

Contemporary Theatre Review: Interventions

Incommensurable Corporealities? Touretteshero's *Not I*



Jess Thom's performance of Samuel Beckett's *Not I* at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival (2017) and the Battersea Arts Centre (2018)¹ extends the parameters of performance by drawing out the corporeal and linguistic implications of neurological diversity, the intersection between agency and intention in the speaking body, and by embedding corporeal translation of the voiced text at the heart of performance through British Sign Language. Thom, who plays Mouth in Beckett's play, has Tourettes Syndrome. She makes involuntary, repetitive movements and vocalisations that are sometimes coprolalia. Thom's performance of *Not I* embraces her tics: the involuntary utterances of the performer interjected into Beckett's text in ways that deepen the lived experience of the play.

Thom begins the performance with a visual introduction of herself and BSL translator Charmaine Wombwell² for the sight impaired, then explains the different elements of the performance. There is then a brief pause during which Thom is elevated 8 feet above stage level, and the play begins. After the performance of *Not I* Thom shows a film that explores her rehearsal process, the challenges of the text, and the intimate correspondances between Beckett's play and her lived experience with Tourettes.³ This is followed by a discussion between Thom, Wombwell, and the audience that opens with each member being invited to exchange views with a neighbour, and concludes with a moment of collective release as the audience itself is invited to give voice, by speaking, shouting or making noise.

The primacy of the visual in *Not I* in which our whole attention is directed at the

¹ https://www.bac.org.uk/content/43605/whats_on/whats_on/shows/not_i

² <http://blacktheatrelive.co.uk/companies/london-charmaine-wombwell>

³ As Thom explains in an interview with Jon Snow for Chanel 4
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WA5qSK2etQE>

shuddering grey vision of the actor's mouth and, perhaps, the shadowed figure of a hooded auditor, shifts in Touretteshero's production of the play. Here sight and sound work together to convey Beckett's work in ways that foreground the act of communication and community. Wombwell's hands and face are a live complexity of gesture that conveys the sense of both Beckett's text spoken by Thom, and Thom's tics.⁴ Wombwell is the Auditor, listening to Mouth, but the 'gesture of helpless compassion' attributed by Beckett to that figure in the playscript as first published, is transformed in Touretteshero's production into a gesture of translation, communication and correspondence between protagonist (Mouth) and audience through Wombwell's body. There is a doubling, and a recursion. The eye of the audience flits between Thom's illuminated mouth and Wombwell's illuminated body: the former elevated above stage level, as directed by Beckett, the latter on a level with the audience, bridging the gap between speaking and listening. One of the issues that had to be addressed in the development of the production was whether the body of the BSL translator would remain whole, emulating the figure of the Auditor, or be fragmented, as is the body of Mouth. Hearing impaired audience members suggested that the disembodiment and fragmentation integral to Mouth be replicated in the visual presentation of BSL in order to retain the visceral tension integral to Beckett's play.



Another issue that was raised very early on was the tradition of incarcerating the body of the actor in productions of the play. Well-known actors such as Jessica Tandy, Billie Whitelaw and Lisa Dwan have written and spoken extensively of the physical privations deemed necessary to produce the singular image of an illuminated mouth on stage. The abject fetishisation of the female body in productions of *Not I* has become the norm. I

⁴ For a BSL synopsis of *Not I* see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MTk7swMYn8s>

have no doubt that gender has a significant part to play in the ease with which images and reports of the constrained and subjected body of the actor of *Not I* have become in recent times, a commonplace currency of critical response. Thom changes the terms of engagement, focusing on the image required by Beckett's play, while acknowledging the futility, and indeed perversity, of restraining a body that is wired to move. She takes matters into her own hands, commissioning the design of a mode of illumination that is under her control. Rather than constrained to rest within the visual parameters of an external light source, Thom wears her light in her hood. It is part of her costume and moves as she moves. The actor retains agency over the obviation of her body. Thom is alert to the wider sociological implications of these directorial choices, emphasizing that 'it says something more broadly that relates to disability and to difference, that is: to achieve the same things and to have equality of opportunity doesn't mean we have to do everything in the same way'.⁵

Touretteshero's *Not I* also challenges the 'victim' position ascribed by Ilya Kabakov⁶ to the theatre audience, reconfiguring agency and engagement through relaxed performance⁷ in which the audience are free to come and go, to sit or lie down, to speak or be silent. This is in stark contradistinction to Walter Asmus's Royal Court production of Beckett's *Not I*, *Footfalls* and *Rockaby* (2014) in which the audience are embraced, and perhaps entrapt, by the pervasive dark that links all three plays. I welcomed the sensory deprivation of the Royal Court production, the dark accentuating the visceral proximities of other bodies of the audience, and heightening the visual image of Mouth, May, and W, when the lights came up. Indeed, by situating the audience in darkness, more could be made of the penumbral shades of grey out of which Beckett's figures emerge. Asmus's *Footfalls* extended the possibilities of the crepuscular in ways that evoke Beckett's words from *Worstward Ho*: 'Dim light source unknown. Know minimum. Know nothing no'. Yet even so, the requirement to sit still and silent in the dark of the theatre excludes the very bodies about which Beckett's writing is so intimately concerned.

In *Not I* narrative, performance, and enactment fuse in a taut trajectory of sound. The rigours of Beckett's text play out on Thom's neurodiverse body in ways different to previous productions of *Not I*. Voluntary and involuntary speech contest within an agonistics of agency. The silence that punctuates Beckett's play during the brief moments when Mouth stops speaking become the points at which Thom's body gives voice and the sounds that Mouth hears but does not recognise as her own voice ('the buzzing, all the time the buzzing') are rendered material through Thom's neurodiversity. *Not I* interleaves the voluntary and the involuntary. The first, the performed script about a woman's intermittent aphasia, traumatic affective experiences, and logorrhea, is intercut by the second, the involuntary utterances of the actor's body ('biscuit, hedgehog') creating for the audience a multi-layered experience of Beckett's script in which ideas integral to the play are enacted within the performance.

Yet we already know how the silence called for by Beckett's stage directions is an impossibility since the body is never silent. Composer John Cage experienced the sounds

⁵ 'Edinburgh Showcase 2017: *Not I* by Samuel Beckett by Touretteshero and Battersea Arts Centre', <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bwv8riGhOcw>

⁶ Ilya Kabakov, *On the 'Total' Installation* (Berlin: Cantz Verlag, 1995), p. 3.

⁷ <http://adiarts.ie/audiences/access-the-arts/relaxed-performance/>

of his own body within the putative silence of an anechoic chamber (the high pitch of his nervous system, the low pitch of his circulation system). Artist Anne Niemetz's and nano-scientist Andrew Pelling's collaborative sound work *The Dark Side of the Cell*⁸ enables us to hear the sounds created by the oscillation of living cells through the nano-technology of an Atomic Force Microscope (AFM). As the narrator of Beckett's novel *The Unnamable* notes, 'it is all very fine to keep silence, but one has also to consider the kind of silence one keeps'.⁹

Thom's tics operate on a continuum with, rather than in contradistinction to, the voicings and sounds of the neurotypical body. What differs, here, is the question of agency understood in terms of the interaction between linguistic structures, neurological systems, and intentionality. Neurodiverse activists have taken to task twentieth century philosophers of language such as Davidson, Grice and Lewis¹⁰ who ascribe a common set of propositional attitudes to language users that are predicated on a theory of mind based on the neuro-typical body. Davidson's idea of linguistic communication, for example, is based on what he terms 'prior' and 'passing' theories (whereby interlocutors enter into conversation with assumptions about what might be construed, assumptions that are then modified as the conversation develops)¹¹. Davidson's theory of radical interpretation is challenged by Deborah Barnbaum who argues that the neurodiverse and the neurotypical are 'speaking different languages'.¹² Beckett's novel *Watt* seems alert to this. Radical interpretation is the means by which Sam repeatedly comes to understand Watt's increasingly complex locutions. But Beckett, writing in the 1940s, stops short of exploring the implications for interaction and understanding if interlocutors speak from incommensurable corporealities.

Ulrika Maude traces the correspondences between the involuntary locutions of Tourettes and the depiction of speech in *Not I*. She identifies the individuals who informed Beckett's understanding of neurodiversity: Henri Bergson's examination of dyskinesia and automatism (in his essay *Le Rire / Laughter*), Jean-Martin Charcot's work with neurodiverse patients in the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, the pervasive cultural influence of which endowed cabaret and vaudeville with a new vocabulary of movement gleaned from the automatic gestures and words observed in those under his care, and the tics and convulsions of writer Samuel Johnson. She reminds us that Beckett took notes from Max Nardeau's book *Degeneration*, recording terms such as *echolalia* and *coprolalia*. Maude reads Beckett's engagement with analyses of neurodiversity in terms of a contest between habitual, mechanical behaviour and an increasingly tenuous and fraught agent, arguing that the 'Tourettic or convulsive aesthetic is everywhere present in Beckett's

⁸ <http://www.darksideofcell.info/about.html>

⁹ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), p.302-3.

¹⁰ Donald Davidson (1917-2003), Paul Grice (1913-1988) and David Lewis (1941-2001).

¹¹ Donald Davidson, 'A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs', in E. LePore ed., *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 436, 442-43.

¹² Deborah R. Barnbaum, 'The Neurodiverse and the Neurotypical: Still Talking Across an Ethical Divide', in *Ethics and Neurodiversity*, ed. C. D. Herrera and Alexandra Perry (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), p.134.

writing, extending to the very texture of language, which is repeatedly staged as speaking for itself.¹³

However, I'd like to propose that Touretteshero's *Not I* alters the debate about intention, volition, and agency, shifting the parameters of that debate away from the epistemology of what Gilbert Ryle¹⁴ discredited as a category mistake (the distinction between mind and body) towards a pragmatics of agency and access. Barnbaum asserts the importance of cognitive pluralism in terms of both fact and value and, drawing on Joyce Davidson,¹⁵ underlines that 'these different sets of neurological traits can, and do, comprise individual's identity and potentially provide a basis for culture'.¹⁶ Andrew Fenton and Tim Krahn point out that neurodiverse communities 'contest the default pathologizing of differences in brain circuitry that are revealed in behavioural deviances from the standard norm' and seek 'a recognition that, though they are neurologically, cognitively and behaviorally different, they do not necessarily suffer from being neurodiverse nor do they need to be cured'.¹⁷ At the heart of these debates lie issues of power and the dynamics of social inequality that cut across communities to include longstanding debates concerning gender and ethnicity. Touretteshero's *Not I* challenges the pathologisation of neurodiversity and breaks new ground in theatre performance to include the neurodiverse body as a central agent and a vital audience.

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¹³ Ulrika Maude, 'Chronic Conditions: Beckett, Bergson and Samuel Johnson', *Journal of Medical Humanities* (2016) 37:193–204 (p.201).

¹⁴ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), p.16

¹⁵ Joyce Davidson, 'Autistic Culture Online: Virtual Communication and Cultural Expression on the Spectrum', *Social and Cultural Geography* 9:7 (2008): 791-806.

¹⁶ Barnbaum, p.43.

¹⁷ A. Fenton and T. Krahn, 'Autism, Neurodiversity and Equality Beyond the "Normal"', *Journal of Ethics in Mental Health* 2:2 (2007), 1-6 (p.1).