intermedial performance and aesthetics, and on our interactions with the performance archive.

The repositioning of the human in relation to the non- or more than human is a fundamental concern of ecology and performance. This is the subject of Carl Lavery's article that develops, using Beckett as a prism, existing work that he and Clare Finburgh presented in their 2015 edited collection, *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd: Ecology, Environment and the Greening of the Modern Stage*.<sup>7</sup> However, Lavery does not ask us to once again consider Beckett a card-carrying absurdist, whose early work for the theatre such as *Endgame* (1957) was seen at the time as an expression of post-nuclear anxieties. Instead, Lavery puts forward the proposition that Beckett's theatre becomes a site where the human disappears, or else is subjected to the ravages of time, such as the figures in *Play* (1963), whose visages have become weathered by the same processes as the urns that enclose them. In this way Lavery argues that Beckett's theatre can be viewed ecologically through the metaphor of a garden. While this has long been used in drama from Shakespeare onwards –in *Richard II* (1597) as an emblem for misrule, or the marker for the dysfunctional family relationships in Enid Bagnold's *The Chalk Garden* (1955) – Lavery asks us to view Beckett's theatre in performance as an ecological phenomenon: from the structure of the building itself to features such as the proscenium arch, the drama becomes an affective site through which spectators are 'weathered' through the events they experience onstage. However, Lavery does not equate ecology with nature, but more a relationship between the human and the non-human. Far from being 'at home', or at the centre of things, Lavery reminds us that cataclysmic events such as the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, demonstrate that human

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<sup>7</sup> See *Rethinking the Theatre of the Absurd: Ecology, the Environment and the Greening of the Modern Stage*, ed. by Clare Finburgh and Carl Lavery (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

beings are actively dispelled from the *oikos*. This precarity is something that Beckett is all too aware of, and using *Footfalls* (1976) as his main example, Lavery demonstrates, through reference to Jean-François Lyotard's late writings, how this hostility is enacted in a world such as *Endgame* where it has ceased to rain<sup>8</sup> and where beyond the sanctuary of the room Hamm bewails, 'Nature has abandoned us'.<sup>9</sup>

Trish McTighe addresses questions of performance and landscape in her article on place and archive in relation to the Happy Days International Beckett Festival that has been held for several years in the Northern Ireland town of Enniskillen. In particular, McTighe is interested in those performance events that take place outside the central locus of the festival itself. Drawing on the early work of Nick Kaye on site specific performance, McTighe sees geographical sites as forms of archive that, when utilized within the context of a performance, reveal traces of their own history. Yet crucially, McTighe does not see the use of location in the Happy Days Festival as genuinely site specific in intention or effect, even taking into account Beckett's own tenuous association with Enniskillen, through his attendance at the local Portora School. Using as her main example a performance of *Ohio Impromptu* (1980) on Devenish Island in a small cottage, sited within the ruins of an ancient monastery, McTighe argues that the tourist experience (travelling out to the island by boat and being given the opportunity to explore the ruins after the performance), diminishes the associations of place and performance that most site-specific work deliberately seeks to accentuate. While the town of Enniskillen has many historical associations – from being an early plantation settlement for the English and Scots in the 1600s to the IRA 1987 Remembrance Sunday attack, McTighe concludes that for the festival organizers site becomes used more for its novelty value and what she calls the 'resonances of place' than for

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 1986), p.94.

<sup>9</sup> Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 97.

any commemorative function such locations might hold. However, McTighe's article offers productive ways of thinking about place and landscape as archive.

Indeed, within the landscape of Beckett Studies, archival research has become prominent, including a rise in genetic manuscript study.<sup>10</sup> With an emphasis not on Beckett's own texts, but on the ephemeral traces of performance, archival work became one of the main strands of the Staging Beckett project, together with an early recognition that to properly assess Beckett's impact on British and Irish theatre cultures the team would need to travel out beyond the showpiece collections housed at Reading University and Trinity College Dublin. Sinead Mooney's article is a mischievous and witty response to this recent 'archival turn' in Beckett Studies that has focused on the discarded drafts and works in progress that the author had left carefully preserved for after his death in 1989. Instead, Mooney takes us on a journey to less prestigious repositories of Beckettian materials situated within small theatre collections, public libraries and city and county council records in order to look at several regional productions of *Waiting for Godot* performed since the celebrated (and well documented in performance histories) London production in 1955. Mooney argues that the value of the ephemera located in these collections – scrapbooks, prompt books, financial records and stage managers reports – is of value to scholars of Beckett and theatre historians alike in that these archives move away from the author centred archives of Reading and Dublin to ones that expose (often in unexpected and amusing ways), the material conditions of performance and give indications of how a celebrated *avant garde* work such as *Godot* fared beyond the metropolitan centres of Paris and London to audiences at Birmingham, Nottingham and Manchester. Here, Mooney discovers that little regard was paid to *Godot's* Left Bank credentials, tracing how the play was first made to conform to institutional

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<sup>10</sup> See the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project, a collaboration between the Universities of Antwerp and Reading, and the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre at the University of Texas at Austin: <http://www.beckettarchive.org> (accessed 18 March 2017).

structures, and more broadly how these *Godots* from the late 1950s to the mid 1970s charted the decline of the old repertory system and the policy changes instituted through Arts Council and local authorities that directly impacted on theatre in the provinces from the 1960s onwards. Mooney argues that these networks of less regarded collections represent the vast, invisible ‘dark matter’ that binds together theatre studies as a discipline in the traces they reveal of backstage conditions integral to the producing of performance itself.

In addition to searching for archival traces of performances of Beckett’s plays, the Staging Beckett project has invited performance analyses of specific productions through its conferences and publications, in order to reflect on past and present approaches to staging Beckett’s work in the UK and Ireland.<sup>11</sup> In this issue, Andrew Lennon’s article looks at the role that darkness occupies within Beckett’s theatre in a series of case studies that include the actress Lisa Dwan performing *Not I* (1973), *Footfalls* (1976) and *Rockaby* (1982) at the Royal Court Theatre in 2014; a show collectively entitled Beckett’s *Ghosts* (2007) by Bedrock Productions, Dublin, and Out of Joint’s production of *All That Fall* (1957) performed at the Enniskillen Happy Days Festival (2015). For Lennon, darkness does not simply limit what is seen, but becomes a crucial property that can also be perceived visually. Moreover, complete darkness becomes a property that, Lennon argues, partly through direct observation of audience reaction in these shows, can provoke a new awareness, inducing feelings of intense solecism, unease and panic.

Throughout the Staging Beckett project, we held interviews and public talks with theatre practitioners, as an integral part of the history of staging Beckett in the UK and Ireland, and an investigation into the living legacies of Beckett’s work for contemporary theatre and

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<sup>11</sup> For example, Kene Igweonu, “‘The Tree has Four or Five Leaves’: Talawa: Britishness, and the First all-black production of *Waiting for Godot in Britain*”, 141-55, and John Stokes, “‘A Price to be Paid: West End Beckett’, 73-86, as well as essays on the history of London and regional including Scottish productions of Beckett’s drama in *Staging Beckett in Great Britain*, ed. by Tucker and McTighe (see note 5).



performance.<sup>12</sup> In the Documents section of this issue, we have included an interview with Katie Mitchell on her many productions of Beckett's work, and a reflective essay by Irish director Sarah Jane Scaife on her company's site-specific staging of Beckett's plays for female actors.

Katie Mitchell is a well-known and sometimes controversial British director who has worked with major companies and institutions in Europe, including the Schaubühne, Berlin. Her productions include a wide range of theatre genres, from Ancient Greek plays to nineteenth century naturalism to contemporary playwrights like Martin Crimp or Sarah Kane. She also directs opera, from Handel to newly commissioned operas such as George Benjamin's *Written on Skin* (2012). What links these very divergent texts is her search to create a visceral, urgent and contemporary environment through which they might address audiences. Other concerns are around ecology, and technology in performance – her use of live camera from her stage adaptations of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (2006) and Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* in *...some trace of her* (2008), to *The Forbidden Zone* (2016) have become major reference points in debates about intermedial performance.<sup>13</sup> She has

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<sup>12</sup> Participants included the Artistic Director of Ireland's Druid Theatre (Ireland) Garry Hynes, Gare St Lazare Players Ireland, Pan Pan Theatre (Ireland), UK based directors Ian Rickson and Natalie Abrahami, and actors Lisa Dwan, Tricia Kelly and Ronald Pickup. The transcripts of these are available on the Staging Beckett website: <https://www.reading.ac.uk/staging-beckett/> [accessed 18 March 2017]. See also interviews in the Back Pages section of this journal.

<sup>13</sup> Interviews with Mitchell and the range of scholarly analyses of her work are too extensive to summarize here. However, interviews we have found particularly useful include those by Maria Shevtsova, 'On Directing: A Conversation with Katie Mitchell', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 22.1 (2006), 3-18; 'Conversations around Choreography: Siobhan Davies and Katie Mitchell' (2009): <http://www.siobhandavies.com/conversations/mitchell/transcript.php> [accessed 7 May 2017]; Summer Banks, 'A Chat with Director Katie Mitchell', *Exberliner*, 28 September 2010: <http://www.exberliner.com/culture/stage/an-interview-with-katie-mitchell/> [accessed 5 May 2017]; and Charlotte Higgins, 'Katie Mitchell, Britain's theatre's queen in exile', *Guardian* (14 January 2016): <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jan/14/british-theatre-queen-exile-katie-mitchell> [accessed May 29 2017]. For an interview specifically on her earlier work on Beckett's plays, see Julie Campbell, 'Julie Campbell interviews Katie Mitchell about her recent production of "Beckett's Shorts"', *Journal of Beckett Studies* 8.1 (1998), 127-39. In relation to Mitchell's intermedial theatre, one of the earliest essays was Louise Lepage, 'Posthuman perspectives and Postdramatic Theatre: The Theory and Practice of Hybrid Ontology in Katie Mitchell's *The Waves*', *Culture, Language and Representation*, 6 (2008), 137-149, and a 2017 one is Benjamin Fowler's 'Re-mediating the modernist novel: Katie Mitchell's live camera work' in *Contemporary Approaches to Adaptation*, ed. by Kara Reilly (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 97-119. In relation to the tension between Mitchell's work in British and in European theatre cultures, see, for example, Dan Rebellato,

frequently directed Beckett's work, though scholarship on her practice tends to neglect this strand of her directing portfolio. The interview with Katie Mitchell included here focuses on her productions of Beckett's work in relation to some of the major preoccupations of her broader body of work and approaches to directing. It is particularly valuable for the Staging Beckett project and for this issue, as Mitchell reflects on very different theatre cultures in Britain and in Europe, particularly in Germany.

The site-specific work of Dublin-based theatre director, Sarah Jane Scaife, was the subject of several conference papers of the Staging Beckett project, and also several of our publications.<sup>14</sup> These outputs are informed by Scaife's own oral and published reflections on her work, which offer valuable documentation and insight into her practice and processes of staging Beckett. In her document in this issue, she discusses the Beckett in the City project which her Company SJ initiated in 2009, focussing on the programme of Beckett plays for female actors entitled *Beckett in the City: The Women Speak*, which premiered in Dublin in 2015. Engaging with Baz Kershaw's argument that traditional theatre spaces are ideologically encoded, Scaife discusses her aim of focusing on the audience's encounter with the performance and, especially, the choice of a site-specific location which aims to foreground the relationship between the performance and its situation in this particular place and contemporary moment. *The Women Speak* programme was set in the ruins of Dublin's Halla Banba, a collection of Georgian buildings on Dublin's Parnell Square which includes the former National Ballroom. This location was chosen as these buildings had been used as State institutions, including the neighbouring Coláiste Mhuire, a Christian Brothers School, that had formerly been domestic residences, initially for Ascendancy gentry, and,

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'Katie Mitchell: Learning from Europe' in *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, ed. by Maria M. Delgado and Dan Rebellato (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 317-38.

<sup>14</sup> See essays by Anna McMullan and Brian Singleton in *Staging Beckett in Ireland and Northern Ireland*, ed. by McTighe and Tucker, pp. 103-119, and pp. 169-184 respectively, and Derval Tubridy, 'Installing Beckett: Pan Pan Theatre and Company SJ', in *Contemporary Theatre Review* 28.1 (2018), 68-81.

subsequently, in the late nineteenth century before being taken over by the State, crowded and dilapidated tenement housing. Scaife discusses her search for a site which simultaneously evoked a domestic and a State setting, and how her collaborative preparatory processes focused on the encounter between the audience, the plays, and the material features of their location. Her *Beckett in the City* project sought to engage audiences in a dialogue between Beckett's plays and the contemporary conditions of marginalization and dispossession whose traces were so evident in and around her chosen sites. Her article also complements that of Lennon in foregrounding the sensory and perceptual impact of Beckett's work on audiences.

Derval Tubridy analyses one of Scaife's earlier programmes in the *Beckett in the City* series along with the work of another Irish company, Pan Pan, who have adapted several of Beckett's radio plays for live performance, including *All That Fall* and *Embers*. Inevitably, the restrictions maintained by the Beckett Estate on modifying Beckett's stage directions or texts in performance has limited the scope for experimentation with his plays in areas of the world or metropolitan theatre spaces to which the reach of the Estate extends. Because of this, many practitioners have turned to alternative means of exploring and re-encountering the contemporary relevance of Beckett's work in performance, and adapting Beckett's prose texts has offered some leeway to experiment with staging and to test the boundaries of live performance by introducing modes of perception and audience engagement inherent to other media.<sup>15</sup> Drawing on analyses of the medium of installation art, which Scaife also invokes, Tubridy considers the ways in which space and technologies of light and sound impact on the audience's sensory response to these works. One of the key findings of the *Staging Beckett*

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<sup>15</sup> Beckett himself collaborated on some stagings of his prose work, where the texts are read or embodied by an actor with minimal set, in the case of Irish actor Jack MacGowran, and director Siobhan O'Casey, for example. See the 'adaptation' entry in *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett: A Reader's Guide to his Works, Life and Thought*, ed. by C.J. Ackerley and S.E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 2004), pp. 5-6. There are more experimental adaptations of Beckett's prose, by Mabou Mines for example, as in their productions of *The Lost Ones* and *Imagine Dead Imagine*. See Anna McMullan, *Performing Embodiment in Samuel Beckett's Drama* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 133-39. For a recent discussion of Irish adaptations of Beckett's prose texts, see Nicholas Johnson in *Staging Beckett in Ireland and Northern Ireland*, ed. by McTighe and Tucker, pp. 175-202.

project is that Beckett's work remains a particular inspiration and testing ground for experimental performance focused on the body, site and technology, and that the intersections between the performance of Beckett's texts and an installation aesthetic is a growth area. Recent work by Gare St Lazare Players Ireland, such as their piece, *Here All Night*, where Conor Lovett read sections of Beckett prose amid the installation 'Hello Sam Redux' by Irish artist Brian O'Doherty, and musical compositions by Paul Clark,<sup>16</sup> demonstrates this trend.

Brenda O'Connell continues the discussion of the intersections of Beckett's work with concepts and practices from the performing arts more broadly, through a discussion of how contemporary Irish performance artist, Amanda Coogan, has been inspired by and has reconceived aspects of Beckett's work in her own practice. Coogan has acknowledged Beckett's influence in her work, and with reference to her 2015 Irish Royal Academy series of performances, O'Connell investigates how Beckett's staging of the indomitable need to tell one's story and his focus on reimagining embodiment as part of the staging of marginalised subjectivities, has been reimagined in the work of Coogan.

The actors who have interpreted Beckett's work have often been interviewed in order to mine their experiences of being directed by Beckett in some cases, or to evaluate whether there are specific approaches or skills appropriate to performing Beckett. Phillip Zarrilli contests the long-standing association of performing Beckett as form of torture / trauma, arguing from a theatre practitioner's point of view that performing Beckett offers a range of challenges and affordances to the performer. Like Sarah Jane Scaife, Zarrilli is a practitioner-scholar, and, like her (and indeed Herbert Blau, invoked at the beginning of this Introduction) his writing voice shifts between the academic and the personal. Zarrilli concludes with a

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<sup>16</sup> *Here All Night* was included in a Gare St Lazare Beckett in London programme at the Print Room in May-June 2016. See <<http://www.the-print-room.org/past-productions/beckett-in-london/>> [accessed March 18, 2017].

profoundly intimate reflection on Beckett's impact on him at a particularly challenging time of his life, but which he in turn channelled into his productions of the Beckett Project. Many of us are drawn to Beckett's work precisely because of this intersection of the aesthetically challenging; the invitation to rethink the languages, modes of embodiment, technologies and boundaries of theatre and performance; and the intimate address, the way in which his work speaks to the vulnerabilities of being human.

Staging Beckett has now concluded the AHRC-funded phase of the project, though the website continues to be updated with interviews and research resources on staging Beckett, including project-related publications and other research outputs and events. Indeed, the project has acted as a catalyst for reconsidering Beckett's relation to contemporary critical discourses and landscapes of theatre and performance, and renewing Blau's challenge to 'think through' Beckett. The project aimed to analyse and foreground the rich legacies of Beckett's work and its contexts of performance for audiences, archivists, theatre companies and practitioners, as well as for scholars. The main finding of the project, however, is that we have only begun to scratch the surface. Independent sister projects include the Beckett Laboratory, which was established as part of Trinity College Dublin's annual Samuel Beckett International Summer School in 2013, directed by Nicholas Johnson and Jonathan Heron,<sup>17</sup> and, in France, the Jouer Beckett / Performing Beckett project is investigating the differences between French and British approaches to staging Beckett.<sup>18</sup> We look forward to many future dialogues and collaborations.

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<sup>17</sup> See <https://beckettsummerschool.wordpress.com/beckettlab/> [accessed 20 September 2017].

<sup>18</sup> Performing Beckett / Jouer Beckett, organised by Dominic Glynn and Jean-Michel Gouvard, involving two programmes of study days, one in March in Bordeaux and one in London in October 2017: <https://jmgouvard.wixsite.com/performingbeckett> [accessed 20 September 2017].