

## BOOK REVIEWS

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Anita Rákóczy, *Samuel Beckett's Endgame and Hungarian Opening Gambits*, Budapest and Paris: Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary and L'Harmattan Publishing, 2021. 170pp. €19.00, paperback. ISBN: 978-2140245664.

Scholarship on the production and reception of Beckett's work in performance has revealed a fascinating history not only of different national, regional and independent theatre contexts and approaches to staging Beckett, but also the political, historical and cultural landscapes in which they took place (see Nixon and Feldman, 2009; McMullan and Saunders, 2018; McMullan and Pattie, 2018). Productions of Beckett's plays in the former Soviet bloc during and after Russian control, demonstrate the potential of his work to articulate the experience of surveillance and domination—and its aftermath—for both audiences and theatre makers, as well as offering innovative and challenging models of and roles for theatre. Anita Rákóczy's book is an engagingly written, detailed and meticulously researched account of a selection of important Hungarian language productions of Beckett's plays, prefaced by scholarly analyses of *Endgame* in particular, including its genetic history, which Rákóczy has researched in detail. The volume is a collection of essays and

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resources such as interviews which do not necessarily lead organically from one to the other, but the material is rich and valuable. This volume is of relevance and interest to any scholar of Beckett's theatre, and the inclusion of Hungarian scholarship, theatre history and analyses is an important counter to the dominance of Anglo-American, Irish, French and German accounts of productions of Beckett's work.

The first section of the book offers an overview of *Endgame* before investigating in detail the genetic history of the play. While this has been covered before (in Van Hulle and Weller, 2018), Rákóczy focuses particularly on the theatrical elements of the different variants, investigating modifications of props, setting and space, including Beckett's foregrounding of the vertical / horizontal axis of stage space.

Rákóczy's background as a theatre critic and dramaturg, as well as an academic scholar and teacher of theatre, is evident both in her textual analysis and in her ability to recreate productions for her readers in vivid detail. In 1994, on my first visit to Budapest, I went to see *Godot-ra várva* (*Waiting for Godot*) at the Művész theatre. That production remains one of the most memorable of the play I have seen. It was just a few years since the fall of the Iron Curtain and, even though I did not understand a word of the language, I was struck by the production's brilliant acting and by the *mise en scène* in a rubbish dump with a ragged Hungarian flag, which seemed to articulate that moment of Hungarians waiting for change amidst a sense of stasis and continuing deprivation and uncertainty. Rákóczy's account both recalled details of my experience of watching the play and enriched my memory of it by amplifying the theatrical, political and historical contexts of that production. The book transports us to different moments in over half a century of staging Beckett in Hungary, focusing in the earlier years mainly on *Godot* and *Endgame*, and including some later productions of *Happy Days* and *Krapp's Last Tape*, translating to the reader how the productions strove to bring Beckett closer to their Hungarian audiences.

Rákóczy's performance analyses are informed by archival research and interviews with theatre makers, which are included in the book. Each production is also placed in the broader historical and political context of Hungary and indeed post-war Europe, so that we can gauge how the theatre makers or programmers

negotiated the political climate and restrictions of the period from the first production of a Hungarian language *Godot*, in Thália Studio in Budapest in 1965, to a 2015 production of *Happy Days* by a young female student director and a post-COVID staging of *Godot* in Portugal in 2021. Rákóczy's programme essay for the production in Portugal is an excellent analysis of how Beckett's work has expressed the experience of loss and isolation during the pandemic, but it also reminds us that states of catastrophe are not exceptional – it is rather their absence that constitutes an exception.

Rákóczy has also researched the reception of these selected productions. The first staging of *Godot*, for example, took place several years after the Hungarian uprising of 1956 was ruthlessly suppressed. It demonstrates the courage and dedication of the Thália Theatre's Artistic Director, Károly Kazimir, who commissioned an emerging theatre director, Péter Léner, to direct the play, but protected him from any government reprisal by adding his own, more powerfully connected name as co-director. That *Godot* was not only significant in the production and reception history of Beckett in Hungary and former Soviet-controlled Europe, but – as happened elsewhere – it also paved the way for the development of experimental theatre as it resulted in the launching of the first studio theatre in Budapest. Rákóczy argues that the critical reception of the production was more concerned with its relation to dominant ideological debates than it was with dramaturgical or aesthetic criteria, and the production drew enthusiastic audiences.

In further chapters, other key productions are explored. These include the work of Gábor Tompa, who has staged more Hungarian-language Beckett plays than any other director, and whose Beckett productions of *Godot* in particular, in different iterations and across several years, have toured internationally. For example, his remarkable *Godot* with a television screen mounted on a pile of dusty shoes, suggestive of surveillance of the stage and on which the boy appears, toured to the Lyric Theatre in Belfast in 1999, when David Grant was Artistic Director there (Grant, 2016). The chapter devoted to Tompa's work demonstrates how Beckett's drama was not abstract or difficult for these theatre makers but spoke directly to them about still visceral memories of incarceration, surveillance, hunger and dispossession, and about living with the history of WWII, the Holocaust and its aftermath.

The interviews with practitioners confirm this strong rapport Beckett's work had with many of the theatre makers in Hungary. I was especially moved by the interview with director, dramaturg and teacher András Visky, who was held as a child in a Gulag-style camp while his father was captive in an undisclosed location. Visky emphasizes that theatre should be about confronting our own reality, exposing lies and cheap explanations, in spite of the operations of institutional culture, which attempt to place such 'dangerous' works into a 'mausoleum'. He sees Beckett as a model of such theatre. These interviews are not only relevant to the staging of Beckett but are highly informative to any theatre student, teacher or scholar.

The interviews include two rather moving ones with the late Tom Bishop, professor of French at New York University for many decades and a major Beckett scholar. One of these interviews covers Bishop's early years in Vienna, with visits to Budapest where his mother's family was from in the years of Hitler's rise to power, and his family's escape first to France and then on the last boat to leave for the U.S. before the outbreak of World War II. The second interview is devoted to Bishop's views on Beckett and an account of the festivals he organised in Paris (1981 and 1986) and New York (1978, 1986). At the 1986 festival, Pierre Chabert presented a programme of late Beckett, and Bishop sat in on the discussions between Chabert and Beckett that focused on the revision of *What Where* for the stage after its quite radical televisual reworking at the German television station, Süddeutscher Rundfunk.

The final section of the volume primarily comprises a selection of notes drawn from Rákóczy's participation in the research process for the premiere of György Kurtág's opera *Fin de partie*, which finally took place after a long delay at La Scala in 2018. The notes offer insights into Kurtág's work in progress, including the level of research undertaken, and they are of considerable scholarly interest.

Writing from the vantage point of the third decade of the twenty-first century, I am struck by how hungry I am for accounts of Beckett's plays in performance, not merely the accounts of premieres by earlier generations of scholars such as Ruby Cohn and James Knowlson or the theatre practitioners who worked with Beckett such as George Devine, Alan Schneider, Walter Asmus

or Pierre Chabert, but also of productions such as the ones re-created here, which were generally textually faithful to the original playscripts, but whose team creatively and profoundly interpreted Beckett's work in terms of their own experience and traumas. Beckett's drama is an integral part not only of our personal memory, but also that of wider cultural contexts at a particular time and place. This is at least partly why Beckett's work continues to resonate, and this book is an important testament to a rich and resilient history, demonstrating the importance of collecting archival documentation informed by testimony while some of the theatre makers involved are still with us.

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It used to be that the James Joyce Tower and Museum in Sandycove had Beckett's telephone from his Paris apartment. An undistinguished rotary model, it nonetheless possessed at least