The Stuff of Performance

Beckett, Theatre Marginalia, and the Archive

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Abstract

The idea of the archive has been thoroughly explored in Beckett studies since the mid-1990s; we are now very used to the idea of a 'grey canon' (to borrow a term from Gontarski) which extends far beyond those works published in Beckett's lifetime. However, it could be argued that our study of the Beckettian archive is centripetal; that is, that the investigations lead us back to the figure of Beckett. This paper proposes another way to read the material in the archive, at least in relation to the 'stuff' (Boscagli) produced in relation to performance. This reading is centrifugal, taking us from the performance itself to the interaction between the performance and the wider world.

Résumé

L'idée des archives a été minutieusement explorée dans les études de Beckett depuis le milieu des années 1990; nous sommes maintenant très habitués à l'idée d'un 'canon gris' (Gontarski) s'étendant bien au-delà des œuvres publiées du vivant de Beckett. Cependant, on pourrait soutenir que l'étude de l'archive de Beckett est centripète puisque toutes ses explorations nous ramènent toujours à la figure de Beckett. Cet article propose une autre façon de lire le matériel archivistique, au moins par rapport aux matériaux (Boscagli) ayant un rapport avec la représentation théâtrale. Cette lecture se veut centrifuge: conduisant de la mise en scène à l'interaction qu'elle faisait naître entre la représentation et le monde extérieur.

Keywords

Beckett – performance – archive – staging – canon – culture

The idea that Beckett studies, at some point in the 1990s (and definitely after the publication of James Knowlson's biography in 1996) took an archival turn, has by now passed through all the stages of critical acceptance, from interesting new direction to commonly accepted academic truth. The impetus behind the development of Beckett studies in the past fifteen or so years has been provided by the ever-closer investigation of the material held in various repositories around the world. Furthermore, the multi-volume edition of the collected letters, the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project, and various analyses of Beckett's reading and his private diaries have served to expand and enhance our understanding of Beckett's artistic evolution. As Dirk Van Hulle put it, in the introduction to the *New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*:

All this new material has had a considerable impact on the perception of the Beckett canon, to such a degree that S.E. Gontarski coined the phrase 'the grey canon' (Gontarski 2006) to denote all the writings by Beckett (notes, letters, diaries, criticism, self-translations, abandoned works) that provide us with a new context to interpret his published works.

2015, xvii

A scholar approaching Beckett in 2017, therefore, approaches a writer whose output, rather than settling into an accepted, organised canon, now seems to be expanding voluminously, if not yet exponentially.

There is much to welcome in the archival turn (not least because it has served as a necessary corrective to the theoretical abstraction of an author whose work deals, in prose and theatre, with the sharply, painfully material); it has produced works of criticism that have fundamentally altered our perceptions, and enriched our understanding of Beckett's work. However, the archive is also appealing, precisely because it is an archive:

The archive sits in its silent vault, but when you or I take hold of it, it becomes a performance site, a materialization of an implied narrative already spatialised and arranged. Like performance, the archive is a site of transformation, its 'material substrate' transformed by touch and interpretation into knowledge. Like performance, the archive solicits and interacts with a reader/spectator who, drawn by texts, objects, or perhaps something unlooked for, is seduced into desirous identification with writers, figures and events [...].

DIAMOND 2008, 22

Elin Diamond identifies the archive as something that is profoundly seductive in itself, and it is hard not to see a generation of Beckett scholars (myself included) as seduced—benignly seduced. Visiting the Beckett archive at Reading, it is hard to avoid the idea that one is part of a ritual (as Sinéad Mooney pointed out in a recent conference paper, delivered at the AHRC-funded Staging Beckett Conference at the University of Reading, 10–11 April 2015). The material, swathed in individual plastic sleeves, is delivered to the researcher in precisely ordered boxes; it is examined in silence, and frequently in the presence of other Beckett scholars, whether emerging, established or venerated. The atmosphere is studiously monastic; in the silence of the archive, it is easy to feel that one is gaining privileged access to the heart of Beckett Studies.

Much of the work undertaken in the archive leads back to the figure of Beckett himself. This work either illuminates aspects of the life (as in the four-volume edition of Beckett's collected letters) or traces the evolution of the work, through various drafts of the prose works, and the production histories of the plays. One might say that the predominant trend in archival work in Beckett Studies is centripetal; that is, that it leads from the detailed investigation of archival material to the processes of individual composition and creation. If there is a process—a necessary process—of desirous identification (to use Diamond's term) at work here, it is with the idea of Beckett as absent presence, traceable through the marks left in the archive for academics such as myself. This approach is entirely appropriate: perhaps in the case of Beckett, it is more appropriate than it would be for most artists. Archival exegesis has, undoubtedly, clarified the intellectual and artistic underpinnings of Beckett's output, and it has provided us with a clearer picture of the mechanics of Beckett's aesthetic approach in prose, poetry, and in the theatre.

However, given the nature of the material generated by a theatrical archive, the centripetal force acts alongside another force, which draws the archivist in the opposite direction. Theatrical archives contain production information, but they also contain material that is neither ephemeral (because it is linked to the production) nor essential (because the material has no effect on the production itself). This material forms part of the audience's reading of the event, even though it is ancillary to the events on stage: it is also directly linked to other factors—the status of the theatre or performance venue, the links between that performance venue and the immediate environment in which the theatre is located, and the wider cultural environment which surrounds them both. This material—programmes, flyers, tickets, posters, and so on—can be thought of, in a term usefully anatomized by Maurizia Boscagli in 2014, as 'stuff':

The commodified and aesthetic version of materiality takes us to the middle of the everyday, and allows the critic to gauge with more clarity the effects of matter as a force operating through different networks of power—economic, technological, scientific, libidinal, affective, collective, and individual. I call this everyday material with style, accessible to the subject's senses and produced also by aesthetic practice, stuff [...].

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What distinguishes 'stuff' from material produced and discarded as part of the normal processes of a capitalist economy is the fact that it is, primarily, designed to have an aesthetic effect. In other words, the aesthetic impact of the object is not an ancillary part of the design process, but the main reason for the object's existence—the object is designed to awaken desire, and to invite purchase.

When it comes to the materials located in a theatre archive, stuff plays a particular, and often overlooked, role. Those objects designed for aesthetic impact (the posters, programmes and so on) extend the aesthetic of the production outward into the foyer, the street, and (assuming the programme is not simply discarded) the home. These materials form the meat of many theatre archives, and, given that theatre productions disappear after performance, the stuff of the theatre archive (unlike the notes and manuscripts of the literary archive) cannot be used to retrace the steps taken by an artist toward a final artwork. Necessarily, the stuff of the theatre archive leads us in a different direction—centrifugal, out from the production to the context that supports it, rather than centripetal, or back to the creating artists. What this material offers, in other words, is the opportunity to embed productions of Beckett's work in particular theatre histories, and specific theatre cultures. It roots Beckett's work in the commercial transactions of performance, and in other narratives, such as of state support for the arts, and the cultural and political structures that define the place of theatre in British society.

As an example of this, we might examine the programme for the Oxford Playhouse production of *Waiting for Godot* in 1986. It would be fair to say that this programme is not the most aesthetically pleasing item in the archives: the front cover, a washed out and colour-blocked version of René Magritte's *The Red Boots*, might not be a particularly appealing image, but it does at least begin the aesthetic process of mediating between the production itself and the context within which that production takes place. Rather unobtrusively, it performs a dual manoeuvre: it references the play directly (the image shows that blaming your boots, and blaming your feet, are the same thing) and links *Godot* (which by

this time had been securely lodged in the cultural pantheon as a classic text) to the traditions of twentieth-century avant-garde art. However, the link is to Magritte, rather than to other surrealist images (Yves Tanguy's bleached and skeletal landscapes, for example); the image is therefore quickly assimilable (it references the play directly) and culturally familiar—by the 1980s, Magritte's paintings were already readily available, in coffee table editions, posters, and the like. The first image locates the play firmly in what could be termed the cosy avant-garde.

The juxtaposition of the play and the image tells us a great deal about the positioning of this particular Beckett text in the history of British post-war theatre. The original production of *Godot* was one of three events that, in the mid-1950s, had seemed to herald the final incorporation of the British stage into the modern era (the other two were the Berliner Ensemble's visit to London in 1956, and the premiere of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court in the same year). Beckett's play was more than a contemporary classic (a status that was, by the mid-1980s, secure in most Western theatre cultures). Its importance was more specific; it was the play that had launched Peter Hall's theatrical career and, during the late 1970s and 1980s, Hall's stature was at its peak (he was the artistic director of the National Theatre until 1988). However, it also signals a theatre culture that was in transition. From the late 1960s through to the end of the 1970s, both Labour and Conservative governments had increased state funding for the arts in general; in the theatre, funding increases had supported the growth of a touring network for the theatre companies which emerged from the counterculture in the late 1960s. By the time that the Oxford Playhouse staged *Godot*, the funding situation had changed. Although the amount of money spent by central government on the arts did rise, it was redirected into capital projects; theatre companies, whether building-based or touring, had to secure income from a variety of sources, whether central government (through the Arts Council), local government, business sponsorship or box office:

The impact of these funding battles on the repertoires of regional theatres was complex. Brown and Brannen's research for the Cork Report in 1986 found a diverse picture of large and small theatre provision outside London, where the repertoires of regional theatres that produced work (rather than simply receiving it), comprised 45 per cent post-war drama, with Shakespeare, Alan Ayckbourn and new writing occupying around 6 per cent of the repertoire apiece.

MILLING 2012, 47

Milling notes that some regional theatres (like Hull Truck or the Liverpool Everyman) were instrumental in fostering a sense of local cultural identity. However, this would have been unlikely for a theatre like the Playhouse. During the 1980s, the London theatre regained something of the commercial dominance it had last enjoyed in the 1950s. Although, as a regional theatre, the Playhouse would receive money on the understanding that it would serve the geographical area in which it worked, Oxford was too well-connected, physically and culturally, to the capital to establish a distinctive, regional theatre culture of its own.

The programme for *Godot* illustrates the position in which the Playhouse found itself in the mid-1980s. On the double-page spread that announces future productions, we have a mixture of the reasonably contemporary (Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*) and the solidly literary (aside from the Stoppard and the *Godot* production, the Playhouse company staged an adaption of Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*). Other productions, understandably, demonstrate a close link between the theatre and the university; the opera club were to perform *The Magic Flute*, OUDS (the Oxford University Drama Society) inaugurated its 'second century of production' with J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*; and the Oxford College Players and Hertford College Dramatic Society tackled Peter Shaffer's *Royal Hunt of the Sun*. Two touring productions were also booked in: a children's company, Whirligig Theatre, with an adaptation of Prince Charles' fairytale, *The Old Man of Lochnagar* (misspelt Lochnager in the programme), and the New Vic company (one of the earliest of the new breed of regional theatres, based initially in Scarborough, and in the process of moving into its own, purpose built theatre in Newcastle-Under-Lyme) brought an adaptation of *The Last Mohican*. The Cork Report's breakdown of theatre provision in the regions (a rather patronising term used habitually by the Arts Council, amongst others) chimes with the evidence of the programme; not much in the way of new writing, and a preponderance of known quantities, guaranteed to draw an audience.

Against a repertoire like this, *Godot* becomes an outlier: not only a more radical, experimental text, but a classic—the play that stands behind Stoppard, and the play that is part of the European experimental tradition Shaffer adopts in *Royal Hunt of the Sun*. The supporting material (short blurbs on Beckett, his theatrical work, and the play itself) link Beckett to Oscar Wilde, Descartes, Joyce, and the European avant-garde; theatrically, they tie his work to Yeats, Synge, O'Casey, Jarry, Artaud and Vitrac—the programme cites one of the founding principles of Artaud's and Vitrac's *Théâtre Alfred-Jarry* (a theatre where the audience "would no longer come merely to see but to participate"; Programme

Notes, *Waiting for Godot*, Oxford Playhouse). The blurb that contextualises the play for its Oxford audience is taken from Eoin O'Brien's *The Beckett Country*, newly published by Faber and Faber and Black Cat Press in the year of the production—the excerpt chosen carefully locates the play nowhere and somewhere:

WAITING FOR GODOT is a timeless play. No detail dates the drama or its message for any age. It will adapt to the theatre of the future as readily as it has done to the twentieth century stage. As it is timeless, so too it is placeless, demanding little more for its setting than a strange tree, a country road and desolation. Beckett removed most, but not quite all, detail that might permit identification of place in **GODOT** [...] Perhaps the one should desist from even suggesting an influence in Beckett's setting of **GODOT**. Might it be better to refrain from touching something so precious for fear of damaging it? And yet ...! Walking the summits of the Dublin mountains, in certain weathers the mood of **GODOT** is so palpable, that though the urge emphatically to locate the drama there might be resisted, a director in search of inspiration for the ideal setting for **GODOT** could not find better than the lonely summit of Glencree, with its occasional threatened tree.

Programme Notes, *Waiting for Godot*, Oxford Playhouse

This is all of a piece with the general tone and tenor of the programme; the play is daringly radical, European, and high-cultural—but it is linked to names, images and locations which are comfortingly familiar (or at least, which can be located in a recognizably familiar setting). The Oxford Playhouse, as a producing and touring venue, had to be particularly careful at this point in British theatre history: as noted above, the nature of arts funding was changing, with theatres like the Playhouse under pressure to maximise their box office receipts. Over and above this, the Playhouse was funded not only to produce work in house, but to tour, and a flyer for the same production tells us that the show would be mounted in Bury St Edmunds, Harlow and Poole. Given this, the aesthetic and textual information contained in the programme had to do two things: it had to do justice to the perceived cultural value of the play, but it also had to reframe that value in a way that would not alienate a potential audience. If state funding had been more secure, perhaps the play could have been marketed with a more challenging image and accompanying text that stressed innovation and intellectual complexity. For a theatre like the Playhouse, in the funding atmosphere of the mid 1980s, the accompanying stuff had to indicate comfortable innovation, an assimilable avant-garde, and a play

which is reassuringly timeless (as is all high art), and reassuringly located (in an accessible holiday location—where the natives speak English).

Moving on fourteen years, to 2000: the programme for Theatre Cryptic's *Beckett Time* is, aesthetically and textually, the product of a different time and a different location. It glosses a festival devoted to Beckett's work, and hosted by the Scottish multi-media, multi-disciplinary performance company in a number of venues in Glasgow. Most of the activities took place in the Tron theatre just off the High Street (a significant venue in itself: the Tron was Glasgow's repost to the Traverse in Edinburgh—a sign that Glasgow was as capable as the capital, in supporting new, innovative performances). The programme's front cover is a charcoal portrait of Beckett himself; the picture was by the Japanese artist Kumi Yamashita, whose work was exhibited in the festival. The cover is more obviously an advert than that of the Oxford Playhouse programme (which is fitting—it badges not one, but a number of events). It does, though, draw our attention to the fact that the iconography surrounding Beckett had changed: his lined, elderly face has by this time become a brand in its own right (Apple's much reviled 'Think Different' campaign had run, with much publicity, the year before).

Behind Beckett's face, the *Beckett Time* programme is interestingly poised, halfway between an introduction to the events and a critical investigation of Beckett's work. In the preface, Andrew O'Hagan (whose novel *Our Fathers* had just been shortlisted for the Booker prize and the Whitbread Prize in 1999) made sure that the events in the festival were securely linked to Glasgow:

Beckett's atmosphere has had something to do with replenishing the cultural and political reality of life in modern Scotland, and people need more of him, more of his humanity, more of his lessness, and more of his acute attentiveness to the sounds and rhythms of daily life. Beckett's humour, too, I like to think, is a lovely stirring of something essential in Glasgow's character. The world of his jokes, his vacant laughter, is a home for the homeless, a place without maps or government, but a place where we find ourselves alive and absurd and waiting for God.

Programme notes, *Beckett Time*

The tone of O'Hagan's preface is striking, and very closely tied to the atmosphere of the time. It is fair to say that the country had experienced a cultural renaissance during the 1980s. This upsurge in artistic activity was the rather surprising outcome of a moment of political failure; in 1979, the Scots had narrowly voted against the devolution of political power from the Westminster parliament to Edinburgh. At the beginning of the 1980s, however, the political

energy that had built up around the campaign for devolution didn't dissipate, as had been predicted; unexpectedly, during the decade, Scottish culture grew to fill the political vacuum left by the failed devolution campaign. In literature, the 1980s saw the publication of major novels by Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, Janice Galloway and Iain Banks; in art, Peter Howson, Stephen Conroy, Ken Currie and Steven Campbell led a revival in figurative painting; in theatre, companies such as Gerry Mulgrew's *Communicado* joined established groups like 7:84, Wildcat and Borderline, and established theatres like the Traverse, the Royal Lyceum in Edinburgh, and the Citizens' Theatre in Glasgow. This cultural rebirth coincided (and was in part fuelled by) political developments in the rest of the UK. From 1979 onwards, voting patterns in Scotland began to diverge from those in the rest of the country. Great Britain was governed by majority Conservative governments from 1979 to 1997; the share of the Conservatives' vote in Scotland shrank from 31.4% in 1979 to 17.5% in 1997. Over the same period, the number of Conservative MPs in Scotland shrank from 22 out of 72, to none. When the incoming Labour government offered Scotland another vote on devolution in 1997, the idea that the Scots were culturally and politically distinct from the rest of the country had become firmly embedded in the country's cultural life. This time, the vote was passed, with just under 75% voting in favour. In 1999, a year before the festival, a Scottish parliament sat in Edinburgh for the first time since 1707.

It is not that Theatre Cryptic's *Beckett Time* can be read as a simple illustration of the Scottish nation's political and cultural health. It would be more correct to say that political organisations in Scotland had, by the turn of the 21st Century, learned that supporting cultural events allowed them both to assert and to reflect a more general sense of social distinctiveness. Glasgow had been European City of Culture in 1990; and it had been engaged in a vigorous rebranding campaign (under the slogan 'Glasgow's Miles Better') since 1983. Crucially, the city council helped fund a new arts festival—Mayfest—whose remit was to blend community art with internationally lauded artists and groups. The city had also opened new multipurpose performance spaces; the Arches, in the disused sheds beneath the city's Central Station, and the Tramway, a converted engine maintenance shed south of the River Clyde. The council's, and the city's, commitment to culture could not compensate for the rapid decline of Glasgow's industrial base in the 1970s and 80s, but it did mean that, in the last decades of the twentieth century, cultural activity was a valuable means through which the continued health of the city could be demonstrated, both to the rest of Scotland and to the wider world. The *Beckett Time* programme, with its restrained, black and white, text-heavy, minimalist aesthetic, is peculiarly of its time. It reflects what was, and arguably what still is,

Scotland's and Glasgow's preferred self-image: a cool, sophisticated document of a cool, sophisticated and quintessentially Beckettian city, nested in a country newly invigorated by a resurgence of locally controlled democracy.

The festival included an impressive array of performances, installations, and exhibitions: among the international artists, were new Scottish theatre workers like Graham Eatough, the co-founder of Suspect Culture (who were, at that time, one of the most fêted new theatre companies in Scotland). In his contribution to the programme, Eatough was, as might be expected, keen to establish the clear links between Suspect Culture and Beckett's theatre:

Beckett's minimalist approach to stage imagery as well as his incisive emotional economy have been inspirational to me throughout my career and particularly influential in my work with Suspect Culture. Responding to Beckett's work specifically for this project has only served to reinforce the central role Beckett inevitably occupies in a modern approach to the stage.

Programme notes, *Beckett Time*

This re-states the central ethos of the Festival, in that the artistic director of a new, important Scottish theatre company—a director who is himself not Scottish (so the quote evades any potential charges of parochialism)—asserts the central importance of one of the most significant artists of the 20th Century to his work. *Beckett Time*, in allowing Eatough the space to reflect on the relation between Beckett's work and his own, allows the Festival programme to draw an unbroken line from the latest explorations of Scottish experimental theatre, all the way to the heart of the European avant-garde.

The programme does not simply demonstrate the cultural vigour of a newly-devolved Scotland, it also demonstrates a change in Beckett's own status. Eleven years after his death, Beckett's place in the theatrical canon was secure, and the critical industry that had grown up around his work was growing rapidly. The Oxford programme included a quote from a recently published work of Beckett criticism; the Glasgow programme includes a mini academic conference, co-ordinated by Claude Schumacher from the University of Glasgow, and including such luminaries as John Calder and James Knowlson. And, unsurprisingly, the festival also boasted an impressive list of sponsors, all with their logos prominently displayed in the programme—the Scottish Arts Council, Glasgow Council, the National Lottery, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Alliance Française, The British Council, and (providing support in kind) British Telecom, Easyjet, Borders, Aer Lingus, Scotrail, P&O Ferries, the Goethe Institut, Hilton Hotels, et al. Many of the companies who provided help in kind adver-

tised in the programme; their visibility represents both the fact that the idea of sponsorship is now a key and almost unnoticed part of the arts funding landscape, and the fact that this festival, in this location at this particular time, is globally ambitious, just like the culture in which it takes place. Scotland, this festival says, is confident enough to co-opt the big names: and, culturally, Beckett's name, and Beckett's face, is an advert for the festival, for the venues, for the city, and for the country. *Beckett Time* is, by implication, also Glasgow's time, and Scotland's time.

It is, of course, entirely by accident that these two programmes, and the others collected in the Beckett archive, have survived; and it is also possible (although, given the care with which the archive is collated and preserved, unlikely) that they will at some point become what all unarchived material becomes junk, to be disposed of because their use-value has altogether disappeared. The unarchived ephemera generated by performance is particularly prone to the process through which meaningful material declines to the status of junk; it has a momentary value, tied to a particular experience of a particular event, but unless the audience member attaches significance to the programme or the ticket stub, or the theatre is able to collate its own archive, it will be lost—and its loss will neither be mourned nor marked. In the last section of *Stuff Theory*, Boscagli analyses Agnes Varda's film, *The Gleaners and I*, which aims to redeem the idea of junk, to establish it as:

neither the dead matter of the commodity fetish nor plasticity for plasticity's sake. We should see instead what Varda shows with the images that conclude her film, the images with which she asks us to look at reality again [...] This is the capability to look at objects as stuff [...] pointing at the process of materiality, at materiality as historical and experiential process, at how things get made, happen, and encounter each other and us [...].

2014, 265

More than any other part of the theatre process, programmes, flyers, tickets, and their more recent digital counterparts (the forms we use for online booking, as well as websites, e-mail notifications, podcasts, and trailers) bear witness to what Boscagli would describe as "materiality as historical and experiential process." Both programmes support events which are irrecoverable: the Oxford Playhouse production is one of many productions of *Godot* in the UK since 1955, and *Beckett Time* is one of a number of programmed seasons and festivals, from the Gate Theatre's first Beckett season in 1991 to the annual Enniskillen Festival—and its contributors have long since moved on. The pro-

grammes (and the other bits of ancillary stuff) in the archives give us names to interview, and clues to the nature of each performance; but the centre of a textual archive—the published work—is, and will always be, absent. Even the designs employed in the programmes, shorn of their immediate connection with the lived experience of performance, seem dated, tying the document to the irrecoverable past.

However, this does not mean that these ephemera hold no interest, or that their place in the Beckett archive is less secure than (for example) the *Murphy* notebooks. These programmes, and the other theatrical stuff the archive holds, are key mediating texts in a complex interaction between Beckett's work, a particular performance event, and the wider theatrical, social, cultural and political environment within which the performance text is created. The stuff of performance, those materials surrounding the event, which mediate between the aesthetic language of the event and the context, and which share an aesthetic language with the event, draw our attention, not to an absent centre, but ineluctably to the margins: to the intersection between the material of the performance and the world.

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