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Theatre and Installation: Perspectives on Beckett

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Writing on the idea of the 'total' installation, conceptual artist Ilya Kabakov draws out the relations of authority between the artwork and the viewer, emphasising that the audience is both agent and subject when engaging with an art installation.¹ Kabakov considers that installation also operates as theatre since the complex structure of the installation is focused entirely on the experience of the viewer just as the elements of theatre conjoin to provide an environment directed exclusively at the audience. Drawing parallels between installation art, literature, and theatre, Kabakov's thoughts on total installation provide a context through which to explore the interconnections between installation art and theatre performance. This article will explore the intersections between drama, live performance and the visual arts with specific reference to the aesthetics of installation art and the importance of site in selected productions and stage adaptations of Samuel Beckett's drama for theatre and radio by contemporary Irish companies, Pan Pan Theatre and Company SJ. These companies have particularly apposite strategies of intermediality and site-specificity through which to stage Beckett's obscured, failed, and transient bodies in distinct and innovative ways. Each devise for Beckett's drama a mode of performance that situates the viewer at the centre of the work in ways that share key elements with installation art. Performances of Beckett's dramatic work provide exemplars of the intersection between art and theatre, particularly as they develop an immersive experience for the audience, and respond

¹ Ilya Kabakov, *On the 'Total' Installation* (Berlin: Cantz Verlag, 1995), p. 3.

² All of these texts were written, or begun, during the 1950s.

to the site of their installation. Kabakov's emphasis on lines of authority is pertinent to Beckett given the rigorous specificity with which his plays are written and his focused attention on the spatial, visual, and aural environment within which the words and gestures of performance take place. This article examines Pan Pan's production of *All That Fall* and *Embers* in counterpoint with Company SJ's production of *Act Without Words II* and *Rough for Theatre I*² to examine the vital intersection between theatre and installation art.

In her study *Installation Art: A Critical History*, Clare Bishop defines installation art as art that provides a site that encompasses the viewer, generating an immersive space in and from which the viewer experiences the work of art.³ Bishop considers the reorientation of the position of the viewer to be critical to the development of installation art since it 'addresses the viewer directly as a literal presence in the space', asserting that the 'insistence on the literal presence of the viewer is arguably the key characteristic of installation art'.⁴ Bishop's analysis of installation art draws tacitly on an embedded and embodied experience of spectatorship that is integral to the experience of theatre. In his analysis of *Installation Art and the Practices of Archivalism* David Houston Jones draws on Bishop's definition to consider installation art as one that presupposes an 'embodied viewer', one whose engagement with the work is predicated on being immersed in the environment of the work.⁵ Installation art is also, as Erika Suderburg notes, an art form that engages directly with institutional and public spaces in order to transform them in ways that both inform the objects within the installation, and their relation with the viewer.⁶ This can be done in two ways: either by creating an environment that is integral to the the artwork within which the viewer is situated, one which is recreated each time the work is installed; or by responding to the environment or site of the work, thereby reconfiguring the work each time it takes place.

² All of these texts were written, or begun, during the 1950s.

³ Bishop notes that installation art is 'often described as "theatrical", "immersive" or "experiential"'. Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London: Tate, 2005), p. 6.

⁴ Bishop, *Installation Art*, p. 10.

⁵ David Houston Jones, *Installation Art and the Practices of Archivalism* (London: Palgrave, 2016), p.20.

⁶ See Erika Suderburg, 'Introduction: On Installation and Site Specificity' in *Space, Site, Intervention: Situating Installation Art*, ed. by Erika Suderburg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 1-22 (p. 4).

Pan Pan Theatre and Company SJ create work that engages with each approach. Pan Pan Theatre creates multi-sensory immersive environments that are integral to the performance and can be recreated in different locations.⁷ In contrast, Company SJ responds directly to the urban space in which the work is performed, each iteration of a production establishing what Douglas Crimp calls new ‘coordinates of perception’ between ‘spectator, artwork, and the place inhabited by both’.⁸ Beckett’s late theatre as conceived by Pan Pan and Company SJ reconfigures the identity of the spectator, and the notion of site, shifting both closer to the ‘disputed ground of embodiment’ that, for Jones, ‘gives rise to the very dilemmas which have led to the recent “re-embodiment” of Beckett’s work as installation’.⁹

Pan Pan Theatre: *All That Fall* and *Embers*

Reviewing Pan Pan Theatre’s productions of *All That Fall* and *Embers*, Judith Wilkinson highlights how theatre reviewers Lyn Gardner of the *Guardian* and Neil Cooper of the *Herald Scotland* identified *All That Fall* as a kind of installation.¹⁰ She situates that production at the interstices between theatre and installation art, underlining Julie H. Reiss’s view that there ‘is always a reciprocal relationship of some kind between the viewer and the work, the work and the space, the space and the viewer’, that the spectator is ‘integral to the completion of the work’.¹¹ This is particularly evident in Pan Pan’s staging of Beckett’s radio play *All That Fall* (1956).¹² Set in a closed, interior space, the production brings the audience centre stage by seating it on spare wooden rocking chairs, arranged at angles to each other within the auditorium. Each chair has a cushion, marked by the motif of a skull (an echo, perhaps, of Lucky’s maddened exposition of

⁷ Lisa Moran and Sophie Byrne underline how installation art can be ‘reconstructed or reassembled in other similar sites or spaces’, *What is Installation Art?* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2010), p. 5.

⁸ Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993), p. 154.

⁹ Jones, *Installation Art*, p. 20.

¹⁰ Judith Wilkinson, ‘Theatre in an Expanded Field? *All That Fall* and *Embers* Reimagined by Pan Pan’, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 23.1 (April 2014), 128-36 (p. 128).

¹¹ Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Centre: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), p. xiii.

¹² Pan Pan’s *All That Fall* opened at the Project Arts Centre in August 2011. This analysis deals with the 2012 production at the first of Sean Doran’s Happy Days International Beckett Festival in Enniskillen.

‘the skull, the skull in Connemara’ from *Waiting for Godot*).¹³ On the floor is a whimsical children’s play mat, with motifs of transport, that reinforce the trope of arrival and departure. Each member of the audience is now part of a community of listeners, illuminated at times by an incandescence of hovering, trembling lights overhead, and the brute implacability of an adjacent bank of wall-to-ceiling spotlights. Cocooned by the occasionally black dark of the theatre space the audience is drawn in to the experience of listening as an interior event, one in which the intimacy of the voices and the visceral quality of the light generates a profound affect that resonates with the deeply unsettling core of Beckett’s radio play.¹⁴ Sound and light in vital combination make Pan Pan’s *All That Fall* sublime in the sense that Edmund Burke explores in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757).¹⁵ Ideas of pain, danger and terror underpin a narrative that busies itself with the mundane and the everyday: the weight of each step taken, the cast of a colloquial conversation, the trials of ascent and descent: the rhythms of the play reaffirmed by the rocking of the spectator in the rocking chair, a mute echo of *Rockaby* with its evocation of death.

Gavin Quinn who, with co-director Aedin Cosgrove, founded Pan Pan Theatre in 1991 with the specific remit to develop innovative theatre,¹⁶ conceived of Pan Pan’s production of *All That Fall* as a ‘social sculpture’ based on an idea of listening as a communal event experienced in the early years of radio, ‘one family around a radio’.¹⁷ Yet the interior experience was also vital. Quinn’s first impulse was to create an environment in which the act of listening was central: ‘to concentrate the audience member, to make a space—an installation—a kind of listening chamber

¹³ Samuel Beckett, *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 43. The contemporary audience will also associate the skull with Daniel Hirst’s 2007 sculpture *For the love of God* (a platinum cast of an eighteenth-century skull encrusted with diamonds) and Alexander McQueen’s signature motif.

¹⁴ Though situated in a community of listeners, my experience of *All That Fall* was a singular one: the affective intensity of the voices in concert with the modulating light generating an intimate experience.

¹⁵ ‘Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.’ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), Part I, section VII ‘Of the Sublime.’

¹⁶ Pan Pan Theatre aim to ‘provide innovation in the development of theatre art’ <www.panpantheatre.com> [accessed 16 September 2016].

¹⁷ Gavin Quinn in conversation with Derval Tubridy, ‘Honouring Intentions: The Director and Beckett’, Barbican, London, 13 June 2015.

whereby the audience would not miss every word'.¹⁸ Sound designer Jimmie Eadie made a new recording of the radio play with actors Andrew Bennett, Phelim Drew, John Kavanagh, Áine Ní Mhuirí, Robbie O'Connor, Joey O'Sullivan, David Pearse, Daniel Reardon and Judith Roddy using the intimacy produced by anechoic recording (one free from echoes and reverberations) and playing the recorded voices in mono through separate speakers, so that the voices of each of Beckett's characters seem to sound inside the head of the listener. The process was not rushed. While many radio plays are recorded in a matter of days, *Pan Pan* took two weeks for rehearsals and three weeks for the studio recording. With wry humour, the director describes the post-edit process as 'proper Beckett torture: 7a.m. until midnight listening to the 17 takes of "Christ, what a planet" over and over in your head, or coming up with the perfect way of saying "*Jesus*". This careful recording process ensures that the auditory experience is central: as Quinn explains, one 'hear[s] the texts in a very precise and clear way'.¹⁹

While Beckett's voices often come to us from the dark (*Company* begins with the phrase 'A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine'),²⁰ Aedín Cosgrove's lighting design choreographs the exchange of speakers within the momentum of the narrative in terms of an interplay between individual bulbs that dim and brighten, and the vibrant glow and pulse of close-packed spotlights. Maddy Rooney's meditation on the yellow laburnum—"There is that lovely laburnum again. Poor thing, it is losing [sic] all its tassels"—prompted Cosgrove to design the canopy of hanging lights'.²¹ Quinn describes Cosgrove's lighting for *All that Fall* as a form of painting, as 'form, line and colour'.²² In counterpoint to the delicate structure of the overhead lights, the implacable structure of the bank of spotlights, and the intensity of the light when at maximum, enables the dramatic climax as the 'up mail' approaches. Lying underfoot, often overlooked, is the child's carpet, patterned for play (a street scene for toy cars), an unsettling reminder, as Cosgrove notes,

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Nohow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho* (London: Calder, 1992), p.5.

²¹ Aedín Cosgrove in conversation with Derval Tubridy 18 February 2016.

²² Quinn, 'Honouring Intentions'.

of the child's death that is revealed at the close of the play:²³

MRS ROONEY: What was it Jerry?

JERRY: it was a little child, Ma'am.

MRS ROONEY: What do you mean, it was a little child?

JERRY: It was a little child fell out of the carriage, M'am. [*Pause.*] On to the line, Ma'am.

[*Pause.*] Under the wheels, Ma'am.²⁴

Beckett's correspondence on the genesis of *All That Fall* shows how keenly he was aware of the possibilities of working in a new medium. In the Autumn of 1956 Val Gielgud, head of Radio Drama at the BBC, was interested in producing a radio play by Beckett and asked Cecilia Reeves in the Paris office of the BBC to contact him. Beckett replied to Reeves on 4 July writing: 'I should like very much to do a radio play for the Third Programme, but I am very doubtful of my ability to work in this medium. However since our conversation I have, to my surprise, had an idea which may or may not lead to something'.²⁵ That same day Beckett wrote to Nancy Cunard about his idea: '[n]ever thought about Radio play technique but in the dead of t'other night got a gruesome idea full of cartwheels and dragging feet and puffing and panting which may or may not lead to something'.²⁶ On 6 July he elaborated further in a letter to Aidan Higgins:

Have been asked to write a Radio Play for the 3rd and am tempted, feet dragging and breath short and cart wheels and imprecations from the Brighton Road to Foxrock Station and back, insentient old mares in foal being welted by the cottagers and the devil tattered in the ditch—boyhood memories. Probably won't come to anything.²⁷

Yet it did: *All That Fall* was first broadcast by the BBC in 1957. In 1958 Beckett returned to radio, picking up the strands of an aborted piece he initially called *Ebb*. Writing to Barney Rosset on 23 November 1958 Beckett describes the haphazard composition of the radio play: 'It was written a couple of years ago, then thrown away, then recovered, but with a page missing of

²³ Cosgrove, *Ibid.*

²⁴ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 199.

²⁵ Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Vol. 2 1941-1956*, ed. by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Fehsenfeld (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 632.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 633.

which I could remember nothing and which personally I don't miss'.²⁸ By February 1959 *Embers* was on its way to the BBC, and was broadcast on 24 June of that year.²⁹

Quinn describes *Embers* as a 'far more abstract play' than *All That Fall*. Writing to Rosset, Beckett indicates how his approach to writing for radio changed from exploiting the technical possibilities of the medium [in *All That Fall*] to opening out the relationship between voice and sound in *Embers*: 'I gave an aborted radio script to McWhinnie, unbroadcastable as it stands, a kind of attempt to write for radio and not merely exploit its technical possibilities, of which I'll [send] you a copy if I can find one'.³⁰ *Embers* is a radio play dominated by the sound of the sea, sometimes loud, sometimes faint, which the central character Henry attempts to drown out by articulating his thoughts: memories of his drowned father, and his wife (Ada) and daughter (Addie), and a recurrent story of a desperate old man, Bolton, who has called his doctor Holloway, to relieve him of his suffering (perhaps permanently). Intrigued by Beckett's comment that 'perhaps *Embers* lacked a centre' — echoed by John Pilling who describes the radio play as 'the first of Beckett's dramatic works that seems to lack a real centre'³¹ — Quinn and Cosgrove commissioned a sculpture from artist Andrew Clancy that would take centre stage in their theatre production of the radio play. Clancy had worked previously with Pan Pan Theatre as set designer for *Deflowerfucked* (2001) and *Mac-Beth* 7 (2004), designer for *Oedipus Loves You* (2005-10) and designer sculptor for *One: Healing With Theatre* (2005) in which 100 actors were asked to respond to the question 'why do you think you became an actor?' as part of a project that included a performance at the Irish Museum of Modern Art in which the artists — each in an individual room and at the same time — answered that question to a single member of the audience and performed their first audition piece.³² The live performance was accompanied by the screening of a 14 hour film, and the publication of a book of portraits of the artists.

²⁸ Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Vol. 3 1957-1965*, pp. 181-82.

²⁹ Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), pp. 244-45.

³⁰ Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Vol. 3 1957-1965*, p. 181.

³¹ John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 98.

³² <<http://panpantheatre.com/shows/one-healing-with-theatre/>> [accessed 19 February 2016]

In conversation with Clancy, Quinn contrasts the feeling of lightness conveyed by large opera or theatre sets that are designed to be disposable, with the palpable weight of Clancy's sculpture. Clancy's response clarifies his distinction between a sculpture and a stage set in terms of aesthetic coherence, integrity and independence, emphasising that his sculpture for *Embers* 'is a very different thing to a prop or to a set because [while] it is an integral part of the piece, [...] it is independent as well, whereas a prop or a scenography is always just an application to a play, it can't stand independently'.³³ He asserts the importance of scale and bodily relations, the way in which we have a 'physical reaction' to a piece of sculpture. He is also acutely aware of the context of presentation, of how an object works differently when encountered in the theatre or in the gallery, and 'how people react to the sculpture in the context of it being theatrical rather than an installation, [of it being] separate from the art world'.³⁴

Almost twice the height of a human figure and formed of 3,000 slices of wood, Clancy's sculpture of a human skull provides a substantive counterpoint to the abstraction of the play, while also creating the space from which the actors, Andrew Bennett as Henry and Áine Ní Mhuirí as Ada, speak. Like Hamm in *Endgame*, the skull is situated at the centre of the performance space, surrounded by grey pebbles, an overt reference to the play's shoreline location. The motif also echoes the skulls printed on the cushions on the rocking chairs of Pan Pan's *All That Fall*, and reminds us of Lucky's speech in *Waiting for Godot*. Cosgrove's light plays across the form of *Embers*' skull, sculpting and shaping the wood in response to Beckett's text, creating an ebb and flow of colour and intensity that prompted a New York reviewer to name her 'a co-sculptor'.³⁶ Cosgrove has worked extensively with Crash Ensemble, Ireland's contemporary classical music ensemble. In her design for *Embers* Cosgrove draws on her experience of working with John Cage's and La Monte Young's scores in which the directions

³³ Andrew Clancy in conversation with Gavin Quinn, 'Embers—Pan Pan—Sculpture and Theatre', a conversation between Andrew Clancy and Gavin Quinn, recorded at Clancy's studio in Ringsend, Dublin, June 2013. <<https://vimeo.com/68445706>> [accessed 19 February 2016].

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁶ Helen Shaw, 'Review of *Embers*', *Time Out New York*, Friday 19 September 2014. <<http://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/embers>> [accessed 19 February 2016]

can be concomitantly inexplicable yet fundamental; ‘tough to engage with’ as she puts it. She cites the influence of Cage, and the challenge of developing a design response to, for example, La Monte Young’s instructions for his ‘Piano Piece for David Tudor #1’³⁷ with its minimal lighting direction: the light comes up and the light goes away.³⁸ In the design for *Embers* Cosgrove considered the light in term of music, with the rhythm and timing of light and words being rendered precisely: ‘We argued over the half-second. It’s in the half-seconds that it becomes literal or not’.³⁹

Situated between sea and shingle, *Embers* opens with the concerns of sound, and the explicit uncertainty of the senses:

That sound you hear is the sea. [*Pause. Louder.*] I say that sound you hear is the sea, we are sitting on the strand. [*Pause.*] I mention it because the sound is so strange, so unlike the sound of the sea, that if you didn’t see what it was you wouldn’t know what it was’.⁴⁰

Beckett’s plays for radio animate the uncertain space between sight and sound. While Bennett and Ní Mhuirí are housed within the central sculpture, their precise and resonant articulation of Beckett’s text emanates from over multiple connected speakers hanging throughout the space, ensuring an immersive and visceral audio experience of the play so that ‘the audience could hear it clearly and equally throughout’.⁴¹ Wilkinson explains that ‘surrounding the skull are five hundred and sixty-two miniature disc-shaped speakers [that] have been attached to a series of transparent polycarbonate strips and are extended floor to ceiling’.⁴² The hanging speakers are also an important visual element of the staging, anchoring the skull to the surrounding shingle on stage, further complicating the liminal location of *Embers* between land and sea so that, as reviewer Helen Shaw suggests; ‘The air around the head is full of strands, long chains of disc-

³⁷ ‘Bring a bale of hay and a bucket of water onto the stage for the piano to eat and drink. The performer may then feed the piano or leave it to eat by itself. If the former, the piece is over after the piano has been fed. If the latter, it is over after the piano eats or decides not to.’ <<http://soundart.zkm.de/en/piano-piece-for-david-tudor-1-1960-19891990-la-monte-young/>> [accessed 19 February 2016].

³⁸ Cosgrove Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 253.

⁴¹ Quinn, ‘Honouring Intentions’.

⁴² Wilkinson, ‘Theatre in an Expanded Field’, p. 130.

speakers and wires that seem like a frightening, robotic kelp'.⁴³ They are, for Quinn, 'handmade and hanging, like a piece of sound art'.⁴⁴

Beginning on the shore, the alliterative stage directions draw the listener to the sea: 'Slither of shingle as he sits. Sea, still faint'.⁴⁵ The fronds of Eadie's speakers and the lucid undulations of Cosgrove's lights bring us down to a marine underworld from which Beckett's words chart a hydrography of intensity, obsession and distress. The volume of Eadie's sound, at times 'far above any normal acceptable theatrical levels', has a 'physical intensity' that marks key moments of the text.⁴⁶ The protagonist Henry's invocation of the drip – at first considered, then vehement:

Close your eyes and listen to it, what would you think it was? [*Pause. Vehement*] A drip! A drip! [*Sound of drip, rapidly amplified, suddenly cut off.*] Again! [*Drip again. Amplification begins*] No! [*Drip cut off. Pause.*]⁴⁷

becomes what Eadie describes as a 'hard and visceral' sound that rises to an aural intensity that encompasses the auditorium.⁴⁸ Later, as Henry and Ada sit on their shawl on the shingle, the evocation of moments experienced 20 years earlier struggles to emerge through the rising volume of the sea:

HENRY: Don't, don't... [*Sea suddenly rough.*]
ADA: [*Twenty years earlier, imploring.*] Don't! Don't!
HENRY: [*Ditto, urgent.*] Darling!
ADA: [*Ditto, more feebly.*] Don't!
HENRY: [*Ditto, exultantly.*] Darling!
[*Rough sea. ADA cries out. Cry and sea amplified, cut off. End of evocation. Pause. Sea calm.*]⁴⁹

The intensity of Eadie's rough sea layers through the sound of Ada's and Henry's voices, a harsh clash of elements that recalls the opening storm scene of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and its rendition in Peter Greenaway's *Prospero's Books*. The exterior world in which the skull is an object, a sculpture, within the set shifts abruptly to reveal an interior world when light emanates from the

⁴³ Helen Shaw, 'Review of *Embers*', *Time Out New York Friday*, 19 September 2014. <http://www.timeout.com/newyork/theater/embers> [accessed February 2016]

⁴⁴ Quinn, 'Honouring Intentions'.

⁴⁵ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 253.

⁴⁶ Wilkinson, 'Theatre in an Expanded Field', p.128.

⁴⁷ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 255.

⁴⁸ Wilkinson, 'Theatre in an Expanded Field', p. 134.

⁴⁹ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 260.

sockets of the skull, revealing the figures of Bennett and Ní Mhuirí through slatted screens as Ada asks Henry about Addie: ‘What do you suppose is keeping her?’, and we listen to the girl playing a scale of A flat major ‘unsteadily, ascending and descending’ while the Music Master beats time with his cylindrical ruler, cursing softly ‘Santa Cecilia!’.⁵⁰ Cosgrove’s light shifts from blue to hard white—‘snow everywhere, bitter cold, white world’ out of which the doctor Holloway emerges—to glowing rust, tracing the trajectory of the narrative from the exchanges between Henry and Ada to the unexplained visit from Holloway—‘old men, great trouble’—and the interior of Bolton’s room with its ‘dying glow’. Cosgrove’s design strengthens the sense of movement and diminution that Beckett was working towards and that informed his decision to change the title of the piece from *Ebb* to *Embers* as he explains in a letter to Barbara Bray of 11 March 1959:

I decided on *Embers* because for one thing it receives light in the course of the piece and for another because embers are a better ebb than the sea’s, because followed by no flow. The real title is the first line of the little poem ‘Again the Last Ebb’, which I would accept, and *Embers* says that more or less in one word. [...]. The sea and shore are so unreal, compared to Bolton’s room and the dying fire etc., that I feel the reference should rather be to the latter.⁵¹

Beckett here refers to the four line poem ‘Dieppe’ which emulates, in brief, the ebb and flow of the tide: ‘again the last ebb / the dead shingle / the turning then the steps / towards the lights of old’.⁵² Quinn explains how Cosgrove’s lighting design gives movement to the solid form of Clancy’s sculpture: ‘The light was changing on the skull, sometimes over 5 minutes or sometimes over 10 minutes, [...] this strange static image becoming fluid’. The fluidity of the visual form of the staged play is directly informed by the text of *Embers*, characterized by Pan Pan’s director as ‘a very particular story and pattern, where it winds around you like a snake, so it is very important to have of flow to it’.⁵³

⁵⁰ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 258.

⁵¹ Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Vol. 3 1957-1965*, p. 211.

⁵² See Seán Lawlor and John Pilling, *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), pp. 384-85, for further information on the genesis and development of the poem.

⁵³ Quinn, ‘Honouring Intentions’.

Company SJ: *Act Without Words II* and *Rough for Theatre I*

While Pan Pan transform the aural experience of the radio play into a multi-sensory experience in the theatre space that incorporates sculpture and elements of sonic art, Company SJ take Beckett's plays out of the theatre and into the social and contingent place of the city, foregrounding the interplay between abject bodies and dispossessed spaces. Founded by artistic director Sarah Jane Scaife and producer Polly O'Loughlin in 2009, Company SJ has developed a distinctive interpretation of Beckett's drama that underscores the interplay between visceral intelligence and an embodied urban space. In 2009 the company began an long-term project called *Beckett in the City* that re-inscribes Beckett's writing "into the social and architectural spaces of the city" and includes the productions *Rough for Theatre I* and *Act Without Words II* (2009-12), *Fizzles* (2014), and *The Women Speak: Not I, Footfalls, Rockaby* and *Come and Go* (2015).⁵⁴ My focus here is on Company SJ's production of *Rough for Theatre I* and *Act Without Words II*, which Beckett drafted in the years between writing *All That Fall* and *Embers*. In December 1956 Beckett began what would become *Rough for Theatre I*. First titled 'The Beggar and the Cripple', an accurate description of the two protagonists, it was renamed 'The Gloaming' before being 'jettisoned' by Beckett.⁵⁵ Ruby Cohn outlines the provisional trajectory of its composition: at 'some point in the 1960s it was exhumed by Beckett, reworked in French, and published in *Minuit* (March 1974) under the title *Fragment de Théâtre*'.⁵⁶ In 1975 Beckett translated the piece back into English, publishing it in 1976 as *Theatre I*, and then adding the descriptor 'Rough' to the title to underline its fragmentary and provisional place in the writers *oeuvre*. Between *Rough for Theatre I* and *Embers* Beckett wrote *Krapp's Last Tape*, swiftly, by 1958 (fragments of it are in the Eté '56 Notebook at the University of Reading),⁵⁷ an aborted fragment 'Last Soliloquy', and *Fragment de theatre II*. In a

⁵⁴ <www.company-sj.com> (accessed 19 September 2016).

⁵⁵ Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, p. 236.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ MS 1227/7/7/1 Manuscript Notebook: Eté 56, University of Reading, Beckett Collection.

letter to Mary Hutchinson on 31 July 1957 Beckett writes that he is ‘fiddling with another mime for [Deryk] Mendel’ which would become *Acte sans Paroles II* (*Act Without Words II*).⁵⁸

Reviewing Company SJ’s production of *Act Without Words II* and *Rough For Theatre I* Fintan O’Toole underlines the importance of site and context in staging Beckett’s plays as the means by which key thematic concerns of his theatre are negotiated: ‘The importance of the site and the way Scaife uses it is that it addresses one of the crucial dilemmas with contemporary Beckett productions. That problem can be summed up in a single word: context’.⁵⁹ O’Toole identifies these contexts as ‘the second World War and the Holocaust, the threat of nuclear apocalypse, enslavement and oppression, real, observed human miseries’ and argues that ‘their aesthetic depends on those contexts remaining almost entirely unstated. They work negatively: we apprehend them because they are almost (but, crucially, not completely) absent’.⁶⁰ Company SJ’s productions of *Act Without Words II* and *Rough For Theatre I* bring Beckett’s provisional and marginalized texts into city spaces marked by contemporary and historical fault lines. It has produced *Act Without Words II* in a number of urban sites worldwide, each of which inflects the piece with a new signification. Scaife had previously directed the play in a 1994 production by Throwin’ Shapes Theatre Company at the Samuel Beckett Theatre, Trinity College Dublin, in a double bill with W. B. Yeats’s *The Only Jealousy of Emer* and *At the Hawk’s Well* called ‘A Sup at the Hawk’s Well’.⁶¹ Scaife’s decision to take Beckett’s mimes from the intimate space of the stage to public outdoor spaces foregrounds the ethical resonance of his work because, as the director explains, these are the places ‘where the homeless spend their time’.⁶² Brian Singleton emphasises the inherently political condition of site-specific theatre: ‘Moving theatre out of buildings—and thus from their marginal socio-cultural arena of impact—and into the streets, is a hugely political

⁵⁸ Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Vol. 3 1957-1965*, p. 58. *Act Without Words* was first published in *New Departures*, no. 1 (Summer 1959), 89-90.

⁵⁹ Fintan O’Toole, ‘Culture Shock: Two Samuel Beckett plays in a car park? Unmissable’, *The Irish Times*, 21 September 2013. <<http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/culture-shock-two-samuel-beckett-plays-in-a-car-park-unmissable-1.1533672>> [accessed 19 February 2016].

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Entertainment listings, *The Irish Times*, 16 November 1994, p. 29. See <<https://www.reading.ac.uk/staging-beckett/Productions.aspx?p=production-1303829826>> [accessed 19 February 2016]

⁶² Sarah Jane Scaife in conversation with Derval Tubridy, 29 June 2011.

act'.⁶³ Scaife is acutely aware of this impact, and of the responsibilities that lie with the director when translating a play from the anticipated place of the stage, to new and contingent sites. Scaife cuts to the core of the issue, and underlines the aesthetic imperative inherent in the task of the director when she asks: 'What is the stage? That's a choice you make. You can't not make the choice. Is it a black box, is it a Victorian space, is it outside? These are all choices and you can't not make the choice even if you go with the bowler hat, even if you go with the specifics of a particular time period, you're always making a choice'.⁶⁴

When she returned to Ireland in 2006 from a period developing Beckett's — and other Irish playwrights such as W.B. Yeats's, J.M. Synge's and Marina Carr's — work in international residencies in China, India, Malaysia, Mongolia, Singapore, and Tokyo, Scaife came to the city with fresh eyes. She was attentive to the disjunctions in Irish society and to the spaces where those disjunctions are distinct. She began to ask 'who is the other in Irish society?'⁶⁵ In an anecdote that underlines the intersection between body and place in the affective economy of the city, Scaife describes the distinct movement of a Dublin drug addict:

He was bending down to pick up a cigarette and he was moving so slowly. His balance was so precarious but at the same time so physically fluid, it was like he was a Butoh dancer in the middle of the city. Everybody around was flying by, and nobody was taking any notice of him. They were all going fast and he was going in this slow motion way to pick up the cigarette. I started thinking of the void; Beckett's void being a different kind of thing than just the dark.⁶⁶

Scaife's observation here is underpinned by a realisation that even within the space of the city one can be isolated and excluded, 'it's quite possible to be in the community of the city, in the architecture of the city, and actually be removed from it'.⁶⁷ The choice that Scaife made was to identify the liminal and contested spaces at the heart of the cities where *Act Without Words II* and

⁶³ Brian Singleton, 'Politicizing Performance: ANU Productions and Site Specific Theatre', *Breac: A Digital Journal of Irish Studies*, 2014: <https://breac.nd.edu/articles/48940-politicizing-performance-anu-productions-and-site-specific-theater/> (accessed 10 April 2017).

⁶⁴ Sarah Jane Scaife in conversation with Derval Tubridy, 'Honouring Intentions': The Director and Beckett', Barbican, London, 13 June 2015.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Rough for Theatre I could be played, spaces that made visible those who are isolated and excluded. ‘What are the non-spaces?’ she asked: ‘so I started looking for the non-spaces’.⁶⁸

Beckett’s A and B become two homeless men, living rough, their lives circumscribed by the monotony of daily routine, goaded into action by the point of a stick wielded by some unknown force or authority, like the bell that wakes Winnie in *Happy Days*. Played by two powerful physical theatre experts, Raymond Keane and Bryan Burroughs, Scaife’s direction is tightly choreographed to emphasise the disparity between A and B, as Beckett describes: ‘A is slow, awkward (gags dressing and undressing), absent. B is brisk, rapid, precise’.⁶⁹ Beckett’s sacks become sleeping bags in Company SJ’s production and the figures of A and B become grounded in the harsh reality of life on the street. In turn, each figure emerges from their sack to begin their rituals of the day. A’s day comprises a prayer, a pill, getting dressed, eating, then getting undressed, performed in an agonisingly awkward and inept manner. He retires to his sack, letting his clothes ‘fall in an untidy heap’ before he ‘broods, takes another pill, broods, kneels, prays, crawls into sack and lies still’.⁷⁰ In contrast, B begins his day in a brisk and efficient manner, The disparity that Beckett stipulates between A’s and B’s approach to daily existence can now, through innovative staging, be understood in terms of the complex interplay between social and personal factors that can lead to homelessness. Company SJ’s production gives lie to the common assumption that homelessness is a result of personal failings.⁷¹ The disparity between both protagonists, as performed by Keane and Burroughs, underlines a fundamental pathos in our understanding of how the very act of living is a challenge and a difficulty for some, and raises provocative questions about our attitudes, and responses, to the homeless and to those on the margins of society. To O’Toole’s contexts for Beckett’s work we must now add the social effects of austerity policies, and precarious working practices.

Company SJ’s *Act Without Words II* was first produced in 2009 as part of Dublin’s ‘Absolut

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 209.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 210.

⁷¹ <<http://england.shelter.org.uk/home>> [accessed 19 February 2016]

Fringe Festival' where it was performed on St. John's Lane, Thomas Street, Dublin near where Focus Ireland run a homeless support service for adults. The play was presented again at the 2010 'Ulster Bank Dublin Theatre Festival' where it played in 'Tangier Lane, a contested site off Grafton Street soon to be subject to an order closing it off from the circulation of the city. We know from *Thom's Almanac* that in 1862 the occupants of the lane were mostly composed of stables and tenements, with T. Maguire, candle manufacturer, the only named occupant. By 2010 the lane had become subject to concerns about what the Dublin City Business Improvement District described in their annual report as 'anti-social behaviour', and was in line to be closed to the public: to have its public rights of way 'extinguished'.⁷² The people depicted in Beckett's *Act Without Words II* as interpreted by Company SJ are specifically the people that are to be removed from Tangier Lane, as the representative body of Dublin's commercial businesses makes clear in its annual report for 2010:

Since the last general meeting we have campaigned to stop the development of two new facilities – the Bridge Prisoner Rehabilitation Centre on Wolfe Tone Street and the Homeless Information Service on Capel Street. We have also worked to reduce the level of social service provision offered within the city's retail core.⁷³

Act Without Words II subsequently travelled to two major London festivals in 2011: 'Greenwich & Docklands' where it played in St. Alfege's Park and 'Imagine Watford' where it played in the stage-door laneway of Watford Palace Theatre. The performance in St. Alfege's Park, part of which is the graveyard of St. Alfege's Church in the heart of Greenwich took place at dusk on a summer's evening in late June. The audience gathered at a small gate on the perimeter of the park, from where it was guided through headstones and trees to a dim clearing in the gathering dark. The door of a snug brick outbuilding opened and a shaft of light seared the night, illuminating a strip that would become Beckett's 'low and narrow platform at the back of the stage, violently lit in its entire length'.⁷⁴ Cosgrove describes her design for *Act Without Words II* as

⁷² <<http://www.wearedublincity.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/AnnualReport2010-cc.pdf>> [accessed 19 February 2016].

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 210.

a kind of ‘non-design’ because of the nature of the subject, and of the space of performance: ‘It was naturalistic. We didn’t have to do any research, you see it every minute of the day, people walking around with those exact kind of sleeping bags’. Vital also was the idea of a mechanical fade – of light disappearing because of a door closing, rather than being switched off. This was performed to best effect when the play was staged in Greenwich, or in Watford Palace Theatre. The 2015 production at the Barbican posed the joint challenge of there being no door to close, and of the ambient light levels during the first performance being too high to fully enable Cosgrove’s strip of light to fully make present the space of performance. In June 2012 it was performed in Theatre Alley, New York, as part of the River to River Festival, its proximity to ground zero lending greater charge to the sense of vulnerability and despair already evident in the production. That year it also played at Mallow Street Arch, Limerick, and the underpass, Enniskillen, as part of the ‘Happy Days’ festival directed by Seán Doran (the audience met at La Salle de L’Union entrance, Wellington Street).

In 2013 Company SJ developed their project *Beckett in the City*, launching a double bill of *Act Without Words II* and *Rough For Theatre I*, drawing out the resonances implicit in each staging of Beckett’s work within the urban space since, as Company SJ emphasise ‘in each presentation of these pieces, they interact afresh with the architecture and social spaces wherein they are placed.’⁷⁵ The double bill was first performed in City Quay car park in that year and subsequently toured to Tokyo, and to the Barbican, London, as part of their ‘International Beckett Season’ in June 2015. In *Rough for Theatre I* Trevor Knight joins Raymond Keane in a performance that examines the interplay between power and disenfranchisement within the context of contemporary responses to disability and diversity. Knight is A: ‘*blind, sitting on a folding-stool, scrapes his fiddle. Beside him the case, half open, upended, surmounted by alms bowl*’.⁷⁶ Keane is B: ‘*in a wheelchair which he propels by means of a pole*’.⁷⁷ The setting is ‘*Street corner. Ruins*’.⁷⁸ His head shrouded in a

⁷⁵ Company SJ <<http://company-sj.com/aww.html>> [accessed 19 February 2016]

⁷⁶ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 227.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

hoody, Keane wheels and turns around the static Knight, the eyes of whom are rendered blank by dark glasses; each man aiming for the advantage. Siting the play outside the fortuitously named St. Giles Cripplegate Church in the Barbican complex in the heart of the financial district of London underlines the economic disparity of a city that ‘contains the highest proportion (15%) of people in the poorest tenth nationally and the second highest proportion (15%) of people in the richest tenth’⁷⁹ and austerity measures have led to significant cuts in the support given to people with disabilities. The name ‘Cripplegate’ comes from the Anglo-Saxon word ‘cruplegate’ which means a covered way or tunnel that may have run from the city gate of Cripplegate to the Barbican, then a fortified watchtower on the City wall. The meanings contained within the name’s etymology and its sound combine to strengthen the contextual power of this site-specific production in which an economy of empathy is undone by the agonistic relation between the protagonists: ‘Wait, you’re not going to do me a service for nothing? [Pause.] I mean unconditionally? [Pause.] Good God!’⁸⁰ Company SJ’s productions of *Act Without Words II* and *Rough for Theatre I* make visible bodies of precarity in an agonistics of exclusion, positioning the audience as ‘witnesses to a series of bodies on the edge of what registers in the public sphere’.⁸¹

On 24 August 1957 Beckett wrote to Jérôme Lindon, his French publisher, that he has ‘done a little mime, very horizontal. Nothing much’.⁸² Aedín Cosgrove’s design for Company SJ’s *Act Without Words II* and *Rough for Theatre I* focuses on that horizontal, uniting both plays through the oblique light that makes tangible the space of performance in the urban setting. Referring to the ‘frieze effect’ that Beckett stipulated for *Act Without Words II*, Scaife explains her search, in each city, for ‘a space that has a frieze effect, a narrow band of light. We played with lots of ways of doing things, but we always had to go back to the text’.⁸³ Scaife regards the production of these plays within the urban space as a kind of ‘an installation’, reminding us of Wilkinson’s

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ <<http://www.londonspovertyprofile.org.uk/indicators/topics/inequality/>> [accessed 19 February 2016]

⁸⁰ Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 231.

⁸¹ Anna McMullan, *Performing Embodiment* (London: Routledge 2010), p. 142.

⁸² Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Vol.3 1957-1965*, pp.58-59.

⁸³ Scaife, ‘Honouring Intentions’.

examination of Pan Pan's theatre as a mode of installation. Scaife explains how 'the words were one part, the action was another part, the actual black darkness was another: all of these installation pieces of sensory perception all have to knit together'. She underlines how she negotiates the complex tensions between the stipulations of the text and the director's vision, aligning her methodology with the curatorial:

If you were a curator and you brought over a piece of installation art, and there was a bit of video in it, a bit of live art, a bit of sound, and all of these things were integral to your conception of your piece of art, and it was brought over to another country and you forgot the audio or you forgot the visual, the artist would say 'that's not what I meant at all'. When you're bringing his work outside you still have to absolutely respect the integrity of all the parts of the jigsaw that go to make up the image.⁸⁴

The issue here is not any notion of an intentional fallacy, but rather the consideration of the work as an integral whole and the role of the director as the curator of a complex and dynamic set of elements. Kalb argues that Beckett's playwriting 'distinguishes itself from most other dramatic literature to a large extent because of its effects in production, its demands on those acting, directing and watching it'.⁸⁵ Pan Pan Theatre and Company SJ respond to those demands with insight, innovation and a deep sense of the aesthetic integrity of Beckett's work. The sense of 'immediacy' that Kalb finds in Beckett's writing resonates through the modes of performance by Pan Pan Theatre and Company SJ, and the contexts in which these performances are developed, deftly negotiating what Kalb terms 'Beckett's obdurate insistence that his works be performed as written'.⁸⁶

The complex relations of agency and subjection, configured both as a social and an interpersonal dynamic, form the substrate of Beckett's novels and plays. They are also a fundamental condition of installation art because of the immersive quality of the viewer's experience, an immersion that Kabakov equates to the literary experience of simultaneously losing oneself within the narrative of the prose ('submerged in its depth') while simultaneously

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Kalb, *Beckett in Performance*, p. 144.

⁸⁶ Kalb, *Beckett in Performance*, p. 153.

observing the writer ('his manoeuvres, goals').⁸⁷ Kabakov makes a distinction between the range of perspectives afforded by installation art and the range of perspectives afforded by theatre, suggesting that it is only the installation artist who has to consider all possible perspectives from which the work will be viewed since the viewer moves freely in and around the work, viewing the details and the whole in a contingent way.⁸⁸ Yet theatre directors also consider the specificity of the viewer's mode of engagement with performance, envisaging in detail the perspective of each audience member within the auditorium, or devising theatre that involves the movement of the audience through the space of performance. Indeed, in her analysis of the aesthetics of installation (responding to Kabakov, and drawing on Michael Fried's distinction between theatrical and non-theatrical art) Juliane Rebentisch disavows the distinction between art and theatre, positing that '*there is no art that is not theatrical*'.⁸⁹ She argues for a greater intersection in the discourses of installation and theatre given how close many installations are to the modalities of theatre, and therefore 'the examination of this proximity may make a "re-entry" of the theatrical vocabulary into the discourses of art history and theory necessary'.⁹⁰

Recent productions of Beckett's work exemplified by the perceptive and nuanced productions of Pan Pan Theatre and Company SJ, attest to the continued relevance of Beckett's work for contemporary performance, particularly at the intersections between theatre, performance and installation.⁹¹ The immersive quality of installation so evident in Pan Pan's *All That Fall* is also evident in the immersive dark of Walter Asmus's *Samuel Beckett Trilogy: Not I, Footfalls* and *Rockaby* at the Royal Court in London (2013) that so effectively connected each of the three plays and united the audience as a common body of audition. Mitchell's multi-media *Footfalls/Neither* by the Staatsoper at the Schiller Theater in Berlin (2014) interleaved the text of Beckett's play with his libretto for Feldman's opera, the composer's music forming an acoustic space connecting the

⁸⁷ Ilya Kabakov, *On the 'Total' Installation*, p. 3.

⁸⁸ Ilya Kabakov, *On the 'Total' Installation*, p. 15.

⁸⁹ Juliane Rebentisch, *Aesthetics of Installation Art*, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), p. 72 (italics in the original).

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ For an examination of the intersections between performance art and Beckett's late plays see Derval Tubridy, 'Samuel Beckett and Performance Art', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 23.1 (April 2014), 34-53.

multiple doors between which the figures of May moved. Touretteshero's *Not I* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival (2017) extends the parameters of performance by drawing out the corporeal and linguistic implications of neurological diversity and the intersection between agency and intention in the speaking body, and by embedding corporeal translation of the voiced text at the heart of performance through British Sign Language. Jess Thom's performance of *Not I* embraces her tics, the involuntary utterances of the performer interjected into Beckett's text to deepen the lived experience of the play as narrative, performance and enactment fuse in a taut trajectory of sound. Touretteshero's *Not I* challenges the 'victim' position ascribed by Kabakov to the theatre audience, reconfiguring agency and engagement through relaxed performance.

Coming from a background in installation art rather than theatre, Tania Brugheria's *Endgame* at Mosteiro São Bento da Vitória in Portugal (2017) engages the audience directly with the power dynamic that connects Hamm and Clov, Nagg and Nell, placing the audience at the circumference of an installation of scaffolding within which the performance is housed, the face of each member inserted into gaps in the fabric which surrounds the site of performance. The viewer becomes the viewed as each disembodied head gazes both at the performance below, and at each other. Developed from her installation *Endgame Study #7* (2006) at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, in which she placed a speaker and a microphone on balconies facing opposite each other, inviting the audience into a communication at once intimate and public, Brugheria's direction emphasised the visual aspect of the play (the set is an almost monochrome white cylinder)⁹² changing the perspective (Hamm lies on his back, looking up at the audience) and allowing the audience to move about from one viewing position to another, thereby gaining multiple perspectives on the performance below.

These productions extend the boundaries of theatre and engage with modalities of installation art that lend new perspectives to contemporary theatre. The intermedial condition of contemporary art, performance practice and theatre-making opens a new site for the production

⁹² Brugheria's set evokes cylindrical spaces depicted in Beckett's late texts such as *The Lost Ones*.

of theatre, and of art. By considering Beckett through the lens of installation we can better understand what is radical in his theatre, and consider the extent to which the strategies of installation art inform what is most complex and radical in contemporary theatre.

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