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Writing for stage: a beckettian template

It is a daunting experience giving over your play to a collaborative team to stage. Suddenly something you have worked on in isolation for a long time becomes the *working property* of a number of other creatives. Though this collaborative situation is expected when writing for the stage, it is important for the playwright to feel the basic integrity of what s/he wrote is essentially preserved, despite the input from directors, actors and designers. Particularly at stake here are the rhythm and sounds of the dramatic writing - in effect the underlying shape or musical score. For me the utilisation of a theatre model that draws on the composition and playing of the later plays of Samuel Beckett provides a way forward to achieving this outcome.

The subterranean sound base of writing has its origins in the writer's 'truth'. It seems to be an organic part of you that is your own *writerly* experience or *dreaming*. It could be classified as a sort of stream-of-consciousness in writing or free writing. The following observations by David Malouf on the experience of writing seem to share this perspective:

> You have to fall out of your conscious mind. You have to fall out of that part of your mind where you know too much, into an area where you don't know anything before the best writing can happen. (in Turcotte 1990: 53)

Irrespective of whether the writer is novelist, poet or playwright, two fundamental conditions appear to pertain in the process of writing. They are the role of the unconscious mind as motor and initiator of unfolding material, and the engagement of the entire body in writing. The role of the unconscious mind in writing is often seen as the source and the medium for creative expression or the mode of travel that speaks the writer's dreaming. As Roberta Sykes writes:

> In the middle of the night, I wake up with a start and sit bolt upright in bed. A poem is fully formed running across my eyes. I see it and I can feel it at the same time, it's so intense. Sometimes I just read it to myself. Other times I get up and write it down. I have to write it down quickly because the words drop out of it if I linger. (in Turcotte 1990: 28)

Roberta Sykes' dreaming experience indicates the unconscious working *at writing* in dream state while she sleeps. American playwright Sam Shepard takes this idea further by insisting inner visualisation goes beyond day and night dreaming. According to Shepard, 'a watcher [is] … engaged while

writing, whereas ordinarily [in day and night dreaming] the watcher is absent' (quoted in Marranca 1981: 214).

For me free writing means I write as in a trance, trying to access my unconscious, trying to break the block I have on this character, trying to 'sound' the rightness of a voice and action in any scenario. I prioritise the rhythm rather than content in what is essentially stream-of-consciousness writing, and this ties directly into my own playwriting praxis, where the text is primarily constructed through privileging what has been termed the 'semiotic element' in language.

Here 'semiotic' does not have its usual meaning as pertaining to signs. According to Julia Kristeva, the semiotic is rather 'a disposition in language' which springs from the subject's repressed pre-Oedipal drives (Kristeva 1984: 136-37) and is in permanent dialectical conflict with the 'symbolic [disposition]' or the element of meaning. To Kristeva, the semiotic is that which privileges the not-conscious, the not-content, the not-motivation, and the not-however-orientated. It manifests itself in language as:

> rhythms, intonations, glossalias in psychotic discourse …
> nonsense effects that destroy not only accepted beliefs and
> significations, but, in radical experiments, syntax itself.
> (Kristeva 1984: 33)

The semiotic can occur in a catch phrase that feels right because of the sound patterns. Hence, my characters are not based, in supposedly-orthodox fashion, on the building of a Stanislavsky-type persona where one asks oneself repeated questions about their truth and character history. Instead they emerge from the repressed level of the semiotic, which utilises the repetition of phrases and images, as well as rhythm. From my subconscious, catchphrases, rhythms, sounds and images become the assemblage of a character. In a monologue I wrote called *Ginger Boy* the character of Billy was shaped partly by the following:

> It seemed to be leaping like a wild cat.
> Squish, squelch. Fur and blood and tar and gravel. Blue patties
> of cat-ginger flecked. And Tom -
> Faster forward. Faster back.
> Faster forward. Faster back.
> Trying to shake something off his wheels. The women that
> were looking pointed with their mouths open. I waved back
> from under the car.
> Smiling. (Beresford 2004: 43)

Kristeva notes that in the works of theatre writer and theorist Anton Artaud, the repressed semiotic's disposition is palpably felt. For me this is particularly evident in the first stanza of *Here Lies* (Hirschman 1965: 238):

> I, Antonin Artaud, am my son,
> my father, my mother,
> my self:
> leveller of the imbecile periplum rooted
> to the family tree:
> the periplum papamummy
> and infant wee,
> crud from the ass of
> granmummy

In this epitaph, or gravestone, the experiential crashes the words and the logical realms of grammar and syntax to produce an *otherness* of text.

The Artaudian Model

Artaud's collection of essays, *The Theatre and its Double* (1938), presents an uncompromising predicament of being human and living: 'We are not free and the sky can still fall on our heads' (Artaud 1970: 60). That rage of being human, according to Artaud, should be the stuff of Theatre presented as spectacle, with the audience part of, and surrounded by, the event. Artaud's thesis affirms that a language and experience of 'other life' is made active through a 'theatricalisation process'. For Artaud this 'other life' is the quintessential language of theatre that shocks, disturbs and implicates the spectator. Artaud's *Theatre and its Double* theorises a theatre that produces a different language, a poetry taking place on stage. Kalb argues that:

> theatre since World War II has in fact manifested the Artaud/Brecht split - internally focussed performance acting on and through the psyche versus externally focussed performance concerned with social forces and acting for social change. (Kalb 1989: 147)

Artaud's revolt against the privileging of text in the theatre and its service to psychological realism - that is, the making of matters logical to the audience - derives from his opposition to a rational, narrative, demonstrational theatre. For him theatre was underpinned by the fact that the human was an unchanging constant whose mythological powers were forever kept at bay by societal norms and expectations and whose darker side, passions and energy were forever muted.

Artaud's theatre is poetic in form: its imagery matches, in places, the partially-surrendered images of our own unconscious - bloody pictures, cries, madness, screams, even cannibalism. Artaud held that the theatre occurred in the vacuum of pointlessness that begins 'its trajectory from that intangible to be capitulated without anchors of reality' (Artaud 1970: 16). For Artaud the spectator was to be an active participator within ritualised stage action, and directors and playwrights had to find a new stage language, somewhere between gesture and thought. Essentially, Artaudian stage language is physical. Artaud reacted against the dominance of the spoken word on stage. He did not want to eliminate words and spoken language as part of theatre's function, yet he objected to the central role they played:

> There is no question of abolishing speech in theatre but of changing its intended purpose, especially to lessen its status to view it as something other than a way of guiding human nature to external ends, since our theatre is solely concerned with the way emotions and feelings conflict with one another or the way man is set against man in life. (Artaud 1970: 53)

Artaud believed the exchange between audience and performer was predictable - and the entrenched lines of demarcation sustained - through passive interaction. Artaud saw his stage language as working from a range of other stage devices alongside the spoken word, to make a metaphor of a shared experience between spectator and performer. According to Artaud, once the script is curtailed, the active role given to dark poetic feelings predicates the need for tangible signs. These signs, always physical, become the stage language and are spatially organised. These devices that 'cooperated in a kind

of pivotal expression' (Artaud 1970: 69) included lighting of objects plotted with silence and/or stillness, as well as those expressive means usable on stage, such as music, dance, plastic art, mimicry, mime, gesture and voice inflection.

Artaud maintains that each of these means holds its own specific poetry as well as a kind of ironic poetry that comes from interplay - the tangible signs present as a poetry that lies beyond the scenic event. For the spectator to respond intuitively to the intelligence of Artaudian theatre, this poetic language - a spatial poetry - must be received on a sensory level:

> It [theatre language] liberates a new lyricism of gestures, which because it is distilled and spatially amplified ends by surpassing the lyricism of words. Finally it breaks away from language's intellectual subjugation by conveying the sense of a new deeper intellectualism hidden under these gestures and signs and raised to the dignity of special exorcisms. (Artaud 1970: 70)

There are clear parallels here to Kristeva's formulations of the semiotic element in language, and Samuel Beckett's later plays provide a blueprint of ways in which playwrights can access the Artaudian model.

The Beckettian Theatre Model

Beckett's later plays, such as *Not I* (1972), *Rockaby* (1981), and *Footfalls* (1975), are essentially performance texts and quintessentially imagist, because the language has built-in distancing techniques - such as the denial of a linear narrative - that simultaneously engage and disengage the audience.

From the outset of his career as a writer, Beckett chose not to write about his work. However, in a letter to director Alan Schneider he states, 'My work is a matter of fundamental sounds … made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else' (Beckett 1957: 185). The music and rhythm of Beckett's later plays are an essential part of their image-making potential, and the actor thus needs to be receptive to 'sounding' Beckett's text. The performer's voice is of paramount importance, and the handful of actors acclaimed as great Beckett interpreters, such as Billie Whitelaw and Daid Warrilow, have brought to their roles a particular vocal quality. When directing his own plays Beckett often used a piano to communicate the sound/pitch level of voice he required from his actors. In fact, it was after Billie Whitelaw's performance in *Not I* that Beckett wrote *Footfalls*, and dedicated it to her. Whitelaw refers to the performance experience in *Footfalls* as a musical Edvard Munch painting (Knowlson 1978: 89).

Kalb reports how Whitelaw maintains her approach to the performance of a Beckett text by locating its music and rhythm, rather than analysing the text for any particular meaning.

> I am not interested in what the plays are about, to be absolutely honest. That's an academic's job. I get a bit nervous when people get too reverent about Beckett's work. (Whitelaw quoted in Kalb 1989: 17)

Similarly, David Warrilow (1980) spoke in an interview with Kalb (1989) of his need to find the right 'tone' to feel comfortable in performance. He also stated that preparation was a process orientated towards a particular sort of theatrical effectiveness:

> And in order to judge that effectiveness, he performs with a kind of double consciousness - of speaking and listening like a musician. (Kalb 1989: 60)

The music in Beckett's works, particularly in his later plays, comes through the rhythm of language used. This is particularly apparent in *Footfalls* and *Rockaby*. These plays produce a soothing lullaby-type effect on an audience. It is an effect that calls for a consummation of the event/predicament presented in the stage picture, but the rhythm is interrupted by a technique of refusing to resolve the situation. Instead, the words that follow 'sound' interruptions that reinstate, one could argue, a present living moment. This refocuses the audience towards the initial stage picture. Essentially the developmental process for Beckettian interpretation is for the actor to become an instrument for the musicality of the text and thus to sound out the stage pictures.

Beckett brings an audience effectively to 'a kind of still point at the core of theatre - a still point in which perception races in a circle' (Porter Abbott 1991: 12). How? Although every play must have an audience, in Beckett's later texts only the audience's participation will complete the performance. However, this participation must go deeper than rational attempts to experience the performance. Beckett requires that the audience also be receptive to the semiotic elements of the language. This in effect brings an audience back to the still point where this playwright begins - in the irrational modes of consciousness. The privileging of rhythm and sound reveals a further semiotic layering which attempts to negotiate the audience's co-creative role in narrative construction by using pause and silence as a punctuation dynamic within the performance text. Punctuation is to do with rhythm and hence is a key element in semiotic patterning.

The theatrical praxis of pause and silence are effective strategies to help the audience co-create the performance text. These strategies lure an audience into a state of consciousness where awareness of the semiotic can be evoked. This praxis is paralleled in Japanese Noh theatre, in which the audience view the stage with half-closed eyes, on the verge of sleep, in order to engage such awareness. Pause and silence operate as a semiotic element, like sound and rhythm, as a form of punctuation that also entices the audience to engage their imagination and have a creative stake in the performance text.

American playwright Suzan Lori-Parks uses a different notation to effect the same dislocation and reinvigoration of rhythm. These directives appear at the start of each of her plays:

> . *(Rest)*
>
> take a little time, a pause, a breather, make a transition
>
> . *A Spell*
>
> An elongated and heightened *(Rest)*. Denoted by repetition of figures' names with no dialogue. Has sort of an architectural look;
>
> Lincoln
> Booth
> Lincoln
> Booth
>
> This is a place where the figures experience their pure true simple state. While no action or stage business is necessary,

> directors should fill this moment as best they see fit. (Lori-Parks 2002: Author's notes)

The texts of Beckett's later plays isolate moments in the lives of his characters within the wholeness of a larger narrative. These discrete moments are never verified by the larger narrative, yet are registered by the spectator. The intangibility of the larger narrative produces struggle and quest for the audience as it does for the character. The 'doubleness' inherent in this situation accommodates the audience as part of the performance text.

The co-creative and image-making role of the audience as 'privileged voyeur' works as follows. The Beckettian character in the later plays repeats memories as habit, there being no assimilation of them into awareness of the present. Instead:

> The spectator locates these memories … projecting them into a fictional past in which they once manifested a keen awareness … we [as spectators] confront and [build] the gap between past and present as the principal subject presented. (Lyons 1983: 310)

Naturalistic action, though sparing, enhances the effect of non-verification. In Beckett the stasis maintained in the larger narrative predicates the ambiguity of any resolution but enables fragmentary glimpses of a character's life and reality. It is on this ambiguity that the poetics of Beckett's theatre rest. The more strongly the actor can build on the character's identifiable realism within that ambiguity, the greater the imagist impact of Beckett's theatre. Beckett creates this ambiguity by his interlinking of representational and presentational action in the single scenes or situations that typify his later plays.

In preparing to perform Beckett:

> [t]he central aesthetic problem for the director and actor is to embody the Beckett text, in performance, without supplying the scenic, psychological, or emotional contexts that Beckett the playwright has carefully removed from the text. (Becker and Lyons 1986: 294)

In a way, what Beckett presents with his presentational/representational mix of action is a theatre that exists somewhere between Stanislavskian and Brechtian models. In this instance, the presentational mode, by which I mean an awareness of the wider narrative of the performance, does not synchronise with the representational, by which I mean what the actor actually does, for example, in terms of movements and speech patterns to depict character.

With Stanislavsky the actor prepares a character role by sourcing the subtext from the play s/he is performing in order to reveal the intentions and inner life of the character. The actor considers work towards fuller text realisation to be uniquely his/her creative brief. In Brechtian theatre, the actor's role is again orientated towards privileging socio-political aspects of character and situation. Both contrast with Beckett, where there is no privileging of text to locate subtext. All is subtext. Unlike Stanislavsky, Beckett does not propose to the audience the truth of an internal fiction. Instead the basis of his theatre's appeal is uncertainty or ambiguity.

In Beckett's later plays character detail is also very sketchy. Often a dismembered human figure fronts as a character. What happens, in effect, is that the 'illusion of a character is sustained in the physical by presence of the actor …' (Lyons 1983: 300). The illusion becomes more tenuous and thus more

vulnerable when the text is presented independently as a commentary on the action. In effect, the self as object becomes the theatrical study. The actor's body, though, can still contain the dialogue, and the presence effected establishes the dramatic moment the actor speaks 'in specific relationship to an image of space and time' (Becker and Lyons 1986: 292).

The actor has to project the living moment of the present situation through a character's emotion 'that exists only within the irretrievable history of the character' (Becker and Lyons 1986: 292). These gaps and interruptions of the character's consciousness the actor must bridge through his/her own physical presence, that is, through 'aliveness'. In the same way, actor movement in Beckett is choreographed to a precision that makes it non-naturalistic through its style and submission to the original stage picture. Examples include the eye closing in *Rockaby*, the arm gesture of resignation in *Not I*, and the knock-repeat-knock sequence in *Ohio Impromptu* (1981).

Beckett's precision in creating the stage picture mainly through actors makes him as much a painter as a playwright. Effectively, characters' movements become choreographed and sculptured. The particularity of a character's action, physically and vocally, is vital, because the director, while being faithful to the focus on the specific in terms of character portrayal and subsequent action, must nevertheless adhere to the 'mindscape' of the text, which is often signalled by a prescribed stillness. Hence Beckett's stage directions are precisely detailed and adhere faithfully to this 'composition' of the performance text.

The later Beckett plays present more than a glimpse of Artaud's 'other life'. They are rather a theatre of consciousness that challenges the passivity of the traditional spectator role by deliberately committing their audiences to the role of accomplice or privileged voyeur. This is done particularly through fractured syntax, pauses and silences, unexplained and mysterious repetitions, and the presentation of disconnected images. It is the impact of these techniques to produce 'otherness' that lead me to privilege the Kristevan semiotic in the language of my own plays, to locate their signature or musical score.

As a playwright I have endeavoured to control my material or monitor it post-textually by writing it in the form of a musical score. Although I anticipate negotiations with the director and other theatre personnel, if the musical score is tight enough, there can be changes without unpicking the foundation frame, which for me is ultimately the signature song(s) that is my play. The collaboration of actors and directors utilising eclectic Beckettian methodology in the making of the performance text not only reveals what I have tried to *say*, but also extends it beyond the writer and actor to give to the audience a deeper realisation of the play that is a truly *heard* and truly *felt* experience.

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