

# AMERICAN PLAYWRIGHTS ON BECKETT

Jonathan Kalb

The following remarks by American playwrights on the subject of Samuel Beckett were gathered during January and February, 2006, in the course of researching a *New York Times* article on Beckett's influence, published on March 26, 2006, in anticipation of Beckett's centenary on April 13. Most of the writers quoted here are prominent enough not to need lengthy introductions, but I have appended lists of their major works at the end. For me, the chief surprise of these exchanges was that nearly every playwright I contacted—even those whose work suggested little obvious affinity with Beckett—had thought about him a great deal and had much of value to say. Their comments deserved preservation beyond the brief excerpts that could be quoted in the *Times*.

The playwrights were initially contacted via e-mail and asked to respond to the following questions. Some chose to answer in recorded interviews, others by e-mail or fax. (1) What is Beckett's importance to you? (What do you feel you learned from him?); (2) What can an aspiring young playwright learn from Beckett today? (What part should he play in a playwriting curriculum?); (3) Is Beckett's value as a model for playwrights possibly limited by time or place? (Does the disparity matter, for instance, between Beckett's stripped-down aesthetic, born of postwar desolation—his "art of impoverishment"—and expectations of plenty in the media age?)



## CHRISTOPHER DURANG

My play *The Actor's Nightmare* has semi-nightmare, semi-parody versions of Noel Coward, then Shakespeare, then Beckett. My Beckett is a hodge-podge of three plays, *Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*. I included the "character in the garbage pail" image from *Endgame*, which I found both hilarious and somehow evocative of how life can seem sometimes.

*Why did your reaction to Beckett take the form of parody?*

It came from the setup of that play, which is that somebody shows up and has never been to rehearsal and is suddenly told he has to go on in a play. This person is told

that he's the understudy but he's not even an actor. He's an accountant. In the dream the accountant-actor has to guess at what the possible lines might be, and of course it's very hard to guess the witticisms of Noel Coward, but he does his best to guess what the lines might be, and guess at the plot too. Then when the Shakespeare part starts, it's very hard to guess at the Shakespearean language, and that becomes the joke. And when I got to that point, I truthfully just thought, what other author or style could I put this guy in that would be very hard to guess at? And that's what made me think of Beckett. It was about the contrast.

My other use of Beckett, in the title of *Laughing Wild*, was more personal and was not parody. It came from my having had a very strong reaction to *Happy Days*, which I read in my freshman year at college. This was 1967, and the play *Happy Days* was assigned by my teacher at Harvard, William Alfred, who was a wonderful teacher and very good at reading aloud from plays. He did a very good reading of Winnie; he very much got Winnie's vulnerability, reading her chattering away and saying, "are you there, Willie?" with a little shake in his Irish voice. At some point she sadly says, "One loses one's classics"—a line I quote in *Baby with the Bathwater*. But when she says, "What is that wonderful line . . . something something laughing wild amid severest woe," I just found that juxtaposition very funny: "wonderful line" and "something something." "Laughing wild amid severest woe" struck me as this powerful, powerful line, and when I was writing the woman's monologue in what grew to be called *Laughing Wild*, my character quotes it. But she says, "What's that line in Beckett?"

*Was he an actual impetus to start writing plays for you?*

No, I don't think so. It was more seeing musical comedy, and the fact that my mother loved theatre, so that I read Noel Coward at a very young age. And also around this time that I got to know Beckett I was reading the absurdists, including Albee's *American Dream*, and then Joe Orton's dark farces, and I felt very influenced by them too. It wasn't that I read *Waiting for Godot* and went, "Oh I want to write for the theatre." But clearly he's an influence.

*One could think of the situation in The Actor's Nightmare as a purgatorial circumstance, with the theatre used as the central metaphor, and some people might see that as explicitly Beckettian—say, a Beckettian circumstance rethought for American comic taste?*

If it is, I'm afraid it's a little unconscious. That situation comes from real dreams I had, as far back as high school, you know, that I was in a play and I'd never rehearsed it. Once I dreamt I was in a musical, and I actually was able to pick up the melody and sort of rhyme off the top of my head. Another time I dreamt I was Edmund in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and I knew I'd never learned the play, but I kind of knew the plot, and I kept going backstage and looking at the text. So I did think of it as an existential metaphor, but not as a purgatorial metaphor. I think that totally fits, but if it's true it was an unconscious thought. The core dream, I learned in some psychiatric literature I read after writing the play, is called "the good student's

dream.” The most common version of it is to go to a test and be tested on something and you’ve never been to the class, and you can’t remember why you weren’t at the class. I’ve actually had that one too.

*Do your students at Julliard ever mention Beckett? Does he mean anything to any of them?*

You know, I unfortunately don’t know the answer to that question, because we don’t talk about dramatic literature in any organized way. We basically deal with student scripts that come in and then Marsha Norman and I give feedback and discuss them.

*Does Beckett ever come up in the discussions?*

I don’t remember a specific time.

*Is it possible that we’re living through a moment when Beckett can’t mean as much to students and young playwrights as he did a generation ago?*

I do think it’s possible. He meant a lot to me in the 1960s and 70s, particularly as a world view, but it’s actually a world view that’s hard to live with. God knows this morning I wasn’t feeling optimistic, reading the news about global warming, but in other ways and on other days, as I got older, I felt a little more optimistic. I came from a family where everybody fought all the time and nobody ever solved any problems ever, and so the hopelessness in Beckett was familiar to me from my family background. Then as I got older I managed to be around friends who were more reasonable, and I thought, “Okay, well, life is perhaps not so unrelentingly hopeless.”



## WILL ENO

1. He never really seemed to me, as everyone always claims him to be, unreasonably despairing or overly glum; the writing was too painstaking, too beautiful, and even in the lowest moment there was always the chance that a sentence or line would take a sort of pie-in-the-face turn, that a volleyball game would suddenly start up in the cemetery. Every sentence, every phrase, even the commas are quotable. Words to live and get sick and die by. I’d say, in a sideways sort of way, I learned how to live from him a little. I may have started playing tennis because of Lucky’s monologue. Singles, doubles, “tennis of all kinds.”

1a. *(Lots of people have compared Thom Pain to Beckett, but how do you see that matter?)*

Any comparison kind of overwhelms me, the way it would an altar boy if you said to him, “Hey, you remind me a lot of Jesus.” I overheard a man say to his wife,

after a performance of *Thom Pain*, “Worse than Beckett.” I felt as if someone had called me dumber than Einstein.

2. It would be good for the theatre and for the world at large if there were more signs of his influence—his humaneness, invention, and humility. (It’s not easy being humane and inventive, at the same time.) This will sound crazy and I can’t really explain what I mean, but, Beckett is as close as we’ve come to a Unified Theory, to an understanding of the gigantic meteor sorts of things, and, the little bitty fingernail side of life.

3. The subject with him was always essentials, the essential, to such an extent that even food and air could disappear without a lot of fanfare. As long as people still die, I think he’ll be important. I think his significance grows, our need for him grows, in correlation to the piles of junk and non-essentials our culture seems bent on producing. There’s the line from *The Unnamable*, “Bah, the latest news, the latest news is not the last.” I think he knew where he stood, where his art stood, in relation to the million breaking stories that have come and gone since him, the million BREAKING STORIES!!! whose details are hazy and misremembered, if remembered at all. Long live him.



## RICHARD FOREMAN

I respect Beckett and obviously he was of great importance, but in a way I resent the fact that people tend to use him as a club to beat down other avant-garde efforts, because comparisons are made where people say, “Look, Beckett is avant-garde but he’s also very humanistic”—as opposed to these other people who are just too crazy and too cerebral and what have you. My first experience of Beckett was the original New York production of *Godot* with Bert Lahr and E.G. Marshall. And of course programmatically I found myself defending it, because of all that it meant to New York art and the theatre world, but it wasn’t that great a production. In fact, I’ve seen *Waiting for Godot* a couple of times since, and I have mixed feelings. It seems a little schematic and I get a little bored with it. I know that’s heresy, and I’m friendly with many fanatical Beckett supporters, probably you included, but I have mixed feelings about Beckett. Brecht did, too. I’m most interested in Beckett’s most abstract, far-out pieces where he really pulverizes language.

*Like what?*

Like *Worstward Ho*. A lot of the other pieces I find a little too local and down-homey in a way—all that Irish stuff about little people going through depressing daily life and documenting it to an extent that I feel . . . you know, I get the point, why does it have to go on? Not to minimize the great and desirable influence that Beckett had on so many people. He’s obviously a major figure. Who knows how people will react to it in 100 years? I myself wouldn’t be surprised if 100 years from now he’s not one of the major figures.

*Do you have less mixed feelings about Gertrude Stein?*

I have mixed feelings about everybody. But yeah, in many ways Gertrude Stein is, to me, still more problematic and more inspiring. She really proposed a different way of looking at literature, looking at the theatre, whereas Beckett, I think, is a child of Joyce, the son of Joyce. Also, I think of Beckett as being a slightly more academic figure than Gertrude Stein, who was really daring. I think Stein took risks that Beckett didn't take. Now that's not to put anybody down. Risk-taking isn't the only valuable attribute in the arts. But Stein seemed to me to shake things up in a much more provocative way.

*What's the influence of Beckett that you do see and admire?*

That he allowed people to think that literature could embrace a kind of non-spectacularness, that one could dig in the little spaces between events and make literature and theatre out of that. That's certainly a great contribution. And I admit that it's something that I think more and more about in my own work these days.

*I was going to say, that sounds like Richard Foreman.*

Yeah, but in my case I don't particularly trace that back to Beckett. But who's to say?

*And Brecht?*

I have very mixed feelings about Brecht, too. The only person in the theatre I don't have mixed feelings about, I think, is Strindberg, who is a great, possessed artist. He continues to be extremely mysterious and energized and electric for me.

*It's brave of you to say all this.*

Well, I never hesitate in expressing my questions about artists who are really established. A little worm like me can't possibly hurt a big worm like Beckett. Nothing I say is going to hurt him in any way. I also think Beckett is noble in the way he lived his life, in his own purity, in his own relationship to his art. That's a noble example that I certainly would not denigrate in any sense.



## **RICHARD GREENBERG**

It's hard to track Beckett's influence because by the time I started to think about writing plays, it was pervasive and had been transformed in the work of others. I'm not much of a theatre historian but it seems to me that when Beckett came along the model of a serious play was one that depicted a highly detailed social structure—a reflection of the real world, either literal (mainly) or metaphorical (mainly)—and then saw through it—its treacheries, its faultlines, its unkindnesses. What a pre-Beckett

“serious play” most often did was to put on stage a version or analog of the “real world” and then point out its failings or hypocrisies (e.g. bourgeois society is infected by a strain of syphilis).

A premium seemed to be placed on plausibility, even verifiability, and the outside world was determinative. With Beckett, the stage space became the real world and human interaction was essentialized. So part of what trickled down to me through Beckett is the idea that I am not writing the world then plumping it down on a stage, but am writing for the stage itself—a specifically theatrical space that can reflect the larger world to a greater or lesser degree but always remains a stage, and capable of achieving an extra-literal dimension because it starts there.

One of the things I’ve noticed is that an audience’s hostility to a disliked play today is more personal and more ferocious than any other kind of respondent’s reaction to any other kind of art. I think this is because an audience’s condition is a kind of hostage—while you’re watching a play, your rights are abridged and your time usurped. You can’t move around without inviting the opprobrium of your neighbors (at a movie, it’s fine to go for popcorn); you can’t put it down and pick it up again when it’s convenient, as you can with a book. I think this is why inert plays are loathed with such a special violence. The audience situation creates an anxiety for action: because the watcher can’t move, the play has to.

Which is a way of saying that Beckett’s plays, which are on some profound level about the excruciation of time, are probably the most innately theatrical plays there are; because they don’t simply offer portraits of conditions of common concern to the artists and the audience; they engage the dilemma of the audience vis-à-vis the play. If a lesson can be extracted for this that’s of use to a student playwright, it’s this: the playwright’s primary act is the taking of time; for this not to be pure theft, time has to be acknowledged—somehow—as the inevitable subject of every play—as the thing that’s happening in the room.

Most of my plays (not something like *Take Me Out* which was the product of an aberrant enthusiasm; or *A Naked Girl on the Appian Way*, which is inexcusable) seem specifically and mainly to be about time—how to fill it or construe it or grapple with its force. And this MUST derive from the contagion of Beckett, who made it clear that the problem of how you spend your time is enough subject for a play (as it is the inevitable subject of the act of watching a play).

Also:

I think he was probably the great sensibility adjuster in the latter half of the last century. The great insight he popularized—nothingness is opportune, the space where the mind can be most fully alert—gave us high solemnity and black comedy, piercing satire and numbing cynicism. I think Joe Orton needed Beckett; and if you want to talk far and absurd emanations, so did Roseanne. So all sorts of people who’ve never heard of him are partially who they are because of him.

Also:

I'm thinking of that universally applicable because utterly empty slogan: "Now more than ever." I know our central nervous systems have been re-jiggered à la McLuhan by the saturation of new technologies, and that we now process widely, simultaneously, and shallowly; and I think that's not entirely good. (Who's the President?) I feel more and more drawn to writing longer and longer scenes. Forms seem to create an anxiety that they do what they can do—which is why plays adapted faithfully to film so often seem claustrophobic. What I mean is, because a movie can take you all over the place, eventually it feels as if it HAS to take you all over the place; keeping the camera still and refusing to vary the scene makes us itchy as we watch.

The thing with theatre is that it can gather attention to a subject not in hysterical flux. Theatre can't really do all that many things effectively, but one thing it does better than any other performance medium is play host to the long thought. If anything's going to help extend the attention span, it's theatre. Beckett offers the power of concentrating the mind, the pleasures of attending. He and what he means are necessary.



### JOHN GUARE

Beckett's a great writer but a bad influence and almost *sui generis*. I hate the way people—playwrights, directors, designers—will create a Beckett-like atmosphere and think that gives their work relevance and depth. Beckett earned his despair. We can't spray on that despair. Young writers used to think tramps speaking non sequiturs passed for playwriting. As a teacher you want to stop people from writing pastiches of Beckett. You want them to learn how to admire him, but to know the aim of playwriting is not to become a ventriloquist using someone else's voice. And what do I want them to admire? The way he boils it all down to its essence. *Footfalls* is the play of his that wipes me out. Of course his impact will be lasting the same as Chekhov's or Ibsen's. He captured a time—life after war when everything is burned out and not rebuilt. Tragically, that time keeps repeating. Sebald is an heir. Roberto Bolaño another.



### TINA HOWE

Beckett is a titan among playwrights because he had the courage to dramatize the existential "Why?" And what thrilling drama it is! Harrowing, hilarious and eerily familiar. Because of him, playwrights could stop thinking about the intricate hoops their characters had to jump through to ponder the more compelling question—why do they have to jump at all? We were suddenly given permission to work from the inside out. This was especially thrilling for us lady dramatists, because it meant we

could toss out all those constricting male hoops and design our *own* obstacle courses. And what courses they've been—mutable, obsessive and sublime.

As a teacher of novice playwrights, I'm reluctant to hold up Beckett as model, however, because beginners have a hard enough time figuring out what their characters want, let alone tapping into their own anguish as well. Of course there are always exceptions. I remember a young student from NYU who was eager to write a play about a light bulb and a ball of string. A dose of Beckett was just what he needed. The great man led him to heights and depths he never dreamed of.



## TONY KUSHNER

*Your 1995 essay "On Pretentiousness" praised thick, overstuffed "lasagna" drama in contrast to thin, flat, spiritually disciplined "matzoh" drama like Beckett's. Did you mean to imply that the quintessential American drama was necessarily very full, and not spare?*

I wouldn't say that, because I don't know that I believe there is such a thing as the singular "American drama." There's the emptied out version and there's the overstuffed version. David Mamet certainly represents one development of American drama, in the Pinter/Albee tradition, which is obviously very indebted to Beckett. There's also a tradition in American fiction of an emptied out or pared down exploration of American inarticulateness. There's a mistrust of language in this country and some really remarkable writers, including Mamet, have explored that. Suzan-Lori Parks is an interesting case, because she's on one level a very opulent and lyrical writer but also one who explores terseness and abbreviation and silence and aporia of various kinds. She has a very clear debt to the Beckettian tradition. When I wrote that essay I was being attacked from various quarters for having aimed at more than I could provide in *Angels in America*. That's in a certain sense the definition of "pretentiousness," and I was trying to argue the value of creating something large and vast without actually having the contents to fill it. Writing a play like *Angels* feels to me like a leap of faith. It's what Blake was talking about: you don't know necessarily where you're headed, and you can't necessarily obtain any perfection of form, but you go stumbling out into the dark. That creates the possibility of taking aim at something larger. There are frustrations in encountering that kind of writing, because sometimes it fails embarrassingly. But there's also, in the Melvillean tradition, something to be said for it.

One of the things I was trying to do in that essay was to say that playwrights in this country are punished for ambition, and for the sin of having an ambition that can't be fulfilled. A lot of drama is rewarded for having very small ambition, and for consequently being able to fulfill it completely. You strike out at very little and you can create something that absolutely fulfills the terms you've set up at the beginning. Not to name names, but I think there's a tendency among drama critics—in Britain as well—to get very happy at play machinery that seems to fire on all pistons like clockwork, because what it's really setting out to do, both in form and content, is



very small. It gets there, and though nobody really cares that it's gotten there, you've gotten your money's worth and there's a certain school of thought that that's what we should all strive for.

*Has Beckett been important to you at all? Melville might be considered the stylistic opposite of Beckett.*

Yes and no. In a sense, you can't think of anything less Beckettian than *Moby Dick* or *Mardi*, but in another sense, the willingness to relinquish everything, including narrative and form and expectation, in pursuit of this chimerical thing, in pursuit of your own other, down the well of your own unconscious: there are parts of *Moby Dick* that are hugely Beckettian. I don't know if Proust ever read Melville, probably not, but these are all writers who are interesting to somebody like me, who has been in psychoanalysis for his entire life. One incredibly powerful part of the impulse to write is to turn away from the exterior world and force oneself down into the cavern of the unconscious. And that seems to me the connection between Beckett and Proust and Melville—all very strange writers. Melville gave me permission not to worry too much about being neat and clean. I love the length and sprawl of his work, and in a sense that gave me permission to do whatever I wanted to do. He has that effect on a lot of writers. But Beckett is like Shakespeare. He's very dangerous, because his voice is so overwhelmingly persuasive and influential. I never read him when I'm actually writing something. Because you can't. It's a voice that changes your own voice. It just completely overwhelms you. Or me at any rate. I always catch myself trying to write like Beckett.

There are terrifying moments in Beckett where the play arrives at just a few words. Some tiny simple little sentence and the whole universe seems contained in it. That's so enviable. And it's easy to do cheap imitations of it. Again, I don't want to name names, but there are playwrights whose whole careers are based on doing half-baked imitations of that sort of telegraphic, gnomic style. It's the gnomic side of it that's worrisome, because part of the game in Beckett is the way that a lot of the writing is pitched on the line between profundity and meaninglessness. You walk along as an audience aware of the fact that you're caught between these two possibilities, of infinite meaning on one side and nonsense on the other. And it's really hard to do that with the kind of greatness of Beckett. It's very easy, if you've got any kind of an ear, to make a sham version of it. So it's a scary voice for me. Also, he started out writing the two greatest plays of the twentieth century, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. I mean, they're perfect. They're bottomless. They're like *Hamlet*. And that kind of perfection is always discouraging for a writer. You say, why am I bothering?

*The grandiosity and pretentiousness that you describe as Melvillean might also be considered aspects of American Individualism. As I'm sure you're aware, the glorification of the Individual has been criticized in our national character for the way it restricts vision beyond the Self. Is there a work of writerly generalization beyond the individual that becomes impossible when one glorifies the pretentious self?*

I would have to say that there absolutely is, and that's a criticism that I level at myself. I have no question that there's too much ego in my work. I think that it's my limitation. It's something that I work at, and I believe it's nice to have something to work at. There are a number of deficiencies in me as a person and as a writer, and that seems to me the point of having ongoing work: you bang away at them and see where you can go. But there is a deep investigation of individual ego, individual consciousness, in Beckett, combined with a kind of egolessness and non-presence. The distinctiveness of voice and the absence of individual style and narcissism in the work of self-reflection are part of the greatness. You could also say that about Chekhov and Shakespeare. In a certain sense, that's one of the things that makes for genius. It's what Virginia Woolf means when she talks—I think in *A Room of One's Own*—about the absence of anger. Jane Austen is another example, or Keats, or Mozart. There's something kind of unbelievable about their work because it seems to not have been written by anyone. Yet there's no question who wrote it. This is why these people are so fucking annoying to everybody else. I mean, why are we bothering to write? It is all there: these moments where you feel like the bounds of a single personality crack open and you're into some other place that's just much, much larger.

*The fellow who wrote that pretentiousness essay 11 years ago was feeling compelled to be engagé, as the French used to say.*

And still is. I used to be very severe about this: that everyone needed to be, and if you weren't, you were a failure as a writer and an artist. I don't feel that way anymore. I basically feel at this point that there are a variety of prisms in which human epistemology resides. There's the psychological, the political, the theological, the philosophical—various rude ways of grouping or describing your framework—and the whole of the others are present in every single one of these. You can't write philosophically without also writing about human psychology and theology and politics, and you can't write about politics without writing about philosophy and theology and psychology. My prism is primarily a political one: I can't help it. Those are the subjects that I'm drawn to. I think what we were talking about earlier is genius, and I don't have that. I wish I did. But I have talent, and my talent is a concatenation of interests that blend together in me to make the plays that I write.

*We live an overstuffed era, to use your word. Is it possible that we're going through a time when Beckett can't mean as much to us?*

I hate this word—because I'm enough of a historical materialist to not believe that there is such a thing—but I think Beckett's plays are timeless. We're in a very stupid time. I think we're in a time when concentration and the willingness to give up the comfort food aspects of drama, like a really great story, are hard to come by, and that makes it really hard for audiences to endure Beckett. It might have something to do with luxury, being pampered and overfed. But in a way that also makes it hard for people to sit through overstuffed plays. A three- or four-hour play at this point feels like an outrage. People are so stressed out and exhausted all the time, so

toxic and distracted by all the wrong things, so used to shorter and shorter times sitting on their cans. So in addition to a lack of ambition being rewarded—and a critic in *The New York Times* basically declared this—playwrights are rewarded for not having an intermission. I'll admit that I love it too when I sit down and see that a play has no intermission and I'll be out of there quickly. Theatre is hard. It's a tough time for serious theatre in general. And Beckett is really hard. Beckett is interested in the difficult experience of a human being in a room facing another human being, disgorging the contents of his or her soul in front of you. And there's very little comfort there.

*Richard Foreman said he wouldn't be surprised if in 100 years Beckett wasn't considered very important.*

Really? I think that's nuts. I mean, it's 50 years since *Godot*, and it could have been written yesterday.



## DAVID MAMET

1. He was a great kisser.
2. His work is often confused with the play about some bishop or something which starred Peter O'Toole in the film version.
3. Beckett's value for playwrights is that he was a great poet. I do not know what the "art of impoverishment" means, but this does not disturb me, as I am sure I share that state with the phrase's inventor.



## RICHARD MAXWELL

As with a lot of people I admire, I have trouble separating the actual work from the cult of personality that represents something, the IDEA of Beckett—Beckett the icon, cool cachet . . . the I-don't-give-a-fuck about money or fame impression. But I have a kind of appreciation for what I imagine to be rigor and that rigor seems to belong to another time. It probably shouldn't, but I don't feel like you see it that much, at least in terms of playwriting. I don't know, I don't have it. Maybe that's too myopic, but it seems like we live in an age when you just don't see that kind of approach so often, that level of seriousness and depth when it comes to making theatre.

Beckett's work is a little too cerebral for me to completely embrace. Or maybe the bleakness is what's hard to get past. I remember *Film* with Buster Keaton, and for me the most successful productions, like that one, blew off the assumed esoterica around Beckett (another iconic impression?) and instead focused on the physical comedy.

Somebody in the press once called me “a poor man’s Beckett” and I’m still trying to figure out if that’s an insult or a compliment.



## THERESA REBECK

I know a lot of people dig his minimalism but for me what I enjoy is his excess—while yes, there is a tremendous sense of silence in the work, there are also those explosions of language which are so fascinating, like a river of chaos, something so beautiful and frightening and built so simply out of a torrent of words. I like his comedy, I think he’s very funny, and I like his compassion too; I love how tender he is with those two clowns in *Godot*. He is so humane, as a writer, and he rarely is cited for that, as that intellect is so ruthlessly fascinating, but that’s perversely what I am moved by—his tenderness for our sorry state.

Having said that, I have to confess that I probably would NOT consider him an “important influence” on my work. He is important because he just is, like Shakespeare, but I’m a writer who works in a different idiom—if you asked me about Chekhov I could go on and on about his “influence,” or O’Neill, or August Wilson. It’s just a different kind of theatrical idiom, more literal in its interest in story and the way language rises out of character.

[As for Paula Vogel’s idea about women playwrights,] I for one don’t actually ascribe gender to philosophical positions, or writing styles. I know people do that, and I have tremendous respect for Paula Vogel who is a wonderful writer and a fascinating thinker in her own right—but I don’t actually think that Beckett enabled me to become a playwright; that’s not a statement that makes inherent sense to me. This might be because I am a more literal kind of person, but I suspect it’s more because of the kind of storytelling that compels me personally, which I guess would be defined as “male” even though I am physically female. See how weird these discussions can get, if you follow them too far down one or another road? Anyway, my point is that I actually really like the conflict of men (and women) in action, and I am less compelled by theatre that stays in an abstract realm, where the conflict of perspectives is stripped away from an emotional reality.

The fact is, there is an element of the theatrical community that looks down on a more story-centric and “traditional” kind of playwriting. Beckett is sometimes used as a club by these people, who sneer at those of us who are moved by a well-told story. Which I rather suspect he would disapprove of.



## PAULA VOGEL

My usual riff on Beckett is that I think he enabled women to become playwrights. There are two very specific reasons. One is: if it hadn't been for *Waiting for Godot* we would not have had Irene Fornes as such a groundbreaking playwright. Had she not stumbled in to the first production of *Godot* in Paris, she would have remained a sculptor. She said she understood something about the universe as a result of seeing that play. She understood that it was about master-slave relationships, and she understood that she could be a playwright. She suddenly thought, "I can do this." Now I think, even though she didn't speak French, what Irene Fornes discovered is something that Beckett did to the Aristotelian notion of dramatic action, which brings me to the second reason. I often say to my students at Brown: I wonder what would've happened had Beckett existed as a colleague, or a contemporary, or even as a forerunner to Virginia Woolf. What would've happened if she had seen the ability to dramatize stasis, where drama was no longer about the conflict of men in action, but was instead a conflict of perspectives? I think Virginia Woolf would've become a playwright.

Stop and think about people like Henry James or Oscar Wilde, whose narrative forms do not match their dramatic forms. Oscar Wilde realized that the only way for him to be a dramatist was in essence to parody the well-made play, and Henry James never found his means. They were both seeking new wineskin that didn't exist until Samuel Beckett. So it's very interesting, as women playwrights in the twenty-first century look back and think about who the forerunners were who changed dramatic form in such a way to enable us to write in the field, the conversation is basically about Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett. Irene Fornes obviously went the Samuel Beckett way. Interestingly enough, Caryl Churchill is having a dialogue both with Brecht and Beckett. Nowadays it seems as though she's going more to the Beckett end, but regardless of Brecht's critique of Aristotelian drama, he still believed in conflict in action. Beckett believed in conflict in perspective. And I think the huge gift that Beckett gave to theatre, to women playwrights in particular, is our notion of dramaturgy: a non-apocalyptic sense of time. Frank Kermode calls it non-apocalyptic—sheer chronicity that stretches to eternity. Beckett in fact takes us back to the notion of time in medieval drama, in which every moment, all time, is in the same instant in the mind of God.

### *And that's female?*

It's non-Aristotelian. Beckett brings us back to a non-Aristotelian approach. This isn't to say that woman playwrights don't write in Aristotelian conflict. We do. But I think that once there is the ability to write about a conflict of perspective, in which time is simply chronicity rather than crisis, you start going down the pathways of, say, a Virginia Woolf novel, which is more a kind of interior drama than the Aristotelian notion of men in conflict.

*Could you say more about this non-Aristotelian form? Endgame and Krapp's Last Tape follow the three unities.*

Now, the three unities are actually neoclassical rather than Aristotelian, but if you're going to say that Beckett follows them, I'm going to say: he follows them by writing a play without any action. By writing another play without any spectacle. By writing another play without any words. To me, Beckett pares down in a very wonderful way, reinvigorates the Aristotelian elements by paring them down and saying, "Can I do an *Act Without Words*?" Can I do a play without any character and just have lips onstage? Can I do a play without any action and just have them waiting? And it does reinvigorate. There is action in Irene Fornes, and there's action in a Virginia Woolf book, there's action in Henry James, but it's not that Aristotelian action which is a conflict that has a peripety and turning point and a rising and falling action—all of which were actually thrust on Aristotle through neoclassicism and the well-made play. We're actually glossing on Aristotle. This isn't Aristotle himself. We're talking about the glosses. And Beckett comes along and scrapes off all those glosses, gets down to the bare minimum essential. I think there's action in medieval drama. I think there's action in *Everyman*, and I think there's action in Irene Fornes. In the 1960s, women experimental writers were criticized for being static, but they actually would have stayed away from drama without Beckett's model, because quite frankly it wasn't a form that appealed to their different notion of dramatic time.

*You mentioned Fornes and Churchill. Who else are you thinking of?*

For example, Julie Bovasso, Rosalind Drexler, Rochelle Owens. You suddenly had this influx. You suddenly had this incredible flowering of women writing plays who, before that, had looked at Lillian Hellman and thought, "That's not me." Irene Fornes saw the universe as a sculptor, and suddenly Samuel Beckett gave a kind of permission to do that.

*Do you feel Beckett was a model for you in the way you're describing?*

Absolutely. Particularly the notion of circular form, where the ending is the beginning, which comes from medieval drama as much as from Beckett, but it was important for me to see it used by a modern writer. The sense of returning to the beginning in a play, and even though nothing has changed, the perspective has changed about that beginning. Without that dramaturgical model, which Beckett gave me, there'd be no *Baltimore Waltz*, no *Oldest Profession*, no *Hot 'n' Throbbing*. The notion of the circle has been stamped on me by Beckett. To me, circular form is really, with *Waiting for Godot* in particular, what he brought back. And also the simple, phenomenological bareness of the stage, which relates to your question about whether Beckett will remain current and essential to us in the twenty-first century. Basically, he is bringing us back once again to the medieval approach: you have a platform in the public square, you don't need anything else. You do not need technology. You do not need special effects. You do not need spectacle beyond, say, a tape recording and the actor's body and the audience watching.

*Well, there are quite a few people who think they need them. There is a dominant aesthetic of glut and clutter in our time, which grows out of media culture. Doesn't that matter?*

I would say that we're having a failure right now in the film industry because we have a glut of technology. We have such a glut of spectacle. I call it gladiatorial entertainment. Spectacle and plot have become the crack cocaine of the industry. And now we can sit in front of our computer screens and get all of that without going to film. What we cannot get anywhere else but the theatre is the stripped down, bare essence of a stage with living bodies talking to living bodies. And I actually think that, in the twenty-first century, that meekness of the theatrical experience is going to become more of a basic need for audiences.

*What about the compulsory optimism of American culture? Will that continue to inhibit wide appreciation of Beckett?*

Well, I work with young playwrights, and they're not optimistic. They are angry, serious, scared and very brave in showing it. They see the extremities that exist. I don't think that Beckett actually was a pessimist or he would never have written plays in the first place. It's that wonderful paradox that you have to break down the utility of language to show how much we actually need it. You have to examine how little is communicated by language in order to express the fact that we desperately need to communicate. Putting a Beckett play on the stage is not a cynical act at all. I think it's pointing out that there's a paucity of communication, there's a paucity of connection, and that as human beings we desperately need those things.



## MAC WELLMAN

Do you know this Walloon, Arnold Geulincx, who was one of Beckett's favorite philosophers? As I understand him, his philosophy is that there's no such thing as cause and effect in this world. There's a malign deity that wills me to move my hand and also simultaneously wills the salt shaker to rise as though I made it do that, but actually there is no causal relationship between those two acts. I don't know if it's really true that this is something Beckett believed, but his skepticism about normal human assumptions, about causality, is, I think, the basis of his theatre and his art.

*I can see it as a source of his humor. The title character in Murphy was supposedly conceived with Geulincx in mind. Murphy withdraws from what everyone else takes to be "life" because he no longer recognizes any of the connections between things and events that they all see as obvious and ordinary. Does this idea strike you as particularly contemporary?*

No. I think we live in an age of layered assumptions. And I think the difficulty of pursuing theatre or pursuing politics or even understanding what's going on in the

world today has to do with penetrating these layers of assumptions that surround everything. We live in a world of explanations. It's as if the world didn't actually exist. All you have to do is explain things. And I think Beckett is very cynical—cynical in the best sense—about the world of explanations. I don't know if it is a time for Beckett. I do know that a lot of people claim to like Beckett and don't really. He's the gold standard of twentieth-century modernist playwriting, along with Brecht. But he came of age in a very dark and terrible time, a time that I think is really inconceivable for us now. We can't conceive of what it must have been like during World War II, or during the desolation in Europe afterward. I mean, Beckett escaped his apartment an hour before the Gestapo showed up, then walked all the way to the middle of France, where he had a nervous breakdown. That's pretty rough stuff, to have to hide in trees because there are SS people below with machine guns.

*Could you elaborate on this art that is contrary to explanations? You've said that you value nonsense. Is that how you see Beckett?*

Well, I think Beckett is nonsensical, completely. I think nonsense is the sort of talk that we make up to make fun of the world of explanations and the world of causality, to drive it nuts, and to make fun of the fools who rule us with their supposedly rational analyses of everything. Kids just do nonsense for the hell of it; it's instinctual. And a society that is not able to handle nonsense in the good sense cannot be trusted to tell the difference between nonsense in the bad sense (or bullshit) and the truth. We live in such a society now, and it's terrifying to me how we think we can solve all the world's problems with language games. We call somebody a "terrorist" and put him in a black box so we don't have to deal with that person as a rational, living soul. We've solved the immediate problem and created another problem, and that other problem is: how to get rid of all the "terrorists"?

*Could you say more about why nonsense is healthy?*

Because I think nonsense, as opposed to bullshit, is a challenge to all right-thinking authority figures. In Beckett, or in *Alice in Wonderland*, for instance, you find a series of practices, little rituals that enable us to get through time, the absolute hollowness and emptiness of time. They're a way of coping with the terrifying nature of time, in a world which was not created for us. It certainly wasn't created to make us feel comfortable or safe.

*But is Beckett really reacting against authority, or targeting authority figures?*

I don't know what Beckett's intentions were with this work, but it seems to me that part of his work has to do with getting rid of notions of the hero, the heroine, high and noble acts, salvation and redemption in conventional ways. In his theatre works, I'd add denouement and conflict of a conventional sort. Conventions period. He seems to have felt instinctively that there was something false and rotten about this stuff. I'm not sure he had his mind made up beforehand. I think it's just something he discovered in the practice of writing, because he doesn't seem to be the sort of



person who would sit down and say, “Now I’m going to write a nonsensical play making fun of stupid people.” I don’t think that’s how he worked. I think he just wrote and learned from what he wrote.

*Most people think of drama, his included, as reflecting the world.*

I think Beckett does reflect the world. The sort of drama that his plays are filled with is very real, but it’s a reality of small, tiny things. Sometimes what’s going on in his plays is, he’s trying to challenge you to find out where the drama really is, who really is doing what to whom. It’s puzzling sometimes to figure out who is controlling the scene and who is not, and what’s at stake, and why.

*What is your sense of Beckett’s importance to younger writers today?*

I don’t know. I know he meant a huge amount to me when I was younger. He was a touchstone. I certainly mention him a lot to my students, and three-quarters of them claim him as a major influence. But I don’t see that there is a school of Beckett today. There was for a while.

*Who was in the school of Beckett?*

Albee early on, and a lot of other people in the 60s thought of themselves as Beckettian. Early Shepard and Guare, Pinter and Pinget, and lots of other people in Europe. But I don’t really think there can be a school of Beckett. Take Albee, for instance. Whether you like it or not, you have to recognize that *The Zoo Story* is not Beckett at all. It’s something far more familiar, rooted in mainstream American theatre. It’s full of all the assumptions that Beckett rejects. It tries to be a little bit scary and “existential” in that way that was so common in the 60s. I think Richard Foreman is Beckettian in a lot of ways, though he probably wouldn’t accept that now. I mean, he resembles Beckett more than anything else.

*Foreman told me that he resented Beckett because of the way he was used by other people as a club to hit avant-gardists over the head, as if to say, “Why don’t you make work like that?”—meaning more humanistic work.*

That’s the trouble with being a classic. Shakespeare serves very much the same purpose. I think this is a problem. That’s why I prefer Beckett’s fiction and the shorter plays, the little odd prose pieces, to the great plays. *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* have become cultural icons in a way that makes them difficult to approach. I tell my students to read them, and every once in a while I will read them and go see them. But I’m not terribly affected by the productions because they’re usually done in a generic way. It’s *Masterpiece Theatre*. This is a great play, therefore we do this masterpiece with great respect. And what I miss is the savagery and the cruelty in those plays. If they’re really played for the truth in them, they’re very cruel plays. And if they’re played for the cruelty, then I think the humanity does emerge. But if they’re not played for that, then they become saccharine and faintly sentimental.

We've all seen those productions. They become funny in a way that's innocuous. It's leprechaun theatre—charming little leprechaun clowns in bowler hats. There's a lot of that sort of theatre around, funny little gymnastic mime theatre in bowler hats.

*So can Beckett still be considered avant-garde or experimental?*

To me, yes. But there is a problem. If it were up to me I would retire *Endgame* and *Godot* for ten years, just as I would retire the symphonies of Beethoven, and Shakespeare. Let's just have George Chapman plays for a while. I'm serious. I would like to see regional theatres just stop doing Shakespeare. Do Racine instead. There are so many plays that you never get to see. I feel a little bit that way about Beckett, although there's plenty of Beckett that's never done that I would like to see. I'd like to see somebody make a movie or a play out of *Watt*.

*You just talked about commercialized or cheapened versions of Beckett today. Where do you see Beckett's living heritage?*

I don't see a lot of it. It's hard. When you are in the gold-standard category, as Beckett is, it's hard not to be treated with an exaggerated respect that turns into contempt in practice.

*Contempt by the producers or by the audience?*

It's of no importance to either. It's something they're doing because it's a classic. It's a use that's devoid of any sort of meaningful encounter. As I said, maybe Beckett needs to be put away for a while and be taken out again during a time when there is more at stake and people are not so deluded about what they think they know. I hate to say something as dire as that, but I think it's true. Beckett's not at all interested in what people think they know. He strips that all away. He's interested in what people are thinking when they're not thinking anything, once they've gotten past their opinions and their ideas and their moral thoughts about this, that and the other.



## SUSAN YANKOWITZ

A few years before his stroke, Joe Chaikin reported the following story told to him by Beckett. Apparently Beckett and Cioran had spent a long evening together trying to find the precise word for a certain emotional and spiritual experience or condition. They left the café without giving it a name. Near dawn, Cioran picked up the phone to hear Beckett whisper, "Lessness."

"Lessness" is what has influenced me most in Beckett's work: the economy and exactitude of his language. Every word, including the names of his characters, is

meticulously chosen for its narrowly defined or multiplicity of meanings. And his “lessness” is made all the richer by stipulated pauses and silences, which are as eloquent and specific as his dialogue.

This relates to your third question. I doubt that Beckett’s aesthetic will be permanently affected by the current trend toward the overstuffed. And if so, it is producers and directors, not playwrights, who will turn their productions into the tastelessly baroque extravaganzas for which Yiddish has a word the exact opposite of “lessness”: *ongepotckhet*. In my view, it’s not an issue of economics or affluence, but of egos.

## PLAYWRIGHTS – SELECTED WORKS

- Christopher Durang: *Beyond Therapy*, *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You*, *The Actor's Nightmare*, *Baby with the Bathwater*, *Laughing Wild*, *Bettie's Summer Vacation*
- Will Eno: *Tragedy: a tragedy*, *The Flu Season*, *Kid Blanco*, *King: a problem play*, *THOM PAIN (based on nothing)*
- Richard Foreman: *Penguin Touquet*, *Egyptology*, *The Cure*, *Film is Evil*, *Radio is Good*, *Lava*, *Samuel's Major Problems*, *Pearls for Pigs*, *Bad Boy Nietzsche*, *Maria Del Bosco*, *Zomboid!*
- Richard Greenberg: *The Maderati*, *Eastern Standard*, *The Extra Man*, *Pal Joey*, *Three Days of Rain*, *Take Me Out*, *The Violet Hour*, *A Naked Girl on the Appian Way*
- John Guare: *House of Blue Leaves*, *Rich and Famous*, *Landscape of the Body*, *Bosoms and Neglect*, *Lydie Breeze*, *Six Degrees of Separation*, *Lake Hollywood*
- Tina Howe: *Painting Churches*, *Pride's Crossing*, *Coastal Disturbances*, *Museum*, *Birth and After Birth*, *The Art of Dining*, *Approaching Zanzibar*, *One Shoe Off*, *Rembrandt's Gift*
- Tony Kushner: *A Bright Room Called Day*, *Hydriotaphia*, *The Illusion*, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, *Slavs!*, *A Dybbuk*, *Homebody/Kabul*, *Caroline or Change*
- David Mamet: *Lakeboat*, *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, *American Buffalo*, *A Life in the Theatre*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, *Oleanna*, *The Cryptogram*, *Boston Marriage*
- Richard Maxwell: *Cowboys and Indians*, *House*, *Showy Lady Slipper*, *Boxing 2000*, *Drummer Wanted*, *Good Samaritans*, *The End of Reality*
- Theresa Rebeck: *Spike Heels*, *Loose Knit*, *The Family of Mann*, *View of the Dome*, *Abstract Expression*, *The Water's Edge*, *Bad Dates*, *The Bells*
- Paula Vogel: *Meg*, *Desdemona*, *A Play About A Handkerchief*, *The Oldest Profession*, *The Baltimore Waltz*, *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, *The Mineola Twins*, *How I Learned to Drive*
- Mac Wellman: *Bad Penny*, *Crowbar*, *Terminal Hip*, *Sincerity Forever*, *Bitter Bierce*, *Jennie Richie*, *Anything's Dream*, *Antigone*
- Susan Yankowitz: *Terminal*, *Night Sky*, *The Revenge*, *Phaedra in Delirium*, *A Knife in the Heart*

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JONATHAN KALB is Professor and Chair of the Theatre Department at Hunter College, CUNY. He is the author of *Beckett in Performance*, *The Theatre of Heiner Müller*, and two books of collected criticism.