

Beckett's Happy Days
Passion in the Impatience
(1984)

In the universities there were retreats from the word, more resistances to words that were filled by other words, until yet another retreat from the word. Then in the 1980s, for instance in the Baltics, another resistance to that retreat became another retreat. Theories were applied like super-glue; structuralism, post-structuralism, super-structuralism. Everything was deconstructed to be reconstructed, and the dogma remained the same. If Modernism and neutrality trapped a small culture like Finland into being 'absolutely Modern', and absolute beginners at the same time, post-modernism offered novelty upon novelty. Beckett was there first:

"So things may change no answer end no answer i may choke no answer sink no answer sully the mud no more no answer the dark no answer trouble the peace no more no answer the silence no answer die no answer DIE screams I MAY DIE screams I SHALL DIE screams good."

It always struck me as a pathological clue of great importance that the Finnish culture altered the title of Beckett's play, *Waiting for Godot*. It was changed to 'Tomorrow, he will come' with the stress on 'will' (*Huomenna Hän Tulee*). I remember discussing this with the director Jack Wikberg who put on the first production in the late 1950s. Why should such a violation appear so outrageous? Why should it appear like a flattening out, a hammering down, a levelling off, a deflation? Finns, he informed me, would probably stay away if the play was about waiting. If we could give just a hint of the future, of something happening, then we would have an audience.

Such sound pragmatism I was to meet everywhere in the Baltics. Many titles of novels, films, plays etc., were altered to suit the culture. This began what has been a relatively unscientific but passionate field study of any Beckett play in any culture I happen to be in. Mostly, I began observing the differences in productions of 'Godot' in Finland. Then I would pick up the play in Paris, in London, in India, in Poland. I carried with me a little repertoire of where the laughter did or did not occur. None of this made any sense to me until I noticed a small piece in a Finnish newspaper on the death of Samuel Beckett. It had said that he had gone along to a recent performance of *Godot*. It had been turned into a clown--like production. Didi and Gogo were women. The play was carnivalized. Beckett, apparently, wept. Within a week Beckett was dead.

This touched me. I always thought a play as good as *Godot* could ride any treatment. Whatever our humiliation, our blunting, levelling, sprawling or squandering, I always thought our own prejudices, ideologies, morals, ethics and integrity could handle any amount of squandering and sit back up, like those weighted bouncing balls children play with. I still think that. But Sam Beckett weeping at the carnivalization of a play that must have been carnivalized everywhich way since its appearance in the 1950s, really touched me. And Sam, Beckett as the character in a television programme called *Quantum Leap*, just had to invite a re-think of the world's lunacy.

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I always thought theatre would decide its own fate. My visits to the theatre were therapy; temptations for *theatre* to exist. Peculiar? I can cite example of what I mean. In 1978 I was in Paris at the Quai D'Orsay. The Renaud-Barrault company were putting on Beckett's 'Not I' (*Pas Mois*) and 'Footfalls' (*Pas*). Long known in Paris and elsewhere for their tireless productions of Beckett, there was that evening an over-expectation in the air of the audience. Naturally enough it was a theatre goer's audience. It was a converted audience; a recognisably ritualised audience nourished on that very special coded enjoyment, *le théâtre!* It was a pro Beckett-in-French audience. Beckett had, after all, lived most of his life in Paris and written most of his works in in the French language. To say the air that evening could have been cut with a knife would be no exaggeration. The decade had been relatively unkind to Beckett's oeuvre totally missing his music-hall philosophy.

Slapstick metaphysics were left to Groucho Marx during a decade that saw Marxism slowly decline. But the turning points were around in Europe; the world was being whispered about as if it had gone wrong, very wrong. A terrorism of expectation seemed to operate in Paris in a way that it rarely does in any other city of the world. Certainly not in the suburbs of the Baltic globe, Helsinki or Stockholm. This was a culture operating at its most religious. The applause so often an unreliable sign was too well-prepared. There were obviously some in the audience who felt the same.

The mouth of Madelaine Renaud was focussed with a bright spotlight. Nothing else could be seen except here lips. During the performance a rather forlorn, stray voice began from the audience. This voice began interrupting the play. Low, but audible, the voice began a litany. *Samuel Beckett. Frank Sinatra. Dean Martin.* The tone grew in pomposity and irony. The audience was aghast. How could he? There were murmuring. *Merde alors! Can't somebody stop him.*

The silences got longer. The litany repeated. *Samuel Beckett. Frank Sinatra. Dean Martin.* Shushing noises went around the theatre as in a whispering gallery. The voice of Madelaine Renaud, the highly spotlit mouth of *Pas Moi* continued unperturbed. Perhaps just as she should have done, perhaps just as Beckett would have wanted in such an interruption. But the stoic orifice could carry no smile.

The lone voice continued. It was timed. *Samuel Beckett. Frank Sinatra. Dean Martin.* There had to be a link which I couldn't work out. Then there were shouts of 'lumières, lumières'. The shock of these interruptions was too great. The lights came on, the Mouth went out, the words of Mme Renaud were halted, the play stopped. The offender was brusquely removed still announcing, *Samuel Beckett, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin.*

This haunted the evening, and for me, haunts any production of Beckett's plays. The air was even thicker with reverence when the play proceeded. It reminded me of yet one more small death that cultures inflict on themselves as they long for their own seriousness and import. Whenever I would meet this religiosity, in whatever city of the world, I found myself repeating this litany; *Samuel Beckett, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin.*

In 1983 I went to see a performance of *Happy Days* in Swedish. The play was dead from the neck upwards, but I wanted to know why. Was it the language, the nuance, the distorted and squandered brio that Beckett had written into the English and French but that didn't make it into Swedish? These were obviously my prejudices of ignorance. The first disaster for me was the explicit use of expression. Though I did not understand much Swedish I knew the play from repeated readings. There was a feeling that the director had asked the actors to wrench meaning from the lines. As if it wasn't enough to speak these lines, as if the audience could not be trusted with the words and needed explicit pointers.

The production seemed to be trying to neuter the metaphorical implications of a woman buried up to her waist in sand and a man, appropriately named Willie, crawling around the sand fetching and carrying for her. Instead of Beckett's seaside brilliance, it began to sound like a Baltic despondency, a militant despair at the human condition. It reinforced the metaphorical gloom of the country. Winnie's speech lost its adventure and ride, it became throttled. Neutral!

Furthermore, in a culture with such alcoholic instability, Willie became confused. His running and fetching appeared drunken imbecilic behaviour. The play shifted from Beckett's exercise in nuanced communication and the lack of it to a devastating mirror of incontinence. In a society like Finland where irony, sarcasm and futility had to do too much to distinguish themselves, the range is impoverished. Happy Days in the Swedish theatre was flattened into an uncomical dirge.

Full of import and meaning, this reminded me of the theatregoer at The Finnish National Theatre. It was Godot, the moment when Didi and Gogo were about to commit suicide. The string from the trousers had broken and they dismissingly put off suicide for tomorrow. The woman sitting behind me was appalled at the slight laughter in the audience. I recall the laughter being slight because I was astonished that it didn't bring the house down. Instead, the woman turned on her friend and said, "why did you titter at that point. It wasn't funny. It was the most important philosophical point of the evening." Oh Samuel Beckett, I thought, Oh Frank Sinatra, Oh Dean Martin!

But *Happy Days* presented another problem. The immobility of silence is something other in Helsinki than in Paris. The best production of *Godot* I saw in 1979 on a small barge on the river seine. Played in a corridor space of twelve-foot width, Didi and Gogo, young actors, threw the text and the carrots around brilliantly. No one needed to talk about the immobility of silence. And these two actors knew their Frank Sinatra and their Dean Martin.

So what goes wrong for the visitor? Plain seriousness or gloom? Perhaps to make up for their own silence and calm in the culture, the Finnish Swedish actors rushed around too much. There was too much activity in the non-activity of Winnie and Willie. They overplayed! There was an illusion of action, a compensation for a boredom that they assumed present. Laughter, then at Winnie or Willie just relieved the audience like urinating.

Whatever was being performed left me with the impression that the culture wrote its own performance, decided its own theatre and was trapped in its own theory and practice. An anaemic performance without rhythm resulted. Now seeing the same play emerge in the 1990s with feminist militancy, the over-acting shifts itself elsewhere, the culture props itself up on distended crutches.

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Where does the visitor seek nuance in a performance, in a culture that is grasped only by fragments, by snatches? Where, if not sharing timing which itself is culture, is the play to be relieved? In Poland, the air around the society, the timing of the society itself, meant that a visit for me in the 1970s to *Godot* or *Happy Days* became electric. Whilst Polish theatre became the breathing hole for Solidarnosc and played itself off the church, Finnish culture looked as if during the 70s it bored itself to death with allegiance to a confused realism. Perhaps it is only now that I have begun to understand the Nordic temperament, the neutral timing of a culture where nothing happens not twice but continuously?

Over a year after this performance of *Happy Days* I went to a French production of *Oh les Beaux Jours* at the Theatre du Rond-Point of Barrault and Renaud which had moved from Quai D'Orsay to Avenue Franklin Roosevelt. The performance was sold out, the terrorism returned and the air was possibly thicker than ever, certainly than that evening some four years ago of *Pas Moi*.

I had witnessed the same rush to get in, the same hysteria and aggression as I had for Christmas Holy Mass in Paris' Notre Dame. The French, unlike what I had experienced in the Baltics, are excellent at being appalled. In the church you could sense their own sneering and propensity to succumb to that very English disease, the phenomenology of football crowd violence. There's a buzz to French outrage which isn't a safe one.

Later, in 1986, as I would take my film students into a live riot and bus burning sequence in South Delhi, I remember thinking back to the chaos in Notre Dame. There as buses burned in genuine outrage at a student being run over by a wayward Delhi bus driver, (what was in fact a common occurrence) I felt as safe as ever. As the riot squad advanced on us we were caught in the crossfire. The tear gas exploded all around. With a certain amount of dignity, as if this sort of thing happened every day, the students turned to me and said; Sir, we'd better get back to the seminar room now.

In the Théâtre du Rond-Point all 920 places were filled and the aisles were littered with others. All were waiting for theatre. The lights dimmed into a darkness of warning. Or was it a darkness speaking culture, a void in which the voice would begin, and silence would be redefined for another decade. Of course, all by now familiar Beckettian themes. But it became clear that we were not here to witness the excellence of the Beckett text, the extraordinary Beckett minimalism, the unchanging Beckett set of a woman buried up to her waist in sand, we were here to witness theatre performing as theatre.

I say this with no disrespect to Madelaine Renaud, but the production demonstrated clearly someone having played the piece endlessly. Perhaps, ever since the first time it appeared in the 1960s. There was that feeling of trying to excavate culture itself more subtly, yet more fastidiously. I had the feeling of being an Intensive Care patient, being passed from one consultant to another and in the process getting further away from the operation that was supposed to be performed on me.

If this had occurred in a small culture like Finland, or then in India, I would have applied the same distress; yet here we were in the centre of Paris risking the loss of fresher and ruder spontaneity. In short, Beckett had become tacit, the rest mere orchestration. Culture like the Seine or The Ganges, Roger Blin's production idled on like one of the more unnoticeable sand barges. There was laughter here and there, a stare here and there and much coughing elsewhere. Even when the coughing threatened to compete with Mme Renaud's careful, fastidious performance, there was as in 1978, that stoic calm.

Perhaps this was a pattern for the accidental. As usual I imagined that Beckett's play could not only ride the coughing but could integrate it into the play. One point in the first act where Willie replied to Winnie in an irascible manner by coughing grotesquely as if choking on a chicken bone. In Paris, this led to wild laughter. In Helsingfors, this produced knowing outrage and knowing vulgarity. It wasn't long though, from all parts in the theatre, coughing was choreographing itself along with Willie. Supremely comic, adding to Beckett's own music-hall brilliance, for the French Beckett fans present, it marred the performance.

It did nothing of the sort. This type of event has that added possibility of saving the moment from over-playing. Much 'culture' when lifted into other societies sends out signals. When those signals threaten to over-achieve theatrical promise, the reverence is often unbearable.

Recently a violent uproar occurred on a British late-night cultural programme. The mood darkened, the panellists argued, nuance tried to deflect the disagreements. The producer intervened when the language got pointed and vitriolic. Turning on the main culprit of this we heard the appalling line; *it's wonderful television but*. The playwright rightly was outraged at this patronising snub. The producer neutered the moment. Culture was again late-night coded reverence. We cough; there is no longer recognisable passion in its impatience.

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St this time, I found it very difficult to get away from the idea that contrary to what one is taught about language, communication rarely seems to take place. I could go even further; I wasn't sure what relation communication had to language itself. All our private and social relationships to knowledge seem to be subject to serious squandering. At the same time, this aids our desire for more and more source to a knowledge that moves further and further away from asking what we do with that knowledge. Some like the playwright Edward Bond ask it directly, in a language that appears direct, in a note called 'On our Modern World':

It is a matter of interest to see

How long it is before new inventions

Are put to old uses

Electricity is sent through electrodes
Clipped to the body
Men dangled from helicopters on a rope
By college graduates
Medical syringes used in murder
Men dragged at the back of a car
As Achilles dragged Hector round Troy
But Hector was dead
Power drills have efficiently incapacitated
Blow lamps have stripped skin not paint
Flood lamps illuminated
What men should shudder to see by day

I speak only of tools of peace
Not weapons of war

This has nothing to do with you, surely

But your mind is full of modern knowledge
How it is used
In our modern world?

(Edward Bond *Theatre Poems & Songs* 1978)

The answer isn't easy. Boredom, neutrality and silence shift across cultures as they do across decades. Beckett's play becomes a passenger and victim to these shifts. What makes it too-slow, over-nuanced, risking pathos? Why can it get caught in its own seriousness? The seriousness of Beckett's 'cold' text on the page is obvious, yet so is the humour. Do not Beckett's meticulous directions need licence just as we know how parts of the day need leaving out, parts of countries need ignoring, and parts of other people need avoiding if we are to survive.

If we don't play the scripts with a little irreverence, seaside bravado, banality and vulgarity, if we don't do Beckett with a music-hall ice cream cornet flourish, the play is doomed surely. But what of cultures that have no ice cream cornet flourish? Where do we find an understanding of cultures and societies of idiocy, hysteria and seriousness. Then the theatre like culture suffers the fate of much theatre; it collapses under its own weight. As the sand engulfs Winnie for eternity. Surely this is not how we imagine our Beckett, our Chekov, our Racine or O'Casey, our Brecht, our Mrozek, our Lorca.

But this has nothing to do with us surely. Unless we happen to buttress the wrong kind of silence. Silence? But I can cite examples of what I mean! How then do you stop the squander? When did we reach that stage where we drank in the images but our grasp of what was happening in front of us was fading? McLuhan was mocked for surfing with Heidegger, yet he seemed to be one of the first to understand the insight when Lear's eyes were removed.

McLuhan guessed that language and the printed word would be hijacked for its own non-sense, a hysteria, where images would not alter our world but we would alter with them and inside them. There was a time when the images and pictures we were receiving were supposed to fit under a language system. This meant that we could read images as we could read a language. It also meant that images were constructed like a language. It has taken some time to realise that images survive because they resist such linguistic structure whilst attracting us by the promise of language. This doesn't alter the fact that we probably still hear what we want to hear and see what we want to see. And cough when we want to cough. Whatever we are presented with.

Remember the coughing in our performance of *Oh les Bueaux Jours!* The coughing continued throughout the evening, but it never reached the same high as when it married Beckett's text and Willie's groan. The coughing then returned to what it was, embarrassment. Madelaine Renaud produced a remarkable range of barely audible nuances. She halted, gesticulated, listened, chanted and sang. But for me I could never see the music-hall or pantomime that I thought necessary to the play. There was an extended pathos in the French language, it lacked an ironic rise and fall, the slight overplay that can dull the intended irony yet celebrate it. Beckett's text seemed to be like the century, one-liners with memory, a party piece with no party anymore.

What could we gain by understand cultural timing? We would only have to play Beckett's *Happy Days*, a woman up to her waist, then her neck, in sand for it to resonate a hundredfold, a thousandfold. This seemed, as a play, as far away from *Absurd Theatre* was one could get. The theatre wrote its own fate and the spectacle held to a thin disguise as it played to the audience. Audiences that were not hot or cold, refined or crude.

The refined audience seemed to have lost the play long ago. The crude audience struggled painfully for an easier action in the theatre, a more direct response. The more it was described as a touching example of Absurd Theatre the looser the hold on reality came. Visually we are tired, very tired. During the 1980s this came through to me more than ever. I was like an exhausted anthropologist. With little training for anything except 'culture' I drank in all the images of two cultures at the end of a hot and cold spectrum - India and Finland - and I came up with more of the same.

Metal-fatigue downs aeroplanes, hundreds die. Being tired of images is more painful, a brain fade, a slower death. Oh Samuel Beckett! We are likely to trace back this fatigue. McLuhan recognised it. Our enjoyment of images will become over-explicit, too literal even for entertainment. Just like the literal struggle of Willie trying to crawl around the sand-skirt of Winnie, entertainment and culture were muted. Oh Frank Sinatra. Coded suffering gives way to coded reverence. The theatre was trapped in an edged passion of impatience, whereas it needed imperfection and farce not the hushed ambiguity of worship. Oh Dean Martin!

In the same year Marguerite Duras won the Prix Goncourt, Beckett in Paris continued its institutional path it became an uneasy terrorism on a willing audience. Oh, what would we have given for the lone interruption, Samuel Beckett, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin. The books of Mme Duras were displayed everywhere briefly. Those who spotted a future 'legend-in-their-lifetime' went and bought the books. Some already had them. Some may even read them. Naturally locked inside an English voice, I saw the French theatrical voice. It sported with institution, just like the Finnish culture sported with culture, neutrality and Marxism in that decade.

My own control was this; two hours of Samuel Beckett in the early 1970s was not the same as two hours of Beckett in 1984. And it would not be the same as two hours in the Littleton Theatre in 1988 or disguised as Mrinal Sen's film called Genesis. Hallowed perplexity won over playable irony. Irony was the future error, or as Frank Auerbach said, the condom of our contemporary culture. Beckett as a sacred area, as the elephants' graveyard was not worth the paper it was printed on.

This insults the endeavour. But Sam Beckett as over-the-edge, as music-hall, as the orchestration of chance coughing tinged with just a little more Celtic irreverence, is surely still worth much more today. But your mind is full of modern knowledge, how is it used. For wishful thinking no doubt, for this passion in the impatience of the modern world.

In 1979 I left by ferry from Helsinki to Gdansk. I had a bursary to study Theatre and the work of Slawomir Mrozek and Samuel Beckett in Poland. From the moment I met the Finnish Ambassador on the ferry, and we drove from Gdansk to Warsaw I felt I was being followed. By the time I arrived at The Academy, my research was suspected by the professor. Culture is blind, opportunistic and dead, were the type of words he used. At home my telephone would suddenly be invaded or go dead. A visiting American researcher informed me about the blacklist. My research was never completed. I resorted to coughing on the telephone line to confuse the surveillance. I left within the month. *Solidarnosc* erupted the following year and became the theatre I should have been studying.

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