



香港城市大學
City University of Hong Kong

專業 創新 胸懷全球
Professional · Creative
For The World

CityU Scholars

Beckett by Brook or theatre uplifted by abusive fidelity

Glynn, Dominic

Published in:
Francosphères

Published: 01/06/2020

Document Version:
Final Published version, also known as Publisher's PDF, Publisher's Final version or Version of Record

License:
CC BY

Publication record in CityU Scholars:
[Go to record](#)

Published version (DOI):
[10.3828/franc.2020.5](https://doi.org/10.3828/franc.2020.5)

Publication details:
Glynn, D. (2020). Beckett by Brook or theatre uplifted by abusive fidelity. *Francosphères*, 9(1), 55-69.
<https://doi.org/10.3828/franc.2020.5>

Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on CityU Scholars is the Post-print version (also known as Accepted Author Manuscript, Peer-reviewed or Author Final version), it may differ from the Final Published version. When citing, ensure that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination and other details.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the CityU Scholars portal is retained by the author(s) and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights. Users may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.

Publisher permission

Permission for previously published items are in accordance with publisher's copyright policies sourced from the SHERPA RoMEO database. Links to full text versions (either Published or Post-print) are only available if corresponding publishers allow open access.

Take down policy

Contact lbscholars@cityu.edu.hk if you believe that this document breaches copyright and provide us with details. We will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Beckett by Brook or theatre uplifted by abusive fidelity¹

Dominic Glynn²

City University of Hong Kong

This article considers Samuel Beckett through the lens of theatre director Peter Brook. More specifically, it looks at the ways in which Brook engages with Beckett, both in his theoretical writings, and in his stage productions. What becomes apparent is not only that Brook highly values Beckett personally, but that he is especially taken with his dramaturgy, the particular quality of which lies, in Brook's eyes, in its capacity to rid itself of all superfluous trappings to express what is essential. Brook's admiration does not, however, lead him to direct *Oh les beaux jours* (1995), *Glückliche Tage* (2003), and *Fragments* (2006, 2015) in a faithfully subservient manner, but rather to adopt a pragmatic approach to staging these texts, akin to what, in translation studies, is referred to as 'abusive fidelity', and which consists in moving away from the precise stage directions in order to find new means of expressing what is at stake in the plays.

Keywords: Beckett, Peter Brook, staging, abusive fidelity, fragments

Cet article propose une lecture de Samuel Beckett au prisme de l'œuvre du metteur en scène Peter Brook. Plus précisément, il étudie la manière dont Brook appréhende Beckett, dans ses écrits théoriques et à travers ses réalisations scéniques. Il en ressort une grande admiration pour l'homme, qu'il aura eu l'occasion de croiser à de maintes reprises, mais surtout, pour sa dramaturgie; dont la particularité réside, selon lui, dans sa capacité à se délester de tout contenu superflu pour ne retenir que l'essentiel. Toutefois, dans ses mises en scène d'*Oh les beaux jours* (1995), *Glückliche Tage* (2003) et *Fragments* (2006, 2015), cette admiration ne se traduit pas par un respect forcené des indications de jeu, mais plutôt par ce que l'on nommera, en empruntant le concept à la traductologie, « une fidélité abusive », qui consiste à trouver de nouvelles modalités afin de mieux exprimer les enjeux du texte.

Mots clefs: Beckett, Peter Brook, mise en scène, fidélité abusive, fragments

Peter Brook directed his first production of a Samuel Beckett play at the Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne in 1995. When *Oh les beaux jours* toured in Glasgow

1 The title of this article takes its lead from the documentary *Beckett by Brook* (C.I.C.T./Bouffes du Nord and Arte, 2015), available online <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=71I_51ef3Cw> [accessed 10 January 2020].

2 This work was supported by City University of Hong Kong: [Grant Number 7200619].

a couple of years later, *The Guardian* considered that the playwright and director were a perfect match: '[t]hey seem made for each other. The one a master of minimalism, the other engaged on a permanent quest for the essence of theatre'.³ Though not suggested in the review, the fact that the former was deceased may have made the match all the more perfect. On the surface, Brook and Beckett appear to have much in common. Both are English-speaking artists who moved to France, directed Beckett's texts in English, French and German,⁴ and are renowned for their pared-down aesthetics; the former's interest in the 'Empty Space'⁵ combining fruitfully with what Pascale Sardin labels 'the Beckettian ethos of lessness'.⁶ Yet, there is also a lot that sets them apart, given that their methods of working on texts are almost diametrically opposed. While Brook places considerable emphasis on actors finding their own way of bringing a play to life on stage, Beckett has often been portrayed as something of a tyrant in the rehearsal room, issuing 'very detailed, very detailed indeed' instructions to actors.⁷

Differences in approaches to theatre-making could explain why the two men never collaborated during the playwright's lifetime. Brook was nevertheless a keen reader of Beckett, and engaged with his work throughout his career, as is evident from his theoretical writings.⁸ What is more, as archival traces attest, though Brook was never part of Beckett's circle of intimate friends, they did know each other, socialised, and even planned to collaborate.⁹ To date, little attention has been devoted to Peter Brook within Beckett studies, and Beckett is not regarded by theatre scholars as central to charting Brook's career. Yet, from the perspective of the reception of Beckett's works, the fact that a 'key' director¹⁰ in twentieth- and

3 'Arts', *The Guardian*, 29 November 1997, available online <https://archive.org/stream/TheGuardian1997UKEnglish/Dec%2014%201997%2C%20The%20Guardian%20Supplement%2C%20%2324%2C%20UK%20%28en%29_djvu.txt> [accessed 10 January 2020].

4 Beckett directed many of his own works in French and English. His last stint as a director was for German television in 1980, when he directed *Was Wo* [*What Where?*]. Brook directed Beckett's *Oh les beaux jours* in French (1995), *Glückliche Tage* [*Happy Days*] in German (2003), and a collection of short plays, *Fragments* (with Marie-Hélène Estienne) in English with two different casts in 2006 and 2015.

5 See Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: McGibbon and Kee, 1968).

6 See Pascale Sardin, this issue.

7 Jack MacGowran, qtd. in Richard Toscan, 'MacGowran on Beckett: Interview by Richard Toscan', in *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, ed. by Stanley E. Gontarski (London: Anthem Press, 2012), pp. 157–88 (p. 158).

8 In *The Empty Space*, notably, but also in other articles and books, as will become clear in the course of this article.

9 This is apparent from their correspondence archived in the V&A Theatre and Performance Collections, Peter Brook Collection, GB 71 THM/452/3/6.

10 The use of this term is justified by Brook's inclusion in Shomit Mitter and Maria Shevstova, *Fifty Key Theatre Directors* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

twenty-first-century theatre history has staged his writing for the stage marks him out as a potentially useful case study.

This article will first chart Brook's career, before analysing his writing and his stage productions, drawing on various sources including reviews and archive material. It will suggest that Brook's contribution to the playwright's reception has been to interpret his theatre as 'uplifting' in a manner that sits uncomfortably with the presiding image of Beckett as a sinister playwright.¹¹ This has notably been achieved by adopting a pragmatic approach to staging the texts, akin to what, in translation studies, is referred to as 'abusive fidelity', and which consists in moving away from the text in order to, paradoxically, remain more faithful to it.¹² Analysis of *Oh les beaux jours* and the 2015 production of *Fragments*, in particular, will serve to support this argument.

Close encounters

There is hardly a mention of Peter Brook in James Knowlson's authoritative biography of Samuel Beckett, *Damned to Fame*, apart from the fact that the two set up a trust fund to help raise the two young children of Jean-Marie Serreau, upon his death.¹³ Such a passing mention highlights the fact that Brook was never part of Beckett's circle of close collaborators and friends. However, the joint financial commitment suggests a deeper connection between the two than is explored in the biography. Not having staged any of Beckett's plays during his lifetime explains why Brook did not feature on Knowlson's radar.¹⁴ Yet, as he has made clear in many interviews, Brook and Beckett were both professionally and personally acquainted, becoming, over the years, progressively more intimate.

As English-speaking theatre practitioners who spent time in both London and Paris, it is not surprising that Brook and Beckett should have crossed paths, being part of the same 'art world'.¹⁵ Though considerably

11 See Marc Paquien, this issue.

12 For discussion of this term, see Lawrence Venuti, 'Translating Derrida on Translation: Relevance and Disciplinary Resistance', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 16.2 (2003), 237–62.

13 Serreau had been the artistic director of the Théâtre de Babylone, where *En attendant Godot* premiered. See James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 514.

14 The first documented exchange between Knowlson and Brook occurs during the preparation of *Oh les beaux jours* as Brook both complements Knowlson and requests a copy of a book. Knowlson subsequently requests confirmation of an anecdote. Correspondence between James Knowlson, Peter Brook, and Natasha Parry is held in Reading, James and Elizabeth Knowlson Collection, JEK/A/2/42.

15 Howard Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

younger than Beckett (b. 1906), Brook (b. 1925) rapidly rose to prominence on the London theatre scene, such that by the mid-1950s, when *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* were staged at the Royal Court, he was very much an established figure. Following a war degree in Modern Languages at the University of Oxford, his career took off quickly with early productions of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1943), Carl Wildman's translation of Jean Cocteau's *La Machine infernale* [*The Infernal Machine*] (1945) and Marjorie Gabain and Joan Swinstead's translation of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Huis Clos* [*Vicious Circle*] in London fringe theatres being well-received.¹⁶ Just as Roger Blin had had to work hard to adapt *Godot* to the restrictive dimensions of the stage at the Théâtre de Babylone, Brook displayed considerable ingeniousness in turning the constraints of small performance areas into springboards for success. However, it was not long before he was producing in larger venues. By 1946, he was co-opted to the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, directing *Love's Labour's Lost* (1946), *Measure for Measure* (1950), and *Titus Andronicus* (1955), notably. During his rapid ascension, he had a spell as a ballet critic for *The Observer* and was appointed director of productions at the Royal Opera House, a position from which he resigned in 1950, claiming opera was dead.¹⁷ It is to be noted that Brook was also a filmmaker, with *Moderato Cantabile* (1960), *Lord of the Flies* (1963), and *Meetings with Remarkable Men* (1979), amongst others, to his name.

During the 1960s, Brook became part of the management team at the Royal Shakespeare Company led by Peter Hall and embarked on an experimental phase of work. The experiments, which led for example to the devised production of *US* in 1966, and which brought the horrors of the Vietnam war home to its London audience, placed the actor at the heart of all theatre work. An invitation to Paris from Jean-Louis Barrault followed in 1968 to conduct workshops on *The Tempest*. These would serve as the basis for what was to become the Centre International de Créations Théâtrales (CICT), an intercultural group of actors that became the crucible for Brook's explorations of Sufi literature (*La Conférence des oiseaux* [1979]) and the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata* (1985). Since the 1970s, the company's home has been the Bouffes du Nord, a space that has done much to fashion his directorial vision to date.

It was Brook's position of authority at the Royal Shakespeare Company in the 1960s that initially brought him into contact with Beckett. In a letter to

¹⁶ As can be attested in the production reviews collected in V&A Peter Brook Collection, Press Cuttings album labelled P.B.1, GB 71 THM/452/15/1/1.

¹⁷ See Kenneth Tynan, 'Peter Brook', *Profiles*, ed. by Kathleen Tynan and Ernie Eban (London: Nick Hearn, 1989), p. 78.

Barbara Bray, the latter expresses relief at the good reactions to the production of *Endgame*, produced by RSC at the Aldwych in 1964. He notes that the cast and friends were ‘all very pleased with reactions, including P. Brooke’s [*sic*]’.¹⁸ The fact that Brook is singled out highlights the importance of gaining his approval, given his institutional connections. However, the misspelling shows that the two were not yet well acquainted. Yet Brook’s enthusiasm for the play *Endgame*, and the production directed by Donald McWhinnie in particular, was apparent in the amusingly titled article he wrote for the theatre magazine *Encore*, ‘*Endgame as King Lear: Or How to Stop Worrying About Beckett*’. It begins in what is characteristic bombastic fashion for Brook, by the grand claim that ‘*Endgame* as produced by the Royal Shakespeare at the Aldwych was the greatest event in the English theatre for many years’.¹⁹ To which he adds, with a touch of bad faith: ‘I don’t see why the fact I’m an official of the organisation should prevent my saying this’.²⁰

The title of the article is a reference to Brook’s own 1962 production of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, which very much bore the imprint of Beckett’s work – to such an extent that it might be described as his first Beckett production. Indeed, he directed the play with Jan Kott’s interpretation of his work, *Szkice o Szekspirze* [*Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*], in mind. Kott argues that certain scenes in *Lear*, in particular that of Edgar leading the blind Goneril to the precipice at Dover and inviting him to jump (IV, vi–vii) are resolutely Beckettian, and prefigure Pozzo being led by Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*.²¹ Thus, as an article from the 1970s by Normand Belin noted humorously:

By an interesting chain of circumstances, modern audiences have been exposed to a view of Shakespeare reflected in a mirror held by an English director, fashioned by a Polish critic, and reflecting at the same time an Irishman writing his plays in French.²²

Belin’s reference to Beckett is backed up by Charles Marowitz, who was the assistant director on the production, and whose ‘log’ appeared in the *Tulane*

18 *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1957–1965*, ed. by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), IV, p. 607.

19 Peter Brook, ‘*Endgame as King Lear: or How to Stop Worrying about Beckett*’, *Encore*, 12 (1965), 8–12 (p. 8).

20 *Ibid.*

21 See Jan Kott, *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*, trans. by Boleswla Taborski (London: Methuen, 1964; repr. 1967), p. 127.

22 Reference to Normand Belin, ‘Peter Brook’s Interpretation of *King Lear*: “Nothing will come of Nothing”’, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 5 (1977), 299–303 (p. 299).

Drama Review. According to Marowitz, he was the frame of reference for the cast rehearsing *Lear*, and indirectly influenced a great many aspects of its staging, including the set and costumes:

[I]n discussion the work of rehearsals, our frame of reference was always Beckettian. The world of *Lear*, like Beckett's world, is in a constant state of decomposition. The set consists of geometrical sheets of metal which are ginger with rust and corrosion. The costumes, dominantly leather, have been textured to suggest long and hard wear. The knight's tabards are peeling with long use; Lear's cape and coat are creased and blackened with time and weather. The furniture is rough wood, there is nothing but space – giant white flaps opening on a black cyclorama.²³

Beckett is equated here by Marowitz with the decrepit atmosphere of *Endgame*, but there were other plays that critics have called upon when discussing Brook's production. Most notably, the stage lighting, which consisted of 'a permanent, unnaturally bright light', was reminiscent, according to Marguerite Tassi, of 'the blazing light of Beckett's *Happy Days*'.²⁴ When Brook stated '[a]fter all the talk of *Lear* being by Beckett, here we had a stage experience by Beckett comparable to *Lear*',²⁵ adding a further level of intertext, '[t]oo late, too late, too late runs through *Endgame*, turning into never, never, never, never', he was echoing not only his own thoughts but highlighting how Beckett had been read via Shakespeare in various quarters.²⁶

No doubt inspired by the RSC production of *Endgame*, he contacted Beckett towards the end of 1964 with a proposed collaboration, suggesting that Beckett might adapt Pedro Calderón de la Barca's Spanish Golden Age drama, *La Vida es un sueño* [Life is a Dream]. He explained that Beckett was 'the only person in the world who could recreate this play from its core', and enquired whether 'such a work might appeal'.²⁷ The play, as is hinted at in the title, focuses on the instability of life and the illusory nature of the world. The opening scene takes place at night in the countryside between Poland and Russia, where Rosaura, a noblewoman disguised as a man, and her servant, are journeying on foot after the loss of their horses. It appears, at first glance, remarkably distant from the world of Beckett's imagination,

23 Charles Marowitz, 'Lear Log', *Tulane Drama Review*, 8.2 (1963), 103–21 (p. 108).

24 Marguerite Tassi, 'Shakespeare and Beckett revisited: A phenomenology of theater', *Comparative Drama*, 31.2 (1997), 248–76 (p. 249).

25 Brook, 'Endgame as King Lear', p. 8.

26 Brook, 'Endgame as King Lear', p. 12.

27 Letter of 24 November 1964. Qtd. in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 803, note 67.

though, as has been pointed out by a number of scholars, he was well-versed in Early Modern literature and painting.²⁸ Quite what Brook meant by recreating the play from ‘its core’ is also somewhat unclear, but very much part of in keeping with his vocabulary of stripping down theatre to its essence. Certainly, the florid language of the source text, written in verse, seems at odds with the minimalistic expression adopted by Beckett in his early stage pieces. Rather unsurprisingly, the offer was received politely but the proposal declined.

Brook’s opening is in keeping with the way he has operated in the theatre throughout his career, suggesting projects to collaborators who might, on first impression, seem unlikely to accept. Thus, he teamed up with poet Ted Hughes for a project performed in the ruins of the city of Persepolis in 1971. The play, entitled *Orghast*, was written by Hughes in an invented poetic language. What is clear here, in addition to the fact that Beckett was unwilling to position himself as the adaptor of someone else’s work, is that Brook was not at this point well-acquainted with Beckett, though this did indeed change. In personal correspondence dating from 1966, kept at the Peter Brook archives in the V&A, there is reference to the possibility of working together, though Beckett apologises for being too tired to do so fully.²⁹ The collaboration, which never materialised, is referred to by Brook in an article by Peter Lennon for *The Guardian*, published when *Oh les beaux jours* was touring the UK:

In the mid-sixties, Beckett had confessed to Brook that he was finding it harder and harder to write. He often said this, but it did not mean that he would not continue to quarry more and more out of less and less. His next effort was *Imagination Dead Imagine*. But Peter Brook decided to rescue him and persuade Beckett to work ‘innocently’, a potent word with Brook, meaning to be immaculately open to a new experience.

The notion was that Beckett would come along to Brook’s workshop and, when the mood took him, toss in a few fragments which the actors would then ‘develop’. ‘I told Sam you can write as you might write postcards,’ Brook said. ‘He was thrilled and accepted.’

‘As it came nearer to the time,’ Brook said, ‘Sam became more and more appalled at the idea. Then I got a letter saying, ‘I’ve spoken to my doctor and I think this is not going to be a good period, I have to take a rest’.

‘It was very typical of him that he went generously towards it,’ Brook acknowledged. ‘Then when he had to confront the reality of actually

28 See, for instance, *Early Modern Beckett/Beckett et le début de l’ère moderne*, ed. by Angela Moorjani, Danièle de Ruyter-Tognotti, Dúnlaith Bird, and Sjeff Houppermans (Leiden: Rodopi, 2012).

29 See V&A Theatre and Performance Collections, Peter Brook Collection, GB 71 THM/452/3/6.

writing, with actors standing by doing words that he had not really finished, the experiment was finished'.³⁰

Irrespective of health and time constraints, it is likely, as Brook contends, that his directorial approach was anathema to the way that Beckett conceived of his own texts, and how he worked as a director. Describing Beckett's directorial practice, James Knowlson writes in *Damned to fame*:

Beckett was never an actor's director. He seemed to be unable to put himself into an actor's skin and appreciate the problems that he or she was experiencing with the text or with what seemed too often like an alien way of working. For him, pace, tone and, above all, rhythm were more important than the sharpness of character delineation or emotional depth.³¹

Brook on the other hand was always open to experiment and to try new things with actors. This is abundantly clear from his writing, documentaries on practice, and insights provided by collaborators.³² Concerning the production of *Lear*, Charles Marowitz noted in his log that:

Brook's production approach is relentless (and at times, maddeningly) experimental. He believes that there is no such thing as the 'right' way. Every rehearsal dictates its own rhythm and its state of completion. If what is wrong today is wrong tomorrow, tomorrow will reveal it, and it is though the constant elimination of possibilities that Brook finally arrives at completion.³³

The final sentence of the above quote suggests a methodology in some ways akin to the stripping down approach to working on language that Beckett adopted in drafting his texts, and which Brook alludes to in the documentary 'Beckett by Brook'. However, it is the second sentence that reveals the extent of the gulf between Brook, who placed all emphasis on actors finding inroads into performing a text rather than the text dictating an approach, and Beckett, who was not an 'actor's director'. Arguably, it is the appreciation for Beckett as a person that Brook developed during the 1960s which prevented him from working alone on one of his texts and

30 Peter Lennon, 'Playing Sam's Game', *Guardian*, 22 November 1997, available online <https://archive.org/stream/TheGuardian1997UKEnglish/Nov%2022%201997%2C%20The%20Guardian%2C%20%23114%2C%20UK%20%28en%29_djvu.txt> [accessed 10 January 2020].

31 Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 502.

32 To give but one example, Simon Brook's *Peter Brook: The Tightrope* (First Run Features, 2014) offers access to Brook in the rehearsal room.

33 Marowitz, 'Lear Log', p. 108.

respectfully but forcefully going against his stage requests, as he was to do in the productions of *Fragments* in 2008 and 2015.

Illiteral readings

In a pre-show talk at the Warwick Arts Centre in 2005, Brook explained that he has always considered Shakespeare, Chekov, and Beckett to be the most important playwrights in theatre history.³⁴ This echoes his affirmation in *The Empty Space* that ‘perhaps the most intense and personal writing of our time comes from Samuel Beckett’.³⁵ It is thus not surprising that references to Beckett traverse many of Brook’s writings. In surveying these references, it becomes apparent that a number of themes emerge that later shape his approach to staging Beckett’s plays. For instance, in *The Empty Space*, there is early recognition that Beckett is not all about doom and gloom: ‘When we attack Beckett for pessimism it is we who are trapped in a Beckett scene. When we accept Beckett’s statement as it is, then suddenly all is transformed’.³⁶ In addition, Brook explains that there is nothing superfluous in Beckett’s writing: ‘The compression [of his works] consists of removing everything that is not strictly necessary and intensifying what is there, such as putting a strong adjective in the place of a bland one, while preserving the impression of spontaneity’.³⁷ Such remarks about compression go hand in hand with the idea of paring down plays to their essential, at the heart of Brook’s own approach, as the previous quote from Marowitz indicated. The sets that he uses, since his move to the Bouffes du Nord, are not ornate, but highlight only the essential elements that will enable the actor to play.

Such constant engagement with Beckett’s work, whether in the *Encore* articles or in more developed theoretical works, paved the way for Brook eventually directing one of his plays. When he did so, it was *Oh les beaux jours*, which he produced ‘away from home’ at the Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne. Directing *Happy Days/Oh les beaux jours* is no easy task. Indeed, as James Knowlson and John Pilling suggest, ‘a list of the ingredients in *Happy Days* sounds like a deliberate accumulation of difficulties’.³⁸

34 Peter Brook interviewed by Richard Eyre, Warwick Arts Centre, 23 June 2005.

35 Brook, *The Empty Space*, p. 58.

36 Ibid., p. 59.

37 Peter Brook, *There Are No Secrets: Thoughts on Acting and Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1995), p. 10.

38 James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose of Samuel Beckett* (London: John Calder, 1979), p. 108.

However, Brook had long been familiar with the play, having attended the New York premiere with his wife Natasha Parry. In *The Empty Space*, he provides a rather striking and somewhat unusual comparison between Beckett, Merce Cunningham, and Jerzy Grotowski, which he justifies by the fact that, in his mind, they ‘have several things in common; small means, intense work, rigorous discipline, absolute precision’.³⁹ The description of Beckett’s theatre in terms of ‘absolute precision’ presumes that any staging will also be meticulously precise and strongly suggests the need for close adherence to the words and gestures described. This understanding is what would later guide his close reading of *Oh les beaux jours*.

Additionally, it was the sentiment that Beckett was misrepresented as a gloomy writer that Brook fought against in his early writings, and which would also inform his staging of *Oh les beaux jours*. In a comparative review article for *Encore*, Brook looks at Alain Robbe-Grillet’s film *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* and Beckett’s *Happy Days*. Quite unmoved by the former, he argues that the latter is ‘a desperate cry, but at the same time it is implying something very positive, perhaps more positive than any other Beckett work’.⁴⁰ Such a reading of *Happy Days* as paradoxically traversed by a life-affirming force just as it portrays a woman steadily sinking into the ground is exactly what Marc Paquien, in this issue, argues the play is about. Like Paquien, Brook’s decision to stage *Oh les beaux jours* was motivated by his choice of actress. Marc Paquien declares ‘[j]e n’aurais jamais monté *Oh les beaux jours* si je n’avais pas eu une actrice’.⁴¹ For Brook, it was after working on *La Cerisaie* in 1981 with his wife, Natasha Parry, playing the part of Lioubov Andréevna, that he conceived of her as a potential Winnie. Though enthusiastic, Parry was also hesitant when faced with the task as Brook explains in a radio interview for the BBC:

We’d both seen the very first production in New York. We were friends with Beckett. [Natasha Parry] adored Beckett and has followed Beckett and everything he has written very, very closely. We’d seen productions of the play, we saw Madeleine Renaud doing it, and what I think is perhaps very exceptional is that here was an actress who didn’t leap on the part thinking what a vehicle. On the contrary, when I said to Natasha, here’s a play that I think you could bring a different quality to it that could make the play truer for today’s audience in French, she both felt this, and felt at

39 Brook, *The Empty Space*, p. 60.

40 Peter Brook, ‘Happy Days and Marienbad’, *Encore*, 9 (1962), 34–38 (p. 36).

41 See Paquien, this issue.

the same time such hesitation, such respect and reserve and humility in front of the task.⁴²

The idea of making the play ‘truer’ was rooted in a desire to uncover as carefully as possible the playwright’s intentions. In preparing for the production, Brook contacted James Knowlson, who was at the time Professor of French at the University of Reading and who had prepared a bilingual edition of the play along with Samuel Beckett’s directing notebooks. Parry, in particular, was to develop a friendship with Knowlson, informing him of developments in the tour of the play.⁴³ Knowlson argues in the opening pages of the *Happy Days: Samuel Beckett’s Production Notebooks* that Beckett’s take on his own plays are not taken as Gospel: ‘[w]hat the author acting as his own director produces is not, of course, sacrosanct. Other directors and performers remain free to interpret his plays in their own way. Copies are in any case so often dull and lifeless’.⁴⁴ Yet, Parry found that it was in adhering as closely as possible to the indications set out in the notebooks that she was able to come closest to what she perceived to be the best way of performing the text.

Such close adherence explains why the metaphor of the musical score, frequently used by critics in analyzing stage productions of Beckett’s plays,⁴⁵ was applied to *Oh les beaux jours* directed by Brook. Thus, in *The Guardian*: ‘Brook’s production is musically phrased and emotionally exact: it is pitched almost perfectly between ironic optimism and existential despair’.⁴⁶ Robert Hanks, in *The Independent*, meanwhile suggests that reviewing a Beckett play is ‘closer to writing about classical music than about ordinary theatre’.⁴⁷ René Solis in *Libération*, writes: ‘Soir après soir, Natasha Perry épure sa partition. Plus le temps passera, plus elle se rapprochera de l’apesanteur’.⁴⁸

42 BBC Radio 4, *Kaleidoscope*, 1 December 1997, Recording at Reading, James and Elizabeth Knowlson Collection, JEK C/24.

43 See archive material held in the James and Elizabeth Knowlson Collection, JEK/A/2/42.

44 *Happy Days: Samuel Beckett’s Production Notebooks*, ed. by James Knowlson (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 12.

45 See Matthieu Protin, this issue.

46 ‘Arts’, *Guardian*, 29 November 1997, available online <https://archive.org/stream/TheGuardian1997UKEnglish/Dec%2014%201997%2C%20The%20Guardian%20Supplement%2C%20%2324%2C%20UK%20%28en%29_djvu.txt> [accessed 10 January 2020].

47 Robert Hanks, ‘Indy Life’, *The Independent*, 7 December 1997, available online <<https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/theatre-samuel-becketts-meaning-of-life-1287337.html>> [accessed 10 January 2020].

48 René Solis, ‘Théâtre’, *Libération*, 22 September 1995, available online <https://next.liberation.fr/culture/1995/09/22/theatre-dans-oh-les-beaux-jours-cadeau-a-la-comedienne-natasha-parry-la-patte-de-peter-brook-se-mani_142669> [accessed 10 January 2020].

The reference to Parry's weightlessness is on the one hand ironic, given the stage situation, and, on the other, in keeping with descriptions of Brook's other shows, such as Philippe Chevilley's description of *Fragments*: 'La rencontre de deux épures: Beckett et ses "Fragments", pièces minuscules où le tragique s'étouffe dans le rire; Peter Brook et son théâtre en apesanteur, qui avec un rien dit tout, fait tout...'.⁴⁹

In addition, this musicality was valued by Brook in his promotional talks concerning his German-language production, as Merle Tönnies explains: Brook 'treated the text like a musician dealing with a musical score, trying not to change anything in it (since that would only harm the result), but to play what is given with the greatest possible precision'.⁵⁰ Tönnies also explains that Brook was faithful to Beckett's approach, including the revisions 'that Beckett had made for the "score" of his 1979 Royal Court production of *Happy Days*'.⁵¹ To this may be added the fact that it is common practice for Brook to direct two versions of the same play, generally in French and English, in what may be described as a Beckettian gesture. As with Beckett, while the productions ostensibly look similar, there are certain differences between the two that provide subtle inflections.

However, for all the apparent faithfulness of Brook's musical interpretation which might, as Solis suggests, have surprised audiences familiar with his work, there were a number of small changes. As Solis explains, it is in the details that 'on peut relever la patte du maître'.⁵² For instance, in the set:

on cherchera en vain la « toile de fond en trompe-l'œil très pompier (qui) représente la fuite et la rencontre au loin d'un ciel sans nuages et d'une plaine dénudée ». La cage de scène est simplement tendue de gris ou de noir selon la lumière.⁵³

The explanation given by Solis is that this is in fact closer to what Beckett would have wanted than was explicitly written in the text. Such an idea of

49 Philippe Chevilley, 'Les « Fragments » magiques de Peter Brook aux Bouffes du Nord', *Les Echos*, 8 November 2015, available online <<https://www.lesechos.fr/2015/01/les-fragments-magiques-de-peter-brook-aux-bouffes-du-nord-1105204>> [accessed 10 January 2020]. For further discussion of the reception of Brook's theatre, see Dominic Glynn, *(Re)telling Old Stories* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2015).

50 Merle Tönnies, 'Peter Brook's *Glückliche Tage*', *The Beckett Circle Newsletter of the Samuel Beckett Society*, 26.3 (2003), 1–3 (p. 1). In the German production, it was Miriam Goldschmidt, a long-term collaborator of Brook's, who played the part of Winnie.

51 Ibid.

52 René Solis, 'Théâtre', *Libération*, 22 September 1995, available online <https://next.liberation.fr/culture/1995/09/22/theatre-dans-oh-les-beaux-jours-cadeau-a-la-comedienne-natasha-parry-la-patte-de-peter-brook-se-mani_142669> [accessed 10 January 2020].

53 Ibid.

being more faithful to the spirit of the text than the text itself is suggested in the translation studies term ‘abusive fidelity’. In the words of Philip Lewis, who coined the term, abusive fidelity is characterised as ‘the strong, forceful translation that values experimentation, tampers with usage, seeks to match the polyvalencies or plurivocities or expressive stresses of the original by producing its own’.⁵⁴ This notion of serving the author by disserving them is taken a step further in Brook’s productions of *Fragments*.

Fragments of life

Just as Brook directed two versions of *Oh les beaux jours*, he staged two versions of *Fragments*, the first in 2006, the second in 2015. Unlike the former, however, these productions were premiered at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, and were both in English. That the productions of *Fragments* were first staged at the Bouffes is indicative of the fact that to a greater extent than in the previous productions, Brook brought Beckett into his world, into his own space. Indeed, if there is one venue closely associated with Brook, it is this theatre, and to make sense of Brook’s work, one needs to consider the fabric of the building, for as Marvin Carlson has argued:

The entire theatre, its audience arrangements, its other public spaces, its physical appearance, even its location within a city are all important elements of a process by which an audience makes meaning of an event.⁵⁵

When Brook discovered the theatre in the late 1960s, it was in a state of ruin, but the renovations that were undertaken exposed the scars and blemishes of its past and thus created a space that is both edifice and shelter, as Georges Banu explains:

Antoine Vitez classe les espaces théâtraux en deux catégories: *l’abri*, le lieu qui reçoit le théâtre sans être conçu à l’origine pour ce but, et *l’édifice*, le lieu consacré au théâtre et invalide en dehors de cette fonction. Par une belle alliance, Brook parvient à les réunir dans les Bouffes du Nord où *l’édifice* s’apparente à *l’abri*.⁵⁶

54 Philip Lewis’s original article dates from 1985 but is reprinted as ‘The Measure of Translation Effects’, in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. by Lawrence Venuti, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 226.

55 Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), p. 2.

56 Georges Banu, *Peter Brook: Un théâtre premier* (Paris: Seuil, 2005), p. 33.

Such attributes feed into the reception of productions staged at the Bouffes du Nord and into the design of the shows themselves. The emphasis Brook places on communication between audiences and actors leads him to find staging solutions that reinforce the actors' presence. In 'Rockaby', one of the five short dramas presented under the banner title *Fragments*,⁵⁷ a woman rocks in a chair, and a voice-over speaks the majority of the text. Only, the words 'more' and occasional passages are said in tandem by the actor on stage and the voice-over. Yet, in Brook's production, Katherine Hunter, who plays the woman, speaks all the lines and no playback mechanism is used. Instead of the character thus commanding more text from the voice-over, the character is, it seems, subjected to an invisible and inaudible command to continue talking. This explains Hunter's anguished look throughout the piece. Towards the end of the monologue, she even stands up from the chair and walks around before returning and beginning, for the first time, to rock. The movement, which is not natural given that the chair is not a rocking chair, is made to look as such by the physical theatre veteran. The remaining lines are spoken as if she is placated by a physical attack – perhaps a stroke. The result is a powerful and chilling piece that acquires this dimension precisely because Brook did not follow the precise directions of the text, which appear dated, at a time when there is so much technology used in the theatre. In an interview, Brook has described Beckett's stage directions as firmly anchored in the time that he was writing.⁵⁸ It would be a mistake, so he contends, to adhere too closely to these directions as they do not reveal what is essential about the play. He explains that Beckett's stage directions are marked by the time in which he was writing. Now, it is possible to move away from his directions to find the 'essential' part. It is this gesture that thus is more faithful to the text by not being subservient to it.

Conclusion

This article has explored the ways in which Peter Brook has read and interpreted Samuel Beckett's dramatic work. It has done so by highlighting how Brook, while highly admiring of the playwright, has nevertheless taken

57 The others were: 'Rough for Theatre I', 'Act Without Words II', 'Neither', and 'Come and Go'.

58 See *Beckett by Brook*, 28 mins 57 secs to 29 mins 30 secs.

steps to move away from the exact descriptions of stage action as set out in the plays in order to better serve what he felt were the underlying intentions.

With Brook's productions of *Oh les beaux jours* and *Glückliche Tage*, the vocabulary of the musical score was used to describe his production. With *Oh les beaux jours*, at the very least, it was in part Natasha Parry's desire to stay as close to Beckett's intentions as possible that motivated such close adherence to the stage directions. In the respective productions of *Fragments*, Brook adopted a more pragmatic position in line with how he has approached other authors. It might be argued that Beckett also believed in this position as he integrated changes to his published texts after they had been staged. As Simon Gontarski notes, these reworked texts reflect 'Beckett's continued work in the theatre and his desire to have his published texts reflect his most theatrical insights, discoveries that could have been made only in rehearsals'.⁵⁹ Intriguingly, Gontarski suggests that this approach adopted by Beckett was itself influenced by Brook: 'It was Beckett's at least tacit acknowledgement that theatre is its performance, that the theatre space, as Peter Brook has insisted for years, is an arena for creative discovery'.⁶⁰ Thus, it was in moving further away from Beckett that Brook found himself closer to him than he might even have imagined.

59 Simon Gontarski, 'Revising Himself: Performance as text in Samuel Beckett's Theatre', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 22.1 (1998), 131–45 (p. 140).

60 Ibid.