

Concrete, Virtual and Imaginary Space: Beckett's Stage Directions

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Abstract: *Samuel Beckett has made a peculiar use of stage directions in his theatre. Since the first plays, as *Waiting for Godot*, they became essential tools in order to establish a precise and restricted way of staging and guaranteeing the stage physicality he must have had in mind. After the sixties Beckett started to stage his own plays and his writing became yet more centered in rigorous stage directions. This article aims to describe, through the use he makes of stage directions, his evolution from being just a dramatist, in the fifties, till becoming a complete artist of the theatre in the eighties. In doing that intends to prove the utility of looking for stage directions in drama analysis, and to show how, from this point of view, Beckett's theatre gets close of the work of artists commonly viewed as radically anti-theatrical, as is the case of Robert Wilson.*

Despite being a phenomenon of the forties, the theatre of Samuel Beckett reaches the end of the twentieth century still enigmatic, defying labels. Irrespective of the difficulties encountered when classifying his theatrical work, Beckett can be seen as a post-modern dramatist as already argued. (Pavis 48-74) The aim here is to investigate a specific feature of Beckett's theatricality: the role of the stage directions in the framing of his theatre. In doing that, more than attempting to reinforce Beckett's postmodernist characteristics, I intend to focus on what seems to be a key to understanding his dramaturgy not just as a literary work but as an intrinsically theatrical matter. Through an analysis and several conclusions related to stage directions, it is possible to link Beckett with artists apparently distant from him as, for example, Robert Wilson.

Are stage directions relevant to theatrical analysis? Theatre researchers have raised objections to this hypothesis. My first step will be to reply to their arguments and to argue that the examination of stage directions, granting ability to inform about the intrinsic theatricality of the dramatic text, can reveal a textual model where one finds a personal style of dealing with the stage physicality.

Would the assumption that the analysis of stage directions is only literary, entail the exclusion of a possible relationship between the text – which deals with either a future or a past scene – and the physical scene, that is, the actual realisation? Would it be

possible to say that the stage direction text will, in no way, carry back to the play projected by it? Jean Alter believes so. When approaching the question through the literary prism, he discards the stage direction as a proper subject of theatrical critical discourse. (Alter 163-4) To him; the idea of an imaginary play offers no stable referents upon which a discussion could be held. The operator's projection of the virtuality of a concrete scene is so complex – involving so many variants – that it becomes arbitrary, in a kind of visualisation as subjective as a dream. This virtual play has no external referents allowing for an agreement on its existence to be reached. According to Alter the critical discourse should stick to literary referents – the plot –, as the theatrical referent would necessarily become literary when formulated in writing. Therefore, the only way of discussing a dramatic text would be to assume a literary condition, avoiding the uncertain virtuality and sticking to fiction borders, which avoid excessive subjective wanderings.

Against this one may argue that, in the first place, the assumption that stage directions are to be inexorably prisoners of a “literary fiction” is debatable. It is true that, generally, stage directions exist only as literature and that the literary form is the condition of their existence. On the other hand, this does not imply that this literary form is the exclusive expression of a story to which the operators should revert whenever they attempt to guarantee a consistent interpretation of the presented referents. Besides the fiction, to which they undeniably serve, and, many times, have to submit to, stage directions also refer to another dimension. This other non-literary aspect is connected to the physicality and the three-dimensional body of the stage. As an imaginary anticipation of a future concrete scene, stage directions are somewhat independent from the fiction, that is, the story to be told. Therefore, it is misleading to reduce stage directions to the condition of a merely fictional support, and to ignore their other dimension: the one of a narrative related to the stage, which, at first, does not seem to come to terms with the plot. Actually, in extreme cases such as in Beckett's dramaturgy – where even fictional development is threatened – neither dialogues nor stage directions work towards a story. Therefore, when performing *Waiting for Godot*, there is no need to define a story that will combine dialogues and stage directions under a steady referent. As there is no certainty whether a story exists or whether the existing story is an uncertain one, what can be done is to disregard the fictional indicators. The story aid, adopted by a reader trying to make sense out of it, would be unnecessary for those worried exclusively about the material aspects of the performance – such as co-ordinating entries and exits from the stage, or considering the expected number of characters and the number of available actors. In this case, for this hypothetical and not very sophisticated director, the only unessential thing would be the subject of dialogues and of the story that Beckett might have been trying to tell. This is an example that indicates, in a very simple way, the meaning of an independent sphere, dealing with the physicality of the scene. It also suggests an argument contrary to Alter's thought. He sustains that *Waiting for Godot* is a rather theatrical play, which

has always been performed in more or less similar ways thanks to the power of fiction, that compensates for the generality of stage directions. (Alter 1987, 163-4) Actually, it seems to be just the opposite. As it will be argued, Beckett's stage directions exact great precision – they represent an essential tool for the stage articulation. Therefore, performances of *Waiting for Godot* are very much alike, not because the absence of consistent stage referents has forced directors to refer back to literary fiction, but thanks to Beckett's stage directions. The author managed to build a text which work on the stage like a precise mechanism and creates, through stage directions, some safeguards to avoid substantial changes of the stage physicality he must have had in mind. Instead of following the story to carry out the staging task, directors of *Waiting for Godot* followed stage directions, in order to reach a safe haven and in order to tell some kind of story. As a matter of fact, stage directions are a more concrete reference than any story. Their input on the literary ground is a physical and three-dimensional aspect of the scene. As a consequence, stage directions organise the performance on the imaginary level, as well as safeguarding the consistence of the play as a work of fiction. The central point here is to introduce stage directions in this theoretical debate, both as indicative of certain stage physicality and as a reflection of a specific poetics.

Beckett's Stage Directions

The fruitfulness of analysing dramatic texts by the use of stage directions is confirmed by the dramaturgy of Samuel Beckett. Actually, stage directions reflect, much more than the dialogues involved, the theatrical project of this author and his specific procedures towards stage physicality. If it is true that Beckett, somehow, has a distinct theatricality, his stage poetics is revealed by his stage directions. They are the mirror of the writer's evolution from a dramatist to director, as well as the integration of both functions in his work as an author with a personal stage language. Since *Eleutheria* his first play, to *Catastrophe*, one of the last ones, Beckett's dramaturgy constantly uncovers the action mechanism of drama. Characters are revealed as part of a machinery and the finality of their actions should there be one, is to make this revelation real. It is as if his plays, and their subsequent performances, worked like an inverted clock, which instead of showing the hours on the face would show the small cogs at the back. The hypothesis here is that in this inversion – which creates an identity and allows us to talk of a Beckettian style or a new paradigm of theatricality – stage directions play a fundamental role. They do not only set up and operate the mechanism stated by this inversion, but also guarantee and perpetuate the same inversion. In fact, stage directions in Beckett will be as important for the interpretation the spectator is to make of the performance – as long as they are actually carried out – as to the interpretation the reader is to make of the play as a dramatic literary piece, on the pages of a book. Beckett establishes a physical occupation of the stage, and the operator of those instructions has, at any rate, to consider at least if the fictional consistence of the play is not to be completely lost. There is such

a control of the stage indications of changes in the real scenes that disobeying them would entail modifying or omitting the speeches of the characters. When compared to the role that stage directions have on the literary level – where they are unarguably needed for fictional articulation – we realise that they are indispensable for the stage formalisation of this fiction. When, for example, the direction of the movements of characters on stage is defined by the stage direction, this implies a foreseen design by the author, sliding back to a concrete situation, to a physical and significant presence of characters proceeding either one way or the other. While for most authors such an indication – the direction towards which characters move – is truly secondary, in Beckett it is vital. Admittedly, there is an infinite variety of ways of executing it; but should this not be carried out, it would not only mean a betrayal of, but also a complete alteration of the course of the dramatic action: “Estragon– Allons-y (Ils ne bougent pas)”. (Beckett 1952, 134)

One of the characteristics of this scene projected by Beckett is, precisely, to have an essentially dramatic function related to the detailed prescription for movements of characters. In spite of the endless possibilities for the execution of the stage directions on each performance, they will always be as crucial to the fulfilment of his dramaturgy as dialogue speeches. The initial stage direction of *Waiting for Godot* says only: “Route à la campagne, avec arbre. Soir”. These indications are open enough to have allowed all the variety of interpretations present in hundreds of versions made of the original text. The most defined element, suggesting in a more concrete way a physical occupation of space, is undoubtedly that of the tree. However, searching among the pictures of several of the executed performances, we have noticed that the tree has assumed quite different formats in each performance. If the referent is the tree from Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* stage directions, the significant must then be a prisoner of the performance limitations. The meaning, on the other hand, will be the final sum, apprehended by the audience at one specific performance. In contrast to this intrinsic referential non-determination of the set stage directions, Beckett develops detailed specifications of the movements of the characters on the physical space of the stage. Earlier, on the initial stage direction, when describing Estragon’s attitude towards the boot he cannot take off, a detailed and non-replaceable sequence of actions becomes evident. The movements of, specially, Estragon and Vladimir are actions that, despite varying enormously from performance to performance and depending on the actors who carry them out, have a minimum outline and are fundamental to the materialisation of the action curve proposed by the writer.

Un Cri terrible retentit, tout proche. Estragon lâche la carotte. Ils se figent, puis se précipitent vers la coulisse. Estragon s’arrête à mi-chemin, retourne sur ses pas, ramasse la carotte, la fourre dans sa poche, s’elance vers Vladimir qui l’attend, s’arrête à nouveau, retourne sur ses pas, ramasse sa chaussure, puis se chausse, puis court rejoindre Vladimir. Enlacés, la tête dans les épaules, se détournant de la menace, ils attendent. (Ibid. 28)

Just before the famous monologue of Lucky, Beckett enumerates four distinct situations, where the other characters, present on the scene, – Estragon, Vladimir and Pozzo – take a series of attitudes to set in motion forming a trajectory of moods. As in the plot of a mimodrama, they leave a large amount of definitions to be made by the actors and/or directors who perform them. But this undeniable elasticity of indications does not mean that the eventual generators of the physicality of this drama are freed from unrelentingly having to follow the chain of action. Should this not be the case, these generators would face the risk of not performing Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Stage directions become quite as crucial to the plot's course as the spoken text. An alteration of the subsequent speech of Lucky wouldn't affect the plot as much as a change in the physical actions of the three listeners, indicated in four different moments, would.

(1) Attention soutenue d'Estragon ET Vladimir. Accablement et dégoût de Pozzo.
 (2) Premiers murmures d'Estragon et Vladimir. Souffrances accrues de Pozzo.
 (3) Estragon et Vladimir se calment reprennent l'écoute. Pozzo s'agite de plus en plus, fait entendre des gémissements. (4) Exclamations de Vladimir et Estragon. Pozzo se lève d'un bond, tire sur la corde. Tous crient. Lucky tire sur la corde, trébuche, hurle, tous se jettent sur Lucky qui se débat, hurle son texte. (Ibid. 59-61)

The climax of this sequence is indicated, just after Pozzo makes a last attempt to interrupt Lucky with the utterance "his hat!" in the stage directions "Vladimir seizes Lucky's hat. Silence of Lucky. He falls. Silence. Panting of the Victors." In the middle of a desert of references it is natural that the physical actions performed by Vladimir and Estragon should become vital to the continuity of the drama, so that it can go on being unfolded. From *Waiting for Godot* onwards the ambiguity and non-determination of plots only grew, while physical actions and the stage directions outlining them became more and more well defined. A good example of this development is the play written soon after *Happy Days*, in the end of 1962, called *Play*.

The work reveals already in its title – suggesting a substantially concrete theatre – but mostly by its treatment of light, the beginning of a new phase of Beckett's experimentation on stage space. In *Play* Beckett renders the light effects into a contrasting element – as important or even more so than speeches. Characters, heads coming out of ballot boxes, in a variation of the suppression theme presented in *Happy Days*, are crucially dependent for their very existence on a spot light focus that is at least as much important as their physical presence and speeches. It is the light that both authorises them to speak and suppresses their speech. Along the play, eight blackouts create five-minute breaks that divide the performance into independent parts or mechanisms. The coordination of the entire set of appearances and disappearances is operated through stage directions. Those, in *Play*, definitely become the axis of dramaturgy for the potential director. Beckett makes himself very clear in all instructions he gives at several stage direction levels. The initial stage direction presents basic information on set, lights and

how the initial and simultaneous speeches of the three ballot box- characters (w1, w2, and w3) are introduced. The stage direction inserted in speeches determines the directions of the spotlights and, in that way, defines the syntax of the verbal discourse. Finally, there are independent notes bringing additional clarifications. Three of them, referring to the ballot boxes, lights and initial choir, refer back to the initial stage direction. The fourth extra explanation refers to the solicited repetition at the end of the text.

The repeat may be an exact replica of first statement or it may present an element of variation. In other words, the light may operate the second time exactly as it did the first (exact replica) or it may try a different method (variation). The London production (and in a lesser degree the Paris production) opted for the variation with the following deviations from first statement... (Beckett 1986, 320)

There follows a detailed enumeration of modifications made during the London production, where the highlights were the specification of light intensity at eight different moments. This explanatory note of *Play* reveals the emergence of Beckett as a director who writes after the production, analysing the chosen alternative and incorporating this contribution to the original text. At the same time, we can still find a certain hesitation of the dramatist in relation to revisions other directors might make. This leads him to indicate the repetitions half way through the apparition of the last choir, as detailed on this note. Beckett might have imagined that there was a large possibility of variations. This made him consider even the reference to the London production, the first one, as only one possibility among several others. On the other hand, the stage direction gives him an almost complete control over both pace and progression. Thus, there is not a large number of possible variations in relation to light, neither are there any to determine when lights should be directed on speech and when they shouldn't. Moreover, the understanding of what was being said by the heads in the ballot boxes did not matter any longer. To the discontent of actors and producers, Beckett insisted on actors speaking fast enough for speeches to become incomprehensible, articulating only sound rhythm.

A further example worth mentioning is *Catastrophe*. Included among the plays of Beckett's final phase, it appears to conclude a cycle started by *Eleuthéria*.¹ Besides the name, which derives from the Greek, *Catastrophe* was also, just like *Eleuthéria*, written in French. In addition, the themes of both plays are explicit theatrical creations. There are visible differences as well, and these reveal changes brought on by thirty-five years of experience of theatrical practice. At this point, Beckett was fully aware, when writing a scene, of the need to determine the movement of each actor, as well as the actor's speech, so that the performance could be effected as he expected it to be. In this sense, while the stage directions in *Eleuthéria* indicate some sort of flexibility, in *Catastrophe* they are almost unyielding, revealing themselves as indispensable, not only in terms of understanding the plot, but also for the realisation of the performance. Already

in the very first stage direction, an inevitable link comes up. Stage direction had become by then a definite mark of Beckett 's dramaturgy.

Rehearsal. Final touches to the last scene. Bare stage. A and L have just set the lighting. D has just arrived. D in an armchair downstairs audience left. Fur coat. Fur toque to match. Age and physique unimportant. A standing beside him. White overall. Bare head. Pencil behind one ear. Age and physique unimportant. P midstage standing on a black block 18 inches high. Black wide-brimmed hat. Black dressing-gown to ankles. Barefoot. Head bowed. Hand in pockets. Age and physique unimportant. D and A contemplate P. Long pause. (Beckett 1986, 457)

The director, who makes the last arrangements, is a character that is way off the *Eleuthéria* characters. The latter, even when they were involved in a theatrical process (a prompter, a member of the audience), were engulfed under the fiction of the sad destiny of Victor Krap, the youngster who renounces action. The *Catastrophe* director character is cold-blooded, manipulative and sculpts a scene, a *tableau*. He stands at a distance from the fictional dimension and from anything beyond the stage physicality wherein he was built. There is no anguish – his assistant excepted – about performing a scene where the character does nothing and does not show his face. The P character is a child of Victor Krap who, instead of being led to action, finds himself submitted to the torture of stillness and inaction. He is designed as an element of the director's set wanting to express something – "Here is our catastrophe" – although, as a character he is quite plain. He does not even represent a theatre mechanism, as the *Eleuthéria* characters did. He only serves as a support for the scenic discourse of the director. Just as in Beckett's first play, where he somehow managed to get even with the dramaturgy tradition, in *Catastrophe* he is getting even with the tradition of modern direction as a dominating voice in the theatre. He also evens up to his own fifteen year long director condition. Stage directions went through a process of auto-sophistication as a control and operational instrument, since he began to write with the performance – and with no intermediaries – in mind. As the example of Beckett shows, by way of stage direction one can not only read the author's distanced comment on the plot, but, also, these directions become defining elements of the plot.

"[Pause. Distant storm of applause. P raises his head, fixes the audience. The applause falters dies. Long pause, Fade out of light on face]" (Ibid. 461)

Catastrophe also comments, ironically, on the inglorious condition that stage direction faces in the theatre. On seven occasions the play insists upon the same stage direction – "she takes out pad, takes pencil, notes" – always coming after the assistant speech – "I make a note". When speaking of this specific director, the one who writes down in the director's notebook is the assistant. As a synthesis of secretary and plotter, she submits to the tyranny of the director, who dictates stage specifications so she can

transform them into stage directions. Another stage direction – “A at a lost, Irritably.” – is repeated four times during the play every time that, after an orientation from D about what should be altered in P, A fretfully addresses P. If considered as pause indications, and thus as something which have already appeared several times in his first plays, these recurrent instructions for actual performance once again confirm Beckett’s view of stage direction. To the same extent as the written dialogues, they have, for him, a structural importance upon the dramatic mode he builds.

Conclusion

As a conclusion to our observations about stage directions in Beckett’s dramaturgy, it is worth emphasising his transformation process, from dramatist to director. Beckett’s dramaturgy suggests a rare rupture of the realistic dramatic representation paradigm, not only when he confronts the dramatic tradition that preceded him but also in terms of contemporary theatre trends that arise after him. According to Aristotle, the art of the dramatic poet relies upon a specific *tekne* which differs from the art of the stage designer or the art that the “mask maker” relies on. (Halliwell 39) Beckett brings forth, in his creative practice as a dramatic author, an inversion in terms of the *tekne* which is usually credited to the dramatist, that is, the fashioning of a plot. The author approximates his *tekne* to the one identified with the attributions of the mask maker: taking care of the visual aspects of the drama, among which the performance, its “least important” element according to Aristotle, is to be found. Beckett already writes from a new point of view, the mask maker’s, yet still uses words, which are the traditional instruments of a dramatist. Symbolists trends at the beginning of the century, which are represented, for instance, in Gordon Craig’s work, put forward a view of the theatre as an autonomous art, with its own laws for the construction of its physicality. In order to accomplish that the word was cast out. As opposed to these trends, Beckett reaches this very dimension, alternatively, either through the word in the most obvious way – creating the scene through speeches, always accompanied by precise indications of the actors movements and the pace – or in a broader and more visual level of observation – only and exclusively by means of the stage directions, where there are no longer any speeches. In both cases his theatre is no longer close to the logos dimension, but act on the audience only as physis: through visibility and other senses which are far from the rational understanding level. Unlike Brecht, who considers himself as an anti-Aristotelian – though he reproduces exactly the Aristotelian idea that theatre is effective only when rationally understood – Beckett follows his own path as a director. He relies on stage directions to produce a theatre where its realisation goes beyond the rational level of comprehension, presenting itself as a special poem or as a grammar of the physical elements on stage. If, in the same measure as in his literature, the central theme of Beckett’s theatre can be seen as the doubt about whether or not it is possible to represent reality, the way his theatre is organised on the stage discards logical reasoning, as well as the assumptions of a rationality, intrinsic to the classic concept of drama. Also, Beckett’s

theatre shows itself as a rough fabric – sculptural and pictorial – when it expresses itself through movement, total paralysis, or even silence, giving to each of these elements a three-dimensional shape. These attributes of the last Beckett, now explicitly a director and a complete theatre man – a creator who, like his illustrious predecessors, does not distinguish between the functions of writing texts on papers and the ones of playing scenes on stage – placed him surprisingly near to creators who, at a first view, would not be seen as standing close to him, like Robert Wilson for instance. The orientation of Wilson’s work places theatre quite far away from the fable axis, radically inverting the Aristotelian perspective. Even when he uses dramatic literature, Wilson does that in a random and non-hierarchical way. Beckett is mainly supported by dramatic literature, but the drama conceived by him is built in the physical dimension of the stage, in a quite similar way to Wilson’s performances. The main difference refers to the codes used on stage dimensions. In Wilson’s case, a mask maker above all, the codes are blueprints and drawings, ground plans and drafts, which visually anticipate a foreseen scene, as yet to be realised. In Beckett, mainly the Beckett of the latter years, this occurs through the detailed and precise description of movements and actions – based on stage direction verbal indications – which also describe an imaginary scene.

The writing, on contemporary theatre has increasingly been carried out by the mask maker, who takes over the place of the dramatic poet as a writer of stage directions. He operates both the writing of scenes (stage performances) and the literary writing (precedent, simultaneous or posterior to performances). It does not matter if the authors of these contemporary works are dramatists or directors. The point is that the model set to the dramatic poet by Aristotle, although still working for fiction in cinema, television or conventional theatre, no longer satisfies some creators, who search for a plastic and pictorial eloquence. As far as these new dramatists are concerned, directions appear as an intermediate shape between two models: the drama that is no longer satisfying for the kind of theatre one would wish to produce, and the new writing mode for the theatre yet to appear.

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