

THE YEAR OF BECKETT, SPRING SEASON

by *Christine Shives*

Changes are afoot among Atlanta artists and audiences during this year, whether they realize it or not. This is *The Year of Beckett*, the 100th anniversary year of the birth of Irish-born playwright Samuel Beckett, which is being celebrated in cities across the globe. Naturally, Atlanta is a part of this celebration. With the completion of the editing of *The Letters of Samuel Beckett* by Lois Overbeck and Martha Fehsenfeld at Emory University and a history that boasts productions of the entire Beckett canon on Atlanta stages over the past 50 years, how could this city let a year like this pass without whooping it up and doing as much Beckett as possible? As anyone who loves Beckett knows, this is going to mean more than a unity of performances among many of Atlanta's top theaters. The rigors and challenges to the actors and technicians, the hope and despair presented to the audiences, are going to have some far-reaching and long-lasting effects on the way involved participants perform, see and perceive theater (and, yes, life, too) from now on. This festival has, so far, been enough of an impetus to draw artists from around the world, seduce artists out of hiding and evoke reactions out of ordinarily polite and voyeuristic audiences. Changes are afoot.

PushPush Theater's program insert reminds us that the evening of shorts we are about to see is a special stage set for performers who have never performed Beckett (if you *have* performed Beckett before perhaps you read this and a smirk now winks at your cheek). It's a fitting kickoff to 2006's season of Beckett plays being performed at various theaters, where later we'll see some more seasoned hands grapple with the material for us.

Vincenzo Tortorici may be a novice Beckettian, but he is no amateur clown. He both practices the form and teaches it, and though his performance of *Act Without Words I* may provide chuckles to the audience, it equally provides the performer and technical crew a page full of physical challenges set to a precision timing more easily achieved in cartoons than in live theater. I had never seen the piece performed live and was surprised that in execution, Tortorici and the folks behind the curtains at PushPush made it look simple.

The *Come and Go* trio treated us to a double feature of the piece, performing it first in German and then, after an intermission, again in English. The emotion of *Come and Go* played better in the German, connecting the audience with the visual energy of the play, and the unique cadence of the German language played as a mysterious melody set to Chip Epstein's original score and Beckett's pauses. It was not until watching it again in English that the illusion began to break down, and we could feel that the pauses hung a little too long and, looking again with scrutiny, tiny extraneous movements distracted from the piece.

Regardless of whom you ask, however, the most noteworthy performance of the evening was Park Krausen's *Not I*. As much a part of the performance as the relentless pacing of the Mouth's precision-spewed ranting was the outbursts of laughter, gasps and other various little noises from the audience. Krausen's control of voice and movement served the material well, as we looked on in awe at the chaotic ramblings of a solitary orifice driv-

en to repeat a mad tale, giving us the full feeling of “her” suffering, regardless of whether or not we could make out exactly from what “she” was suffering.

In the spirit of experimentation and new production for which PushPush has become known, the evening was topped off with a brief talkback and puppet performances of *Ohio Impromptu* (performed by Raymond Carr and Raymond Tilton with hand and rod puppets) and *Naucht and Traume* (performed by Michael Haverty with marionettes). PushPush has, for months and in preparation for *The Year of Beckett*, been hosting weekly “Beckett Hour” workshops and talks, and this evening’s talkback and puppet shows were presented as part of that series. For puppets, the demands for specified movement and intentional stillness proved an even greater challenge than the difficulties live actors experience with the pieces. The most notable achievement of the two Raymonds *Ohio Impromptu* was the potential for the Auditor and the Listener to be exact copies of one another, a near impossibility with live actors. *Naucht and Traume*, originally written for television, played well with marionettes although, once again, clarity of action sometimes obscured the story, a problem easily solved, no doubt, with more rehearsal time and a full production (though the Beckett estate would prohibit this).

Theatre Gael’s *Waiting for Godot*, the next professional production on the season, appealed to the broadest range of Atlanta’s Beckett audience. The structure of the writing and the two bums waiting on a desolate country road provide a real world context—however vague it may be, it is familiar *enough*. In the case of *Godot*, precision of the tongue and a keen sense of timing are the keys to keeping the audience on board a ride that will go absolutely nowhere. The exchanges between Gogo and Didi run a rhythm inspired by the stichomythia of the vaudeville stages, which Theatre Gael chose to highlight with their preshow music (unfortunately this music mysteriously disappeared at intermission in favor of a more sinister, ambient composition), and John Stephens and Nick Rhoton played in this style of comedy with comfort and ease, giving them space to explore the tragedies and frustrations of the characters as well. It is the same sort of antagonistic camaraderie that Laurel and Hardy made famous in American film in the 1930s.

Godot played on the 14th Street Playhouse’s Stage 3, a tiny black box with no wing space. On entering the space, the immediate question would have to have been, “How are the Pozzo and Lucky scenes going to play without clear stage left and stage right wings?” However, as it turns out, the entire third space is roughly the size of a “normal” stage and so, utilizing the audience entranceway and a door that leads off stage left, the Pozzo and Lucky rope scenes could be performed as written and the audience, rather than watching from the distance beyond the orchestra pit, found themselves caught up in the middle of the chaos and the spectacle created by the two wandering buffoons, experiencing each moment right along with the duo.

Throughout the performance this intimacy of space generally worked well for the Theatre Gael players. In the booming age of television and film where audiences are trained by camera angles and close ups, it can be a challenge for an audience to garner meaning and follow the story of a stage play comprised mostly of lengthy talking and lengthier silences. Proximity to the actors in this case allowed us to hear every word and catch every minute reaction, whether a half-whispered statement of exasperation or an arch of the eyebrows. The only danger for these stage, not film, performers being the temptation to match their characters’ passions with their own volume. This sometimes, in the second act particu-

larly, made the play seem too big, or at least too loud, for the room.

Though occasionally over-projecting himself volumewise, Winslow Thomas plays Pozzo well, giving off a used-car-salesman vibe with his slick (so he thinks) words and grand (so he thinks) manner that often (to his chagrin) collapses into messy floundering for command of attention, although I have seen past productions with a more self-confident Pozzo who pays no mind to his fumbles. Thomas did not seem as up to the task of the vaudeville challenge as Stephens, his character counterpart.

Inevitably, in any production of a Beckettian script, certain choices will draw criticism on dramaturgical grounds, and in the case of Theatre Gael's *Waiting for Godot* the most contentious choices involve the character Lucky, played by Matthew Meyers. Although Meyer's execution of the role was well played (the monologue did draw applause from the audience), two very distinctive choices detracted from the actor's performance. According to what Beckett has written, Lucky is silent throughout the play, except for his massive monologue, which he delivers on command in act one. Theatre Gael's Lucky; however, underscored the entire act with a low, guttural wheezing or growling that was often disturbing and utterly distracting from the action on stage. Given Beckett's renowned specificity in writing his characters and his fondness for including silent figures on his stages, had he intended Lucky to be anything other than totally silent, it would have been indicated. The second questionable departure from the text would have to be Lucky's hair. The text calls for Lucky to remove his hat and "his long white hair falls about his face." However, in this production we were met with the exact opposite: a grizzled buzz cut. The images of a man with hair uncut for ages and a man just stepped out of the barber's chair seem in no way reconcilable to one another, and so despite Meyers' performance, director Chad Yarborough's Lucky can in no way be seen as the "Lucky" that Samuel Beckett wrote.

After sitting through my first *Godot* in Shanghai with a mirthless audience (try watching this played subtitled—no blame), it was refreshing and thoroughly enjoyable to experience the comedic finesse of Stephens and Rhoton. It was wonderful to laugh with fellow theater-goers at the hilarity of Beckettian hijinks. The trap that this troupe falls into though is the temptation to play the comedy right through the silences and pauses (some of the PushPush shorts had a similar struggle with timing of the silences and pauses). Theatre Gael's Gogo and Didi rolled through the material with vaudevillian aplomb, forgetting that the title of the piece is *Waiting for Godot*. In the thrill of the laughter and encouragement from the audience, they forget that the situation should, at times, be uncomfortable, be boring, be the full tragic range of *waiting* for something a little too long, a little longer than too long. Ultimately, a perfect production of this play will capture the very essence of *waiting*, which is not the same as vamping.

The season then turned back to PushPush Theater in Decatur; this time for a production of *Endgame*, directed by Marek Kedzierski, with PushPush Artistic Director Tim Habberger as Hamm, Justin Wellborn as Clov, John McPherson as Nag and Ayesha Ngaujah and DeDe Bloodworth alternating in the role of Nel (given the age of the male actors in this production, both of these actresses looked much too young for the role, unfortunately). To be sure, this production was the 'must see' of the winter/spring leg of the *Year of Beckett* in Atlanta. This group didn't seem to struggle with the pauses and silences, didn't seem to have the technique difficulties that detracted from some of the seasons earlier

productions, allowing the audience to hone in on the characters, their personal struggles and their relationships.

Despite the fact that *Endgame* is a play in which only one character, Clov, is able to move unassisted through the space, the strongest characteristic of Kedzierski's production would have to be movement. Despite his physical disability, Hamm moves and shakes the world around him through the power of his voice, and Habeger's is a fine voice to perform the rigorous vocal acrobatics of this role, the demands of which range from booming command to lullaby soliloquy to mournful self-epitaph. Habeger imbues all of these moments with a rich and varied vocal quality that plays in perfect pitch with his moment-to-moment manipulation of his audience (both those onstage and in the house)

Running (literally, running) counter to Habeger's vocal vigor is Justin Welborn's Clov. Endowed by Kedzierski with a 6-foot straight ladder rather than a smaller step ladder, Welborn's Clov takes on an edge of reckless vigor one would expect of any angst-ridden young man living in a repressive home environment. I was definitely gripping the edge of my seat every time he wearily or angrily or distractedly threw the six foot ladder against the wall, the ladder rocking and rattling (and sometimes jumping off of the floor completely) as Welborn hoisted himself to the windows with a gymnastic strength. This physical energy and vitality made its way into other (physically safer) interactions with Hamm, making their father-son rivalry a strong battle between equally matched opponents.

Like Lucky's monologue in *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett has written a show stopper monologue for an otherwise disregarded character. In this case it is Nag, the whining buffoon father-of-Hamm who, in a moment of defeat and desperation, in the face of this heartless son, curses Hamm. This is one of those iconic moments in theater. McPherson's Nag, a bald and naked baby-of-an-old-man writhes in rage and anguish, spewing curses at his son. The image is evocative and horrifying: the old man, past the point of use and power, naked as a baby, helpless as a baby, crying from the gaping hole of a trashcan. The physical picture perfectly conveys the psychological state of old age. It is no wonder he damns the son who would mock him in his impotence. It tells precisely another tale of countless fathers and sons, this time not rivalry but the contempt that develops with decrepitude and weakness. I am reminded of another post-apocalyptic tale where a father, long past his greatest days as a man, curses the son who looks on him in drunkenness and vulnerability, and in the fervor of McPherson's beautiful and disturbing delivery of this monologue, I could easily forget whether it is Nag or Noah or Any Father, voicing old age's disregarded woe.

In addition to these larger productions, the first half of *The Year of Beckett* has also seen some smaller works throughout the city and the state. Down by the coast in Brunswick, Georgia the Golden Isles Arts and Humanities Association (GIAHA) produced Beckett's *Happy Days* with Tim Habeger trading in his fez for a top hat (two of many hats Habeger is wearing for this festival) and starring Heather Heath as Winnie. This production did manage to make it to Atlanta, but only for one weekend at PushPush. Additionally, many of Atlanta's colleges and universities (as well as other Georgia educational institution) have taken this opportunity to study Beckett in the classroom with much of this study culminating in student productions on campuses across the region. I had a chance to see Kennesaw State's student productions and found it to be a great evening of theater (which I heard played consistently to sold out houses). Of particular note was

the student production of *Play*, a challenging piece for performers and technicians alike, delivered with professional finesse by these Beckettian novices.

The fall will bring even more productions and more theaters under the Year of Beckett umbrella, with some of Atlanta's most skilled and exciting performers and theaters getting involved. 7Stages production, *Beckett Memories*, includes performances by Del Hamilton, as Krapp in *Krapp's Last Tape*, and Marty Fehsenfeld (yes, the very woman commissioned to edit the letters) in *Rockaby* and will be directed by Walter Asmus, making this a show that must not be missed. Dad Garage, Out of Hand Theatre and Theatre du Reve will also get into the mix, with each of these highly specialized theaters bringing a particular expertise and ensuring that the fall portion of The Year of Beckett delivers all of the excitement established in the first half and promises a slightly different taste of Beckett as this year's Atlanta audiences develop their palate for both the savory and repugnant flavors of the human condition.

PETER LAYTON

CUT OPEN CUT

This experience has not been like passes to the circus.
Unless you count the unlucky ones who get to witness
the trapeze artist fall to her death,
the tamer mauled beyond recognition.

You imagined a time of laughs,
Seeing yourself goofy in odd mirrors,
The looks in the mirrors left here
cannot be changed.