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“YOU JUST HAVE TO LOVE THIS WORLD.”  
ARTHUR MILLER’S *THE LAST YANKEE*

In 1983, when he was 77, Samuel Beckett wrote a playlet under the provokingly mysterious title *What Where*. Concise and precise as it is in its sharply edged wording, it pulls the strands of the majority of the writer’s earlier work together and presents them in a way that suggests added implications, “creating a new illusion of their own.”<sup>1</sup> Introduced by V’s sentence, “We are the last five.”, the playlet centers around games, circularity, repetitiveness, humans’ torturing one another, as well as the threat of senselessness. Almost ten years after the inception of *What Where*, also at the age of 77, another giant of the contemporary stage, Arthur Miller produced *The Last Yankee*, a short play of merely two scenes. Dissimilar though the two late dramatic works are, Miller’s is also full of resonances from the writer’s other works and even serves as a kind of summary of what has preceded it, while opening up a comparatively new vista at the same time.

A connection with the former works becomes established by the very title of Miller’s play, as it so emphatically promises to be concerned with America and its people. In more particular terms, it is, again, the deceptive and even distorting nature of the American Dream that seems to haunt the

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<sup>1</sup> Enoch Brater, *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett’s Late Style in the Theater* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 157.

writer, and calls *The Man Who Had All the Luck*, *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman*, *The Price* and *The American Clock* to the reader's mind. "Yankee" connects with New Englanders as well, for whom Miller, the son of Jewish immigrants, discovered a special liking in himself when researching Puritan culture before he turned to write *The Crucible*:

I had all but committed myself to writing the play, but only at this moment did I realize that I felt strangely at home with these New Englanders, moved in the darkest part of my mind by some instinct that they were putative ur-Hebrews, with the same fierce idealism, devotion to God, tendency to legalistic reductiveness, the same longings for the pure and intellectually elegant argument.<sup>2</sup>

The above diverging references can offer joint points of departure for an analysis: *The Last Yankee* addresses both disappointment and belief in American life and its prospects. It is set in a state mental hospital, where 44 year-old Patricia, mother of seven and her older fellow-inmate, childless Karen, receive treatment for depression. (This obviously recalls the hospital setting of *The Ride Down Mount Morgan*, the play completed last before *Yankee* in 1991, and echoes one of its heroines, Theo's temporary psychic collapse in a stronger form.) They are visited by their husbands: carpenter Leroy "dressed in subdued Ivy League jacket"<sup>3</sup>, a descendant of Alexander Hamilton, one of the constitution-making Founding Fathers, and the financially successful John Frick, who wears a business suit. As the review of Miller's play in the *Independent* contends, "In structure, his play is beautifully worked out: the two couples are diametrically opposed and it proceeds rather like a square dance—first the men do a turn, then the women, then one couple, then all four together."<sup>4</sup> Conversation takes up the whole, there is virtually no action except Karen's highly moving tap-dance

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur Miller, *Timebends, A Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1987) 42.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Miller, *The Last Yankee* (London: Methuen, 1993), 1. All further references are to this edition, respective page numbers will be put in the text in parenthesis.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Hemming's review of *The Last Yankee* in the *Independent*, reprinted in: *Theatre Record* 23 April — 6 May 1993, 488.

performance at the climax<sup>5</sup>, preceding the resolution which contains Patricia's departure for home in the company of her husband. Why can one inmate leave trustfully while the other is frightened into what looks much like relapse, and how does all this relate to contemporary American life, its games, worries and values? Hardly any more questions can be raised about the play in general, its essence being realized in the verbal details, ironies nuances and gestures. As Leonard Moss reads Miller's long introduction to the *Collected Plays*, the writer claims to have been involved "with three stylistic modes prevalent in modern drama, which may be labeled the realistic, the expressionistic, and the rhetorical."<sup>6</sup> It is the last of the three that seems most justifiably applicable in reference to the play under scrutiny.

*The Last Yankee* displays affinity with the former plays of Miller also in its use of autobiographical elements. Female depression and depression in general, for instance, have long been part of the writer's world of experiences. His second wife, Marilyn Monroe was notoriously unbalanced and unable to sever herself from her past, "a troubled woman whose desperation was deepening no matter where she turned for a way out."<sup>7</sup> She died of an overdose of sleeping pills, as the writer "was coming to the end of the writing of *After the Fall*."<sup>8</sup> When asked about his mother in an interview, Miller said: "She was very warm, very nice, musical. She was a good storyteller. And subject to fits of depression." On being further interrogated as to what caused her depression, he went on to depict briefly the wider context, that is the failure of American aspirations: "What bothers everybody in this country? Frustration. You are surrounded with what you think is opportunity. But you can't grab on to it."<sup>9</sup> Patricia's dissatisfaction

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Gina Thomas, "Wenn Frauen zu viel leiden. Amerika in der Psychiatrie: Arthur Millers "The Last Yankee" im Londoner Young Vic," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 16 Fevr. 1993, S. 29.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Moss, *Arthur Miller* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980) 95.

<sup>7</sup> *Timebends*, 466.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 531.

<sup>9</sup> Leonard Moss, "*The Absence of the Tension: A Conversation with Arthur Miller*," Leonard Moss, *op. cit.*, 118.

with her husband's lack of material success carries some resonance of the contempt Miller's mother felt for his father's financial collapse during the Depression. His mother's two brothers both died young, which fact is echoed in Patricia's brothers' respective suicides before they would have reached middle age. The differences between the outlook of Patricia's family and that of her husband, Leroy, recall Miller's own experiences in connection with his first wife's, Mary's piously Catholic family. The most important of all the autobiographical references, however, is Leroy's being a carpenter, a craft Miller himself cultivated and probably considered an art. In *Timebends* he describes how he built a little shack,

where I could block out the world and bring into focus what was still stuck in the corners of my eyes. ... A pair of carpenters could have put up this ten-by-twelve-foot cabin in two days at most, but for reasons I still do not understand it had to be my own hands that gave it form, on this ground, with a floor that I had made, upon which to sit to begin the risky expedition into myself.<sup>10</sup>

It was in that self-built shack that *Death of a Salesman* started to take shape. Leroy Hamilton, the last Yankee of our present play can be regarded as a kind of self-portrait, presenting the craftsman part of the artist that wishes to live and create independently of the world's hustling ways.

Scene One contains the encounter between the two husbands while waiting for their wives to join them. Occupied in "idly leafing through an old magazine" (1), Leroy's behaviour becomes immediately contrasted with that of Frick, who looks at his watch as soon as he has entered and taken a seat. A man of business, he is always short of time, even when on a visit to his hospitalized wife. The ensuing conversation focuses on the two women and the nature of their illness. Soon it turns out that not only the two husbands' material background is widely different, with the Hamiltons sometimes not being able to pay the bills they get and the Fricks having more than the average, but also their approach to their wives' depression. Frick keeps on

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<sup>10</sup> Arthur Miller, *Timebends*, 183.

considering external factors: the illness must be due to the presence of too many Negroes, crime, the lack of brothers and sisters to talk to, etc. His nonsense attitude makes him take Karen's problem even as a kind of insult to his own business-based well-being. It is an "awful sensation" (4) for him not to have around the partner who had been such a good listener before her decline into depression began. "Whatever deal I was in, couldn't wait till I got home to talk about it. Real estate, stock market, always interested." (5) In contradiction, Leroy's probings into the implications of Patricia's depression betray an interest in seeing it in terms of their relationship and his own responsibility. Unlike the superficial, routine approach of Frick, his instinctively hits upon something vitally important from the point of view of the disease: "They're usually sick a long time before you realize it you know. I just never realized." (3)

The wives's disorders, however, do not form the sole theme of their conversation. As the above quotation hints, the women's problems are fundamentally rooted in the marital relationships, therefore the men's side becomes equally important in the play. When it comes to light that Leroy is just a carpenter and not, for instance, a contractor, Frick responds in a disturbingly mixed fashion. On the one hand he displays a genuinely human admiration for the art-like craft of the other, who has recently renovated a Presbyterian Church and in addition built a first-class altar to be its pride. On the other hand, Frick's instinctively praising attitude is soon replaced by his assessment of Leroy's achievement from the point of view of social positions and expectations, according to which the younger man fails to have made a career, in spite of descending from one of the Founding Fathers.

The mention of Alexander Hamilton brings to mind the American constitution and the myth of happiness attainable through material success, declared everybody's right. Here, however, neither of the two men is happy. Frick appears hardly more than a clockwork automaton whose latent psychic problem manifests itself in compulsive talking and the over-abundant use of clichés in lack of original thoughts. Leroy claims to be driven crazy by the other's and, by extension, the society's ambiguity about his job:

Well what's it going to be, equality or what kind of country?—I mean am I supposed to be ashamed I'm a carpenter? ... I mean everybody's talking 'labor, labor,' how much labor's getting; well if it's so great to be labor how come nobody wants to be it? ... Do you ever hear people brag about a bricklayer? I don't know what you are but I'm only a dumb swamp Yankee, but ... (10)

Their clash reveals total disagreement and a hopeless lack of understanding, expressed by the younger's outburst and the older's shaking "his head with a certain condescension" (11) as well as by the fact that both resume what they were doing before their verbal encounter. Taken as a whole, this protracted exposition to the play enacts the depression-generating core problem of the American society: the failure of interpersonal communication and relationships because people view one another not as humans first of all, but as players in an artificially set game. Leroy rightly assumes that depression has nothing to do with bills or the number of children or relatives. As a general malaise, it has infected not only the wives but their men as well, although in a less spectacular way. Frick has become insensitive and hypocritical while Leroy "is threatened by lethargy and stubbornness."<sup>11</sup> The exposition anticipates Patricia's later summary: "You've got a right to be depressed. There's more people in hospitals because of depression than any other disease." (17) This also answers why the play, in spite of the fact that the number one sufferers in it are women, should not be analyzed in a simplifying way, blaming patriarchal society for the purposelessness and mental illness of its female members. Most people just can't find themselves, as Miller himself said in a BBC interview conducted by Christopher Bigsby shortly after the London premiere of *The Last Yankee* in early 1993.

Confronting a tentatively recovering Patricia and a Karen of conspicuously incoherent conversation, Miller wades deeper into the problem. The younger woman is dissatisfied with her husband's refusal to make

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<sup>11</sup> Helen McNeil, "Pictures from an institution," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 5 February 1993.

money and, in Karen's words, his "refusing to amount to anything and then spending money on banjo lessons." (17) Karen, in turn, has become repelled by her husband's cruel and expensive pastime activities, hunting and fishing, while there is also a slight hint that he neglects her. As Graham Hassell concludes, "that soul-destroying chimera the American Dream" is to blame for the two women's illness: "The pursuit of happiness via wealth has failed to gratify Karen; not pursuing wealth has disillusioned Patricia."<sup>12</sup>

Rather strangely, contradicting the fact that they are the hospitalized patients, the women characters appear to be less hopeless here than the husbands were at the end of Scene One. Tying up with her husband's reference to the crucial importance of their relationship in viewing her illness, Patricia has started on the way to recovery because of her budding awareness that "I-must-not-blame-Leroy-any more." (16) Karen turns out to have a suppressed talent for different forms of exercise, table tennis and tap-dancing. Reminding one of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, she wishes she could raise vegetables like her family did in earlier times. Most promising of all, however, is the two women's mutual contentment to have a partner to talk to in the other. Their forming relationship is a kind of eye-opener to both. Speaking to Karen about her husband's falling short of her brothers' handsomeness, Patricia is brought to face the fact that they were suicides because of "Disappointment. We were all brought up expecting to be wonderful, and ... just wasn't." (21) (An unmistakable echo of *Death of a Salesman*, again, is quite clear here.) At the same time, Karen is reminded of her talents and advised not to be ashamed of being an inmate in a place like that. Later her husband quotes her in reference to Patricia's influence: "She says you made her realize all the things she could be doing instead of mooning around all day ... " (34) In the complex movements of the quartet, this second turn establishes a step forward compared to the deadlock of the first one. Miller's developing his play in scenes between two people seems to be in harmony with what Brecht claims in his *Organum*: "... the smallest

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<sup>12</sup> Graham Hassell, review of *The Last Yankee* in *What's On*, 12 May 1993, reprinted in: *Theatre Record*, 489.

social unit is not the single person but two people. In life too we develop one another.”<sup>13</sup>

The ensuing encounter between Patricia and Leroy struggles through various phases of a painfully sincere review and reassessment of their relationship. The beginning sounds still in the manner of earlier misunderstandings: the “faintly patronizing tone” (21) of Patricia’s address to her husband parallels Frick’s condescending treatment of Leroy. Ups and downs alternate; on the way toward each other there are sharp emotional turns which indicate that their rise to (re)make a duet of healthy and trusting humans requires changes of attitude on both sides. Following complaints to the effect that even their eldest daughter has learned to look down at him, Leroy reports about having for once asked a realistic price for his quality work to meet Patricia’s wish against the convictions of his own “thick skull.” (23) This positive step opens up the possibility to fathom the depth of their not only strongly related but also commonly rooted problems. It is, first and foremost, the lack of trust in others, themselves and each other that they start identifying together. Patricia discovers an intricate connection between her husband’s unease, untrustfulness and poverty: “You are depressed, Leroy! Because you’re scared of people, you really don’t trust anyone, and that’s incidentally why you never made any money.” (25—26) Leroy, in turn, emphasizes that she should have far more self-trust: “I’m sure of it, Pat, if you could only find two ounces of trust I know we could still have a life.” (27) As far as belief in the other is concerned, Leroy attempts to convince the woman of his loyalty with the following touchingly sincere confession: “When you are positive about life there’s just nobody like you. Nobody. Not in life, not in the movies, not on TV.” (30) Slowly but surely, the Hamiltons manage to realize what the American poet Marianne Moore identifies as “contagion of trust can make trust.”<sup>14</sup>

The heavy burden of the past appears to be equally important for them to sort out. The story of Patricia’s Swedish immigrant family, begun in the foregoing part of the scene, earns a fuller discussion here. With strong

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<sup>13</sup> John Wallett, ed., *Brecht on Theatre* (London: Methuen Ltd., 1987) 197.

<sup>14</sup> Marianne Moore, *In Distrust of Merits*, in: Robert Diyanni (ed.), *Modern American Poets* (New York: Random House, 1987) 363.



words and in deep emotional shock, Leroy draws attention to another aspect of his sense of failure: "I'll never win if I have to compete against your brothers!" (26) In spite of having married a Yankee, Patricia has retained a subconscious resentment against his kind, because of old hostilities: "We were treated like animals, some Yankee doctors wouldn't come out to a Swedish home to deliver a baby ..." (28) It is at this point of the play that the reference of the title receives an explanation as Leroy, in answer to the above, expresses his hope to be the last Yankee "so people can start living today instead of a hundred years ago." (28) This attempt to rid themselves of the chains of the past is interestingly paralleled in Brian Friel's *Translations*, a contemporary Irish play at the end of which schoolmaster Hugh says, "To remember everything is a form of madness."<sup>15</sup>

Finally, leading up to what can be considered the intellectual message of the play, Patricia and Leroy unravel the meaning of the word "spiritual." For the woman it refers to what is inside. For her husband, it carries a more general, life-sustaining sense: "To me spiritual is whatever makes me forget myself and feel happy to be alive. Like even a well-sharpened saw, or a perfect compound joint." (32) Overlooking Leroy's earlier quoted wish to embody the last Yankee, Helen McNeil's brief analysis of the play stresses that opposed to the "hard-bargaining New Englander ... Miller is proposing another essential Yankee, coming forward from the line of Puritanism which saw even the most ordinary objects and acts in the material world as gifts from God." Developing her argument further, she contends that Leroy, as that other kind of Yankee, proves an inheritor of Jonathan Edward's spiritualism.<sup>16</sup> At the emotional peak of their encounter, while Patricia's eyes "are filling with tears", his philosophy runs with relieving power: "I'll say it again, because it's the only thing that's kept me from going crazy—you just have to love this world." (32) Hereby, completing his refusal to continue to carry the paralyzing load of the past, Leroy, the builder rises to the status of a latter-day Transcendentalist. Though in a different context,

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<sup>15</sup> Brian Friel, *Translations*, in: *Selected Plays of Brian Friel* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986) 445.

<sup>16</sup> Helen McNeil, *op. cit.*

the intense love of life characteristically appears in *The Ride Down Mount Morgan*, where Emerson is quoted as well.

Immediately following the highly gratifying progress of the Hamiltons in the renewal of their understanding and support for each other, the last section of Scene Two and the play itself begins, offering further progress and then a mixed ending. The whole quartet is on stage. The older people seem to be having a smooth time, Frick even displays signs of unselfish caring, since he has remembered to bring Karen's tap-dancing outfit to the hospital at her request, despite his conviction that "it's kinda silly at her age," (33) and all his businessmanlike stiffness. The ageing and timid Karen's pathetic tap-dancing is a climactic point of the whole work in that it involves a test for all the four characters. The Hamiltons turn out to have gone as far as being strong enough to offer emotional support for Karen:

PATRICIA. Isn't she wonderful?

LEROY. Hey, she is great.

KAREN *dances a bit more boldly now ...* (36)

Her unrestrainedly continuing performance, however, proves to be too much for the convention-bound Frick whose outburst, in the form of an astonishingly furious shout, brings back a look of fear to Karen's face and brings the dance to an abrupt end. The shout proves revealing as well, since it shows how impatient, incomprehending and selfish he is under the facade of the role of the caring husband, which he tries to play as expected. On the other hand, the secret of their marital failure behind Karen's psychic failure, that is the lack of real human equality and consideration for the other, lays itself bare quite poignantly:

KAREN (*apologetically to PATRICIA*). He *was* looking at me ... (*To Frick.*) She didn't mean you *weren't* looking, she meant ...

FRICK (*rigidly repressing his anger and embarrassment*). I've got to run along now.

KAREN. I'm sorry, John, but she ...

FRICK (*rigidly*). Nothing to be sorry about, dear. Very nice to have met you folks.

*He starts to exit. KAREN moves to intercept him.*

KAREN. Oh, John, I hope you're not going to ... (be angry.) (36)

When Frick has left, Karen does a few more steps then stops and walks out as well. Seemingly, their retreat is a sign of absolute defeat. For the other couple, however, the scene has brought the experience of reassurance and the realization that they have overcome some obstacle already. According to Leroy this feels like a miracle, and Patricia is prepared to go home with him in the hope that "Between the banjo and that car I've certainly got a whole lot to look forward to." (38)

Apart from its optimism, Miller's resolution to the play defies the description of sentimentalism, as the Hamiltons' success remains brittle: Patricia is shown still struggling against her self-doubt before leaving the hospital of her own accord. The presence of a motionless depressive in her bed throughout the scene is also a strong image in its constant reference to illness not having disappeared. On the other hand, the Fricks seem to be farther from each other than ever. They are "diametrically opposed" to the Hamiltons, as quoted above, but also complementary to them. There are faint signs that their case may take a more hopeful turn; after all, Frick promises to come again on Friday and in the meantime their decision to have a more sincere talk will probably mature. Remembering Patricia's question, "Who knows what's normal, Mr. Frick?" (35), the man might even reconsider his comfortable answers. As their behaviour and the response it elicited has helped the other couple continue to remain and even proceed on the positive track, the Fricks may profit from the Hamiltons' example. While depression in the play is a metaphor for the illness of a whole society, its individuals' ability to influence each other is given strong emphasis. Nothing can be changed according to Miller, save people's attitudes. In that field, however, there are infinite resources. One more reason for having a quartet in the play and not merely a couple is to demonstrate that the

humanizing of life as a weapon against depression depends on interpersonal influences within the body of the larger society and not only in marriage. In a way this is a political message: "Miller's plays are always political, in the wide and profound sense that Ibsen's and Shakespeare's are."<sup>17</sup> Nothing is really solved, however, because there is no solution for life either, as Miller himself summarizes in connection with *The Price*.<sup>18</sup>

*The Last Yankee* is remarkable for its subtlety of language, masterfully handled dialogues and polished nuances of non-verbal behaviour. No remark remains unwoven into the whole, Miller unpicks all the strands "with painful honesty."<sup>19</sup> Leroy's playing the banjo and Karen's tap-dancing have a special function. They are both artistic activities, serving as metaphors to articulate the wish for individual freedom and self-expression. This is underlined by their appearance with two so markedly different persons as Karen and Leroy, reminding one that the desire is independent of age, status and gender. The common function is brought home in structural terms as well: introducing the climactic last scene Leroy appears ready to play his banjo for an attentive Patricia when Karen comes in with her costume that she soon uses for her tap-dance. Characteristically of the contemporary theatre, although undeniably based on traditions, various forms of dance are employed by other playwrights as well in reference to the expression of a wide range of human desires. Let it suffice to mention Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) and Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* (1993). Showing the ever possible presence of these needs and desires under any circumstances in *The Last Yankee* testifies to Miller's unfailing belief in life and its rights. What he claimed in one of his theatre essays earlier, holds firmly with regard to *The Last Yankee* as well: "I am simply asking for a theatre in which an adult who wants to live can find plays that will heighten his awareness of what living in our time involves."<sup>20</sup> In the

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<sup>17</sup> John Peter, *America the Grave*, in: Programme Note to Arthur Miller's *The Last Yankee*, produced in the Duke of York's Theatre, London, 1993.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Leonard Moss, *op. cit.*, 121.

<sup>19</sup> Sarah Hemming, *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Robert A. Martin, ed., *The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978) 227.

latter part of Miller's oeuvre *Clara*, one of the two so far neglected pieces in *Danger: Memory!* (1987) anticipates *The Last Yankee* with its ending on a note of affirmation after a thorough self-search, in spite of its tragic content. On the verge of tears, the deserted Lyman in the closing lines of *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* exclaims: "What a miracle everything is! Absolutely everything!"<sup>21</sup>

With an extended and successful run in two London theatres, first the Young Vic then the Duke of York's behind it, *The Last Yankee* has proved to be a genuinely apt piece for the stage. The director and actors deserve praise in bringing out the value of the play with great sensitivity and taste. The ward was placed on a raised platform, as if it were "in limbo ... surrounded by a sea of blue."<sup>22</sup> The setting joined the real and the surreal together; in the pastel-coloured, dreamlike atmosphere inner movements were felt to be taking place, while the quite familiar-sounding everyday problems of middle-aged Americans spoke aloud. The cast was perfect, resulting in an extremely suggestive, life-like acting and well-balanced employment of gestures.

*What Where* happened to become Beckett's final work written for the stage. It leaves the audience with the words: "Make sense who may. I switch off."<sup>23</sup> Beckett did, in fact, but his work, infinitely rich in meanings, remains with us. "In its plea to live in the now, acknowledging yet breaking free of a damaging past," Miller's play "is a short but potent coda to a lifetime of social concern," as was written in *The Times*.<sup>24</sup> One thing remains certain; supported also by its outstanding theatrical success, *The Last Yankee* is the best work Miller has written for the last decade. It will continue to attract all who wish to make sense of their lives.

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<sup>21</sup> Arthur Miller, *The Ride Down Mount Morgan* (London: Methuen Drama, 1992) 88.

<sup>22</sup> Jane Edwards's review of *The Last Yankee* from *Time Out*, reprinted in: *Theatre Record*, 489.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Beckett, *What Where*, in: *The Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1984) 316.

<sup>24</sup> Jeremy Kingston's review of *The Last Yankee* from *The Times*, reprinted in: *Theatre Record*, 489.