

COMPANY FOR COMPANY: ANDROGYNY AND THEATRICALITY IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S PROSE

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The voice has been *dramatic* since its appearance in *Molloy*, and the possibilities of staging it were enhanced in 1965 when Beckett assisted two friends in such an enterprise: Jack MacGowran with his anthology, *Beginning to End*, and Shivaun O'Casey on her production of *From an Abandoned Work*. Since the composition of *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) the line dividing Beckett's prose monologues from his stage monologues has grown less distinct, as Beckett began to explore the theatrical possibilities of the monologue as thoroughly as he explored its fictive variations beginning with the post-World War II Trilogy of novels, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and the *Unnamable*. Hints of that generic androgyny were implicit early in Beckett's dramatic efforts. Colin Duckworth and a number of other critics have remarked on the degree to which *Waiting for Godot* (1949), for instance, had been developed from Beckett's first extended piece of French prose fiction, *Mercier et Camier* (1946), left unfinished and published as such in 1970 in French and 1974 in English. *Krapp's Last Tape* was similarly developed from an abandoned but subsequently published prose text, *From an Abandoned Work*. And the genetic decision about a text like *Not I* came late in the work's composition—it could as easily have become a work of prose fiction.¹

It is not surprising then that as Beckett's own position on keeping «genres more or less distinct»² has softened, as he has become less resistant to what Ruby Cohn calls «jumping... genres,» numerous forays into the prose have been made. E.T. Kirby and his Projection Theater, for instance, adapted *Molloy* in 1969. Joseph Dunn and Irja Koijonen of the American Contemporary Theater adapted the *Unnamable* in 1972. Mabou Mines staged a variety of texts, beginning with *The Lost Ones* in 1972, *Mercier and Camier* in 1979, *Company* in 1983, and most recently, *Imagination Dead Imagine* in 1984, a work the group originally planned to adapt in 1972. Joe Chaikin and Steve Kent combined portions of *Texts for Nothing* and *How it is* in 1981 as *Texts*. And Gerald Thomas has done two versions of *All Strange Away* both in New York in 1984, one at La Mama and another at the Samuel Beckett Theater. Thomas has also worked with actor Ryan Cutrona on a radio version of *Fizzles*, but the stage version of three of the tales,

with the same actor, was directed by Liz Diamond in 1984. My own entry into what has become an increasingly crowded field is an adaptation of *Company* which opened at the Los Angeles Actor's Theater's Half-stage in February of 1985 with Alan Mandell as the Figure. This *Company* was the English language version of *Compagnie* directed by Pierre Chabert at the Theatre du rond-point which opened 15 November 1984, and has the distinction of being the only adaptation of his prose work that Beckett himself has had a hand in.

Certainly one of the attractions to staging *Company* is that it is among the most textually androgynous of Beckett's works. It was written at a time when Beckett seemed consciously exploring the common ground of fiction and theatre, immediately after *A Piece of Monologue*, the most narrative of Beckett's dramas. *Company*, then, offers a striking complement to *A Piece of Monologue*; it may be the most dramatic of Beckett's prose narratives, which works at least equally well on stage and page.

The most fundamental question about staging *Company* was determining the stage image. Beckett, Pierre Chabert and I agreed that one fundamental flaw of adaptations needed to be avoided. The staging should not attempt to illustrate the text literally. We would make no attempt to dramatize the stories of the second person voice, nor illustrate the image of the third person as described, that is, the speaker must *not* be lying on his back. And even if the speaking voice goes through a process of hypothesising which is very like the process a writer like Beckett might go through creating his imaginative figments, the stage image should not overtly suggest that the figure is a writer: no desk, no bookshelves.

The image we settled on then was something between an illustration of the episodes and a reading of the text: a sole figure sitting in a chair. This would keep the emphasis on the words and avoid the pitfalls of other adaptations which in order to render concretely the illusive imagery of the fiction, resorted to a variety of highly technical images which often became ends in themselves. The central figure in *Company*, that is, the figure we see on stage, is imaginative, figment, and ought to remain so in production. The vignettes of the second person are likewise imaginative renderings and trying to dramatize them would alter their thematic function. Language is central to *Company* and Figure's phrasing, the often baroque, inverted, elliptical, poetic phrasing of both voices is as much a source of company as the actual hypothesising, and we wanted to retain as much linguistic emphasis as possible and still stage a drama. In short we were limiting the range of theatrical sign systems working with language to transmit the theatrical message, and such reduction of what some theatrical semioticians would call «transmitters» (i.e., body, voice, costume, props, lights, etc.) is also characteristic of Beckett's own direction.

Once that central icon was determined it was then possible to develop a staging. Pierre Chabert's initial conception was to minimize the speaker's corporeality by creating essentially a floating head. He decided to mask the source of light and so created a black box large enough to accommodate the lighting and the figure sitting on a black chair. Wearing a black cassock the actor's body would be

invisible save the head lit by sourceless light. In addition, the huge wooden box was mounted on rubber wheels and could move so slowly and silently across the stage that movement was not consciously perceptible. At some point in the performance the spectator simply realized that the speaking figure was no longer in his initial position. When Beckett attended his first rehearsal on 8 November (a week before opening), however, he made some fundamental alterations in staging. He rejected the movement for one, and was not altogether happy with the floating head image. He suggested that the third person figure be more fully lit and dressed in grey pyjamas and grey robe. He further cautioned the distinguished French actor Pierre Dux not to anticipate the voice, which although it was spoken by the actor live was projected via a remote microphone through three speakers. The figure must, Beckett insisted, be surprised by the voice and with his failing eyes search out its source. For the actor this meant that he must start to speak while his head was still bowed and maintain the same voice quality as he lifted his head to search out the source of the voice.

What was clear from the earliest rehearsals was that even as a prose work *Company* already contained a fundamental dramatic structure, a dichotomy between second and third person voices, and Beckett's characterization of the two voices reflected the contrapuntal relationship not only between each section but within them as well. The third person voice, he noted, was «erecting a series of hypotheses, each of which is false.» The second person voice was «trying to create a history, a past for the third person,» each episode of which the third person rejects, insisting, that was not I. The adaptation was designed to develop as much of those contrapuntal elements as possible. The first change I made for the English language production was that instead of having the Figure speak both voices as Pierre Dux did, I would tape the second person segments. This immediately solved a number of production problems and opened up additional staging possibilities. For one, the Figure could now truly be a listener, and I was freed from trying to mask his moving lips, a lighting problem which plagued the French production and was never adequately solved. More important, I could establish two separate modes of stage action. A speaking or hypothesising mode, and a listening or searching mode, and play the one against the other visually and aurally.

In the hypothesising mode Figure could move and speak normally in his chair. Here he existed in real time. The listening mode would, however, be highly stylized. As listener, Figure would move in slow, balletic motion toward the source of the voice, one source at each of the two far corners of the theatre and one directly above his head. The voice could be slow, deliberate, almost flat, and the effect generally would be to suggest that time too had slowed. Further, taping the second person voice also allowed me to manipulate the sense of theatre space. I was working in a very small, intimate theatre to begin with, and the initial effect created was claustrophobic. By varying the amount of echo and reverb on each taped segment, I could open up theatre space, create the illusion in the dark that the voice was coming not only from a variety of sources but from varying distances, some from very far off; others whispers in his ear. I divided the second

person segments among the three speakers so that figure's head moved slowly, almost painfully, to search out the source of the voice; the pattern of complex light changes (almost 100 light cues in 65 minutes, and most of those during the listening mode) enhanced that balletic motion by creating a series of silent facial sculptures.

Taping the second person voice then allowed for an additional series of counterpoints. Normal time could be played against slowed time, normal motion against slowed motion, hypothesising voice against the flat voice of memory and/or imagination, the full light of the speaking head against the varying chiaroscuro of the listening head, rejection of the voice against acceptance of the voice: in short, light against dark, movement against stasis, sound against silence. As Beckett suggested, the lighting in *Company* should have «musical possibilities.» That is, it should not only illuminate and as such reinforce the metaphor of imagination, but the light should also control the rhythm and pace of the drama, punctuating each paragraph into discreet segments and enhancing the fugal nature of the performance.

I also wanted the production to reflect two fundamental themes of the work: first, the strength and potential solace of the imagination as company, and second, the weakness and failure of the imagination as company, that is, its failure finally to alleviate man's most fundamental condition, loneliness. Unlike Chabert's production which was staged on a proscenium stage in a 250-seat theatre, my Los Angeles *Company* was staged environmentally. The Half-stage was converted into a black box, no stage, no rake to audience seating. Audience shared Figure's space. The theatre's sixty seats were reduced to thirty, arranged in an irregular pattern so that each spectator would have clear sight lines but would not have the comfort of sitting next to anyone. As a precaution against spectators moving their chairs, the seats were bolted to the floor and covered in black floor-length felt, «Most funeral things,» Krapp might have said.³

As the audience entered the dimly lit black box with the strange looking chairs, they had little hint of what the visual theatrical image might look like. The dim lights faded to dark and the spectators heard, «A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine.»⁴ At that point the lights fade up on a disheveled figure in grey bathrobe and pyjamas sitting in a black chair, an echo of the black chairs on which the audience sits. Figure appeared noiselessly, on a chair beautifully conceived by designer Timian Alsaker, as if the audience's imagination had brought it into being. For some sixty-five minutes Figure hypothesised and listened amid the audience, on intimate terms with it. Then as voice asserted that despite the solace of imagination, the pleasures of mathematical calculations, the contemplation of formal symmetries, and the companionship of hypothesising, Figure is as he always was (fade to black — lights up): «Alone.» Lights fade to black and Figure silently disappears. Dim house lights return, and the audience is, as it always was, alone. A curtain call would only dispell that moment of intimacy and bewilderment. And audiences were puzzled at play's end. They generally didn't know whether or not the play was over, whether or not to applaud (most did not),

whether or not to leave the theatre. Even after the exit door was opened, spectators sat still, unsure what to do.⁵

Once the basic contrapuntual, fugal relationship between modes was established, between second and third person voices, the next step was to establish the relationship of Figure to voice. Almost all of the incidents that voice iterates are painful to Figure. They suggest a loveless childhood where the boy was rebuked or derided by his parents for his comment on the perception of the sun (pp. 10-11), or for his report of being able to see the mountains of Wales from his «nook in the gorse» (p. 25) in the Wicklow Hills. There is the lovelessness of parents «stooping over cradle» (p. 47), the lack of parental concern for a child in desperate need of attention who throws himself from «the top of a great fir» (p. 21), or the embarrassment of the child's being on exhibition, standing naked at «the tip of a high board» before the «many eyes» of his father's cronies as he is urged to «Be a brave boy» (p. 18). The child in the memories seems never to have been the boy or the man his parents wanted. He was busy, even in those days, developing the light of his imagination, one of the work's dominant metaphors. Voice also recounts some embarrassing and naive incidents: the boy who believes he can play God by intervening in the life of an ill hedgehog, the child who can look out the summer house window to see that «all without is rosy» (p. 39), or the young adult who believes that his path (literal and metaphorical) is straight, «a beeline» (p. 35), and looks back one morning to see the pattern in the fresh snow, «Withershins» (p. 38). The incident is wryly comic even as it also suggests the plight of man living the pattern of the sinistral spiral of Dante's hell. Even the sensual moments are painful. The erotic episode of his feeling the «fringe of her long black hair» (p. 48) is intimately connected to the story of the lover's pregnancy, with its puns about her being late. The episode's concluding line hints at the disastrous end to the love affair, «All dead still» (p. 42).

Figure resists that voice for numerous reasons. The memories are, of course, painful, for the most part, but he also resists the simplified notion that a sum of memories (or stories) will add up to a history, a life. And even if the voice recounts incidents from his past more or less accurately, memories are not historical but fictive, selected, re-ordered, re-emphasized versions of past incidents. Philosophically, the separation of voice and figure allows for the dramatization of a phenomenological theme. In order to be perceived the voice needs to be separated from the perceiver and so the voice must always be something other than the self, and hence cannot be accepted as part of the I. In fact, both the figments Figure creates, the figure of one lying on his back in the dark and the voice he hears, have been objectified and thereby separated from the perceiving self, that is, they are not I, as is the narrative Mouth speaks in *Not I*. No story I tell about myself can be me. I am not what I am conscious of, Figure suggests to us throughout the play. That dichotomy, moreover, also destabilizes the perceiver since, according to Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* at any rate, only the known can *be*, the perceiver, the knower, the Figure is a *nothing*. The perceiver is the opposite of what is perceived, what is known, the *en soi*, being, and so the perceiver is a nothing to the perceived's being.

What Figure recoils from at the mention of the «I» when he says «quick leave him» (followed each time in production by a blackout) is the confrontation not only with the nothingness of his self per se, than self's objectification once it has been perceived and the infinite regress of nothingness that a self-reflexive consciousness entail. Figure resists accepting the voice as part of himself as soon as he hears it, as soon as it is objectified and «known,» which process simultaneously nullifies the knower. The play dramatizes once again the difficulties and paradoxes entailed in being and consciousness. Consciousness, or the *pour-soi*, Sartre tells us, «is always something other than what could be said about it.»⁶

And yet voice is appealing. Despite the pain and embarrassment evoked by it, «little by little as he lies [in both senses] the craving for company revives... The need to hear that voice again» (p. 55). The craving not only suggests that voice helps him pass the time, is a companion through the long *nuits blanches*, but it is also the fountainhead of creativity, the source of the art we witness on stage. And so the fugal quality of *Company* suggests an aesthetics. Art is a counterpoint, a dialectic between the formalist hypothesising and the subconscious voice from the past. *Company*, drama and prose text, is precisely that sort of fuge. In production the formalist aesthetics implicit in the text was made explicit by recapitulating at the conclusion all the lighting patterns, visual imagery and sound variations used throughout the play.

The theatre piece *Company* then is in many respects a development of, a conception beyond, a translation of the prose text into the language (or sign system, if you will) of theatre. The novel posited a duality between a «he» voice and a «you» voice, while the narrator, the nexus of those two voices, was barely suggested. In the translation of *Company* the narrator is our principle if illusive or ghostly icon, mediating the two pronouns, sharing characteristics of both but refusing to identify with either. That is, to the character sitting in his room, neither the creature he creates lying on his back, an extension of his imagination, nor the voices that he hears in the night, another extension of his imagination, are essentially part of the «I» sitting in the chair, because both figments and voice have been objectified and thereby separated from the perceiving self. And yet he is connected to both through the act of perception.

In the play we picture a narrator, sitting in a room listening to voices very like his own memories and creating a figure of one lying on his back in darkness. But consciousness can also perceive itself sitting in a chair perceiving memories. The hypothesiser himself is not a stable, core reality, not a transcendental creator, ego or signifier. He keeps an eye not only on his creature, but over his shoulder as well, wondering not only about his created figment but whether he too is only figment, created creature, imaginative construct, *en soi* to another *pour soi*, *en soi* to his own *pour soi*. And so, finally, he is, for he is not an actual hypothesiser, Beckett continually reminds us, but an actor, a representation in an art work created by a particular set of cultural forces that for convenience we call Samuel Beckett. But this Samuel Beckett too is glancing over his shoulder, wondering if he too has been written. One characteristic of consciousness Sartre notes is that it is capable of

being conscious of itself being conscious. Sartre, however, rejected the possibility of an infinite regress, positing a transcendental ego; Beckett, however, rejects Sartre's rejection and entertains the fictive possibilities of the infinite regress by suggesting an infinite series of devisers: «Devised deviser devising it all for company» (p. 46). A transcendental unity is always arbitrary, for one can always ask, «Who asks in the end, Who asks?... And adds long after to himself, Unless another still» (p. 25).

From its opening theatrical image then *Company* emphasizes a point Beckett has been exploring at least in the plays, that one source of dramatic action and conflict is a tension created by playing narrative against visual imagery, ear against eye, the story we hear against what we think we see. The play opens with precisely such displacement — a figure in chair recounting the story of a figure on his back; a figure perceiving voices and hence negating his own being; the spectator perceiving the figure perceiving the voices, negating himself. *Company* is not merely a set of visual images in concord with the text, with dialogue, but a set of disharmonies. The iconography of stage image and the syntax of language, in short what we see and what we hear are as often in conflict with one another as in concord, and the drama, more often than not resides precisely in that tension, that displacement of one by the other (to adapt a psychoanalytic metaphor). Much of Beckett's drama, certainly the late drama, resides in such displacement. As a drama *Company* shares characteristics with Beckett's early plays. The figure in *Company* is passing the time as Didi and Gogo are in *Waiting for Godot* or as Winnie is in *Happy Days*. His means are creating fictions as does Hamm with his chronicle, his narrative in *Endgame*. And much of the imagery of the voice, the «you» portion of the text suggests travel, but like the action in *Godot* and in *Mercier and Camier*, the movement is heading «nowhere in particular» (p. 23). But *Company* is more strikingly of a piece with Beckett late, ghostly plays, plays during which we question our own perception, the existence of the images we see before us on stage as we do in *Footfalls*, *That Time*, *A Piece of Monologue*, *Ohio Impromptu*, and *Rockaby* — hence Chabert's interest in the moving box and my interest in altering the sense of theatre space by manipulating sound. *Company* is certainly part of Beckett's late Theatre of Immobility. The figure himself, the icon we see before us on stage, is the confluence of memory and imagination, and exists in fact as the tension between those forces, as does the figure lying on his back in the dark, as does the work we witness before us on the stage. In many respects the text acquires resonances through its translation into stage language. When Figure wonders whether or not there may be another with him in the dark, he is invoking the ritual we call theatre, fictions for company, where there is always someone with you in the dark — even if his chair is not beside yours.

Notes

1. See appropriate chapters of my *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).
2. Cited by Ruby Cohn, *Just Play: Beckett's Theater* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 207. See also the final section of the chapter «Jumping Beckett's Genres» for an account of the Kirby, Dunn and the first of the Mabou Mines adaptations, pp. 219-229.
3. The adaptation it resembles most in this respect is the Mabou Mines version of *The Lost Ones*, which was at first intended only as a reading and demonstration. Once the notion of reading was abandoned, designer Thom Cathcart conceived the idea of seating the audience within a black, foam rubber-lined cylinder.
4. Samuel Beckett, *Company* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1980). All quotations are from this edition.
5. For a theatre festival in Madrid, «Muestra sobre la vida y la obra de Samuel Beckett» which ran from 28 April to 5 May 1985, en el «Círculo de Bellas Artes» *Company* was performed four times in a 200 seat theater on a proscenium stage. We could not, of course, duplicate the Los Angeles production in the Madrid space, but we tried to achieve some of the original intimacy by building a ramp into the audience.
6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, tr. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 439.