

Performing the Performance of Power in Beckett's *Catastrophe*

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In a rare instance of explicit contextualization, Samuel Beckett's *Catastrophe* presents theatre practitioners in the midst of a final dress rehearsal. This short play is a commentary on power relations, linking those which operate in the theatrical arena with those exerted in the political arena. Having been a director of this play, my interest is in uncovering insights, interpretations, and paradoxes that surface in the performance of *Catastrophe*. The rehearsing of this "rehearsal" reveals specific ambiguities concerning the relationship amongst the Director, the Female Assistant, and the Protagonist, offering provocative interpretations and connections. Furthermore, the actors and directors participating in the production may find themselves inescapably enmeshed in the hierarchy that the play depicts. At times, they may feel at the mercy of what might be termed the "constraint" of a Beckettian aesthetic. The insights of Foucault and others provide a framework with which to explore the interplay of power and authority in theatricality's internal performance process and its unique hyperbolization in Beckett's theatrical world.

The four character play opens with a Director (D) and his Female Assistant (A) contemplating the image of a Protagonist (P). P stands on an 18-inch cube dressed in a full length black gown, head bowed and hidden from view by a black wide-brimmed hat. He is perfectly still. After a grueling silence, the Assistant finally asks whether D "likes the look of him."¹ The Director replies, "so so," and proceeds to inquire about A's decisions in developing the image of P. Question follows question, each spaced by a manipulative pause, each working to dissect and critique another part of A's minimalist production. From her replies and frequent compulsions to "make a note," it is apparent that A's decisions were based on an attempt to meet D's earlier specifications, that it is really his vision that she works to achieve. With various displays of dissatisfaction, sarcasm, and distaste, the Director makes his disapproval clear and sets about altering, subtracting, and experimenting

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to try to "get it right." The Assistant makes some changes and takes notes about others. Between casual puffs at a cigar which he periodically commands A to relight, D also compels her successively to remove articles of P's clothing, to position and re-position his body, and to experiment with various technical instruments until his desired effect is achieved. The result is an image of complete subjugation. The Protagonist is undressed to his ash-colored underwear which is in turn rolled, ripped, and splayed to accommodate D's assessment that he "could do with more nudity." His head is bowed, hands joined and raised to shoulder height, invoking the image of a kind of robotic supplication. The lighting illuminates the entire body and gradually fades to focus on P's lowered head, intensifying the shadows on his "moulting skull" and the "few tufts" of frizzled hair that remain. "Lovely!" declares the director upon achievement of his catastrophe. The last moments of the play, however, belong to P. After D satisfies himself that "he'll have them on their feet," P slowly raises his head in seeming protest of his position as the object of D's artistic experiment and breaks the image created by D and A.

Beckett compels his audience to connect the tyrannical power deployed by the dictator upon the individual with that exerted by the director upon actors and assistants. The theatrical arena is presented as a kind of perverse scientific laboratory or torture chamber (States 14). As Elaine Scarry notes, "torture consists of a primary physical act, the infliction of pain, and a primary verbal act, the interrogation" (28). In *Catastrophe*, Beckett bifurcates these two activities, forcing a voiceless Protagonist to endure the former and the Female Assistant to endure the latter. Our perceptions of both the political and theatrical arenas also speak to Foucault's metaphor of the "prison-machine," skilled as both are in their tested methods of surveillance, intimidation, discipline, and normalization. Both have borrowed its tactics and procedures, demonstrating the way a power-model permeates a society, manifesting its infiltration in "capillary institutions." *Catastrophe's* metaphors so conveniently resonate with elements of Foucault's discourse that a critic can very easily be seduced into a theory of theatre practice as totalizing as is Foucault's of the prison. An efficient apparatus of production, *Catastrophe's* theatrical world sustains itself through intimidation, institutionalizes its hierarchies, secures the compliance of its subjects (the actors), and labels its procedures of torture "artistic." While this vision of the performance process is no doubt a reductive one, Beckett's model does serve as a tool with which to question a distribution of power often reified in the act of theatre-making.

Central to discourses on power and torture is an awareness of the body as the object of political as well as aesthetic forces. As Joseph Roach says, such an emphasis is of interest to the "theatre historian who necessarily chronicle(s) the observances of the fleshly shrine where the body is represented nightly as the principal medium and chief attraction" (101). In

Catastrophe, most of the Director's orders and the Assistant's responses, filled as they are with references to the "fibrous degeneration" of the Protagonist's toes and feet, his "clawlike" hands, and his "moulting skull" with its "few tufts" of hair, remind us of the body beneath D's aesthetic vision. A performance of this play literally fleshes out Beckett's thematics. In an age which has worked progressively "to hide the body of the condemned man," shifting the site of execution and torture from public arenas to private chambers, diluting its methods in an attempt to discipline "at a distance," Beckett reminds us of the materiality of the figure who endures it all. A performance of *Catastrophe*, in fact, restores these systems of punishment, once deprived of their visible display, to their historically spectacular condition; the condemned body, once again an object of sight, reminds its spectators of its fleshly existence.

In discussing Beckett's characterization of theatre as an arena of "maximum corporeal presence," Thomas Whitaker analyzes the way in which this fact secures Beckett's effectiveness as a playwright. "Beckett's reduction of his characters to comic types, partial persons, and disembodied voices can be enacted and understood only by beings who are not so reduced. Indeed, every such reduction derives its theatrical force from the fact that it both requires and resists the medium of live actors and witnesses" (Whitaker 210). In *Catastrophe*, the unrelenting continuity of P's body generates the play's "theatrical force;" its material presence provides a counterpoint to D's theatrical image. As A removes P's black gown and black hat, unbuttons and raises his long underwear, the audience surveys P's ashen flesh, his hollowed cheeks, his emaciated limbs. In the stillness, the audience watches closely to see whether it is breathing, and, when the image starts to shiver, they realize that it is alive.

In his analysis of the apparatus of power, Foucault introduces another perspective which disrupts attempts to interpret it and to prescribe alternatives. "We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes,' it 'represses,' it 'abstracts,' it 'masks,' it 'conceals.' In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth" (Foucault 194). In other words, we should recognize that the tyrannical processes at work in *Catastrophe* are also ones which produce an aesthetic object; they ensure the creation of a production. "*Catastrophe*," says Bert States, "introduces the question of the *means* in pursuit of a well-justified end . . . theatre proceeds from effect (desired) to cause (how to get it)" (16). In this case, the well-justified end is the image of a catastrophe "in the bag," a production that "will have them on their feet." In truth, the image which the Director and the Female Assistant create does succeed. The "effect" of human suffering and subjugation was desired and has been achieved. Hence, the body of the condemned protagonist does not simply denote a being whose humanity has been "unmade," fractured and negated by a torturer's deconstructive

processes. It is also a body on whom the image of fracture and negation has been "made," encoded, and dramatized by a torturer's productive forces (Scarry 45). D's tyranny has produced abjection and subordination, carving it into P's flesh, manipulating the docile body who appears before us. It is the success of this very process for which the director might later receive congratulations and applause much as wardens are commended for their run of a prison, or as teachers are praised for their students' good behavior. The tortured victim's plight is translated and objectified into an insignia of the torturer's power, allowing D's procedures to be celebrated in the name of artistic achievement (Scarry 51). The point, therefore, is to question our tendency to justify such procedures of torture simply because they work, to rationalize domination simply because it is artistically productive or politically expedient. *Catastrophe* questions the "well-justified end" that is the theatrical production by critiquing the ethical basis of the means required to achieve it.

Catastrophe's Text

One of the most effective ways power is organized and becomes institutionalized is through the establishment and maintenance of a hierarchy. Analyzing the position of the Female Assistant in this hierarchy reveals the ambiguous and tenuous nature of *Catastrophe's* power play. In a world where, as Porter Abbott has said, there are those who act and those who are acted upon, she both participates in the former and endures the latter, thus complicating this conception of power as sovereign and uni-directional (Abbott 73). In Foucault's account of the evolution and systematization of the prison, he tracks a shift from the use of torture at public executions to more subtle, distanced exertions upon the the body of the condemned.

From being an art of unbearable sensation, punishment has become an economy of suspended rights. If it is still necessary for the law to reach and manipulate the body of the convict, it will be at a distance, in the proper way, according to strict rules, and with a much 'higher aim.' As a result of this new restraint, a whole army of technicians took over from the executioner, the immediate anatomist of pain: wardens, doctors, chaplains, psychiatrists, etc. (Foucault 11).

In *Catastrophe*, the Assistant represents one of those intermediary technicians. Never does D touch any part of P's body; A is compelled to enact the process of aestheticization, ie. reaching, stripping, and manipulating. Occasionally, D asks about the condition of P's skull and hands. When A moves to uncover them, D shouts, "Say it," forcefully indicating that he would rather hear a

description of the Protagonist's "moulting tufts" and "fibrous degeneration" unless seeing them was absolutely necessary. Thus, the Director's aesthetic "distance" from the fleshy part of his laudable theatrical image, that "higher aim" for which these endeavors strive, is insured by the employment and deployment of a female assistant who specializes in matters material and corporeal. Along the way, she also lights his cigar for him, and, if he wanted a cup of coffee, she would get it. She represents a kind of theatrical secretary, taking her dictator's dictation, transposing it from notepad onto flesh, submitting it for proofreading, correction, and approval.

Focusing on another moment of the play, however, offers more insight into A's position in the hierarchy. At one point, D leaves the stage to check the view of his masterpiece from the stalls. After he leaves, A walks over to the director's chair, sits down, stands up to wipe it off, and then sits down again comfortably. She bolts upright once more when the Director yells from the back that he cannot see the Protagonist's toes. The Female Assistant's momentary assumption of D's place in the chair prompts our suspicion of A's compliance in the face of D's tyranny. James Scott provides some insight.

Ideological hegemony in cases of involuntary subordination is, I believe, likely to occur if there exists a strong probability that a good many subordinates will eventually come to occupy positions of power. The expectation that one will eventually be able to exercise the domination that one endures is a strong incentive serving to legitimate patterns of domination. It encourages patience and emulation, and, not least, it promises revenge of a kind, even if it must be exercised on someone other than the original target of resentment" (Scott 82).

Thus, it may be that A endures her subordination and buys into the notion of hierarchy simply because she hopes eventually to benefit from that hierarchy. Like the stereotype of a secretary who hopes for the boss' job, the Assistant might be accepting the notion of the ladder (and her position on it) so that she has something to climb. We must additionally recognize that, if she is not careful, she could find herself pushed farther down, perhaps to the Protagonist's level. Perhaps she participates in P's thorough subjugation and humiliation in order to protect herself from a similar plight. Thus, A presents an image of co-optation, enduring the tyranny of the powers above her to keep from losing the little power she has.

This appearance of co-optation can be problematized even further, however, when one looks at more specific moments in the performance text in conjunction with James Scott's use of theatrical metaphors to explore his notion of the "hidden transcript" of subordinate groups. The subordinate's

hidden transcript is a separate set of goals, beliefs, and agendas which he or she keeps hidden from the view of the dominant group most often by "performing on the public stage" the role of the subordinate which the dominant have come to expect. At one point D takes a respite from his aesthetic exertions and contemplates his handiwork. Distraught, he declares that "something's wrong" with P's image and asks, rhetorically and with the air of a genius at work, "what is it?" In what seems a voluntary participation in the process of objectification, A offers timidly, "What if we were . . . were to . . . join them?" "No harm trying," responds the Director, whereupon A walks over and joins P's hands. Dissatisfied with the Assistant's suggestion, the Director commands her to raise them higher, then higher still, a touch more, until P's arms are at precise right angles to his body. He then gives a self-satisfied, "Better . . . it's coming," and congratulates himself by reaching for his cigar and calling out for a "Light!" The Assistant advances, lights his cigar, and, while he puffs away, says to him, "He's shivering," to which D sardonically responds, "Bless his heart."

A pause falls after this segment during which we can analyze what transpired. Though A's suggestion to join P's hands participates in the production of the catastrophe, it differs from most of D's commands, for it does not require the removal of any of P's clothes nor discomfort in the positioning of his body. Nevertheless, A manages to appear complicit in the process of objectification, keeping her public role as assistant in play, while perhaps maintaining a hidden agenda that seeks to minimize P's discomfort. However, D's further commands *do* distort P's image and present a great deal of discomfort; P must keep his arms suspended before him with perfect stillness in spite of screaming muscles and aching limbs. Therefore, after A lights D's cigar, she cannot keep from momentarily vocalizing her sympathy with P. "He's shivering," she says, thus dropping her public persona, a hidden text bursts through her performance of the subordinate. The subtext of D's, "Bless his heart," therefore, is meant as a reproach to A, a warning to keep herself in check, to avoid further transgression. The Assistant's next line indicates that she realizes that she has blown her cover, that too much of a hidden persona was allowed to leak through onto the public stage. She offers another, more humiliating, suggestion, "What about a little . . . a little . . . gag?" to which D loudly responds, "For God's sake! This craze for explicitation! Every i dotted to death! Little gag! For God's sake!" By suggesting the addition of a gag, A might be attempting to regain a loss of face, showing that she can and will participate in procedures of torture. Though he insults her by dismissing (thankfully) her suggestion, A might breathe a sigh of relief knowing that the relations of the public transcript have been restored, that she is no longer endangered by her public transgression of authority.

I do not offer the above analysis as the definitive interpretation of this sequence of lines. I resorted to a very detailed example in order to fully illustrate the ambiguity of A's position in the midst of this very dense and concise text. This is not the only moment that offers potentially complex and ambivalent readings of A's character. The Female Assistant displays moments of sympathy with P (reminding D that P is still shivering or asking if P could "raise his head, an instant . . . show his face . . . just an instant") and then alternately suggests other ways to distort P's image. She obediently accepts the Director's power at times, and then, at others, actually displays moments of sarcasm, undercutting his despotism. She operates in a hierarchical system, at once disdainful of her dictator and glad that she is not the victim of his force, simultaneously repelled and fascinated by the power he wields. In this world, she is granted the privilege "to act" only in proportion to her willingness "to be acted upon."

Catastrophe in Rehearsal

The interactions of power depicted in *Catastrophe* become even more paradoxical, however, when we consider the process by which this representation of power *came to be* represented. Let us consider the phenomena of D, A, and P not only as fictional characters, but as beings whose characterizations and interactions are the result of another power play. In other words, I'd like us to move from the isolated domain of the fictional text to the rehearsal of this text--the rehearsal of this "rehearsal."

Like the fictional director in *Catastrophe*, the "real" director of *Catastrophe* has a vision, an end-result, which she hopes to achieve. And, like the fictional D, she also finds herself trying to manipulate bodies, to produce with and onto flesh, in order to realize it. Each time D calls for another article of clothing to be removed or another limb to be re-positioned, the "real" director implicitly calls for the same thing to be done to the actor playing P. She employs a process of subjugation in order to depict a process of subjugation. When I found myself sitting in the director's chair, I became keenly aware of how much my project seemed to require the docility of bodies. To produce the effect of abject humiliation, the P-actor's body had to endure 3 hours of make-up application to face, hands, and feet complete with various colors of base ranging from white to gray to black, a bald cap, temporary dye, and acrylic paste. This actor was also required to stand on an 18-inch cube perfectly still while being bared to the underwear and while sustaining various body positions with unrelenting isometric strength. Thus, the P actor, encoded as I required, not only represented the "lack of power" of the condemned individual, but also demonstrated that someone (in this case me) had the power to encode him that way. The image of a subject's subjection refers not

only to itself but to the activity of the individual who produced it. The P-actor's plight serves as an insignia of the director's power.

Just as P endures the Director's wish to achieve his catastrophe "in the bag," the actor endures my attempts to bag my *Catastrophe*. Beckett's theatrical world is so precise, its environment so sparse, its components so carefully chosen, that it seems that a director's attention to detail must be equally meticulous. It was in the spirit of practicing extreme caution, therefore, that I found myself in the somewhat ludicrous position of trying to control the P-actor's shivers. I asked if the shivers could "be smaller" at first and then gradually build to "a bigger shiver." We proceeded then to hone and refine the jolts and tremors of the P-actor's body until he achieved "the perfect shiver" and was able to replicate it at exactly the right moments in the play. Though aware of the pettiness of my requirements, I remember encouraging the actor and offering warm congratulations, attempting to paint the activity of shivering as a kind of high art, as a skill whose aptitude could be measured and whose development and mastery was extremely desirable. "Discipline . . . dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an 'aptitude,' a 'capacity,' which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection" (Foucault 138). I felt relieved when the P-actor actually *did* seem satisfied with having accomplished the perfect shiver, relieved that the actor had attributed to self-mastery what had initially begun as my obsession with a particular detail.

The P-actor's position, however, manifests itself most paradoxically in the final moment of the play. After D and A's work is done, the Protagonist finally "raises his head," breaking the image of subjugation they have created, in seeming protest of his aestheticization. Yet the actor's experience of this moment is actually one of aching control in trying to keep the rest of his body perfectly still and in slowing the pace of the "head raise" to the ten seconds called for by the "real" director and her vision of P's liberation. The "real" actor is thus oppressed by the image, the effect, of the fictional actor's release.

The P-actor, however, is not the only actor who had to endure the force of my directorial vision. In the opening sequence, I described the long, agonized pause that precedes D's questions. I had a specific idea of the way I wanted D to utilize pauses as an intimidation tool. Hence, the pauses in the scene, the pace during the sequence of orders, all of the technical effects used to portray D's tyrannical power were often first conceived by me, the "real" director. Ruled by a hyperawareness of every second, gesture, and intonation, I found myself giving orders to the actor playing D--orders which were uncomfortably reminiscent of those the fictional D gives to A. I thus placed the D-actor in a position metaphorically equivalent to the one in which A is placed--he had to act and be acted upon. In this scenario, it is now he who

takes my dictation, transposing it, if possible, onto his nerves and instincts, onto his flesh. The D-actor was disciplined by my "vision" of the fictional director's domination. However, when he *did* follow my suggestions, taking extra time between certain lines, punching a syllable of a particular word, holding his coat over his shoulder in a certain way, he did achieve the effect I desired. In this case, the image was achieved; power produced. Thus, in order to paint the picture of a tyrant, it could be said that I momentarily became one. In creating a play which critiques theatre's hierarchy, the "real" director exploited the power of her position in that hierarchy in order to illustrate effectively that critique.

To diminish my discomfort upon sensing my position as a creator of a critique that I could well have waged against myself, I sought opportunities to lessen the force of my aesthetic exertions. When the actor playing P found it tremendously difficult to keep his arms raised straight in front of him during the whole course of the play, I decided to minimize the pain my (and Beckett's) vision exerted upon his muscles by changing the vision. We found that raising the arms at the elbow made for a much more tolerable, if less dramatic, gesture. Another problem came when the actress playing A tried to work through the moments described earlier when, after telling D that P is shivering, A must then suggest "a little gag" for P. Though I attempted to justify her character's complicity with the explanation I outlined above, she told me that her instincts told her otherwise; her sympathy with P was too strong at this point to acquiesce to D so completely. In general, the A-actress and I had been trying to find and highlight more moments of resistance for A, to give more clues allowing the audience to sense the Assistant's hidden agenda. In light of this project, we decided to try something else. After D responded to A's shivering line with a sarcastic "Bless his heart," A turned on her heel and said quickly, rhetorically, and without timidity, "what about a little gag?," her subtext being, "as long as this jerk wants to make P suffer, why doesn't he go for it." D, however, absorbed in himself, still responded as if A had actually meant to make a serious suggestion. "For God's sake. This craze for excitation. Every i dotted to death. Little gag. For God's sake." The joke is then on D. The Assistant has voiced a sarcasm prompted by a need to resist her dictator, but, due to his self-absorption, has not been punished for it. The A-actress also decided to make the cigar-lighting action which precedes her lines another indirect expression of resistance. In our production, A carried out D's orders with a swift, precise motion, finishing with the lighter directly before the nose of her dictator. Hence, without burning him, A lets the audience know that she wants to. Conveniently, however, it is an assertion of resistance that cannot be reproached, enacted as it is within the apparent activity of carrying out an order. I decided that this interpretation, satisfying as it was for the actress and provocative as it was for the audience, was one

that we should keep. In doing so, this sequence of lines became one of a very few moments when the Female Assistant's frustration found a temporary, if eventually stifled, moment of expression. Though none of the scholarship I had read about this play offered the interpretations of the character that we found, I felt that our discoveries added an interesting dimension to the display of power depicted in *Catastrophe*. Additionally, I was happy to have found a way, within this meticulous theatrical space, to have included the actress in decisions and to relieve myself of some of the guilty conscience that had formed while sitting in the director's chair.

Catastrophe in Performance

My attempts to negotiate my position in a theatrical hierarchy of power underwent a new challenge when, on opening night, I sat in the audience, watching several professors, graduate students, and Beckett scholars watch my work. Suddenly, I found myself in a new hierarchy in which my work, choices, and decisions, like those of the Female Assistant in the opening moments of the play, were being judged by a greater power. Like the Female Assistant, I was not so sure that they would "like the look of it."

I was questioned about my interpretation of the Female Assistant. I was told that she was "too strong," that we are barely supposed to know that she is there, that she is simply an extension of D's hand, his automaton. When I attempted to say that I saw more complexity in her, I was told that her moments of sympathy with P came because she is a "wimp," that places where I saw her being sarcastic were actually times when she was being her most subordinate, and that her cigar-lighting gesture was a scandal, that she would never do that. In their minds, I had given over to a "craze for explicitation." Additionally, I was told that P's bent arms made for a most ineffective hand-raise, one that did not comply with the robotic, de-naturalized image Beckett intended. In short, these two instances which resulted from a process of compromise and collective effort with the actors had created a production that fell short of their standards. Armed, as I knew my critics were, with a series of epistemological truths; fortified, as I knew these truths were, by conversations with Beckett (or by conversations about conversations with Beckett); documented, as I knew these conversations were, in books and essays which publicly transposed Beckett's insights and interpretations; incontrovertible, as I knew these interpretations were supposed to be, how could I respond? It was true. I had not "gotten it right."

Most questioned, however, was a decision that I waited until now to discuss so that my readers would sense the enormity of my transgression. Contrary to Beckett's specifications, P was actually played by a woman in my production. In substituting a female for a male on the 18-inch cube, I was told

by one individual that I had divested the play of its "universality." If we accept the extravagant (and yet oft-unquestioned) claim that Beckett speaks for all humankind, this objection did have a point. Since members of the audience informed me that our production spoke to them of issues surrounding female objectification, it seems true that the plight of the universal Everyman was not on everyone's mind. Another graduate student who said he had not encountered the play for a while (and hence did not recall that P was originally male) told me that the play "had an erotic component" that he had not remembered. Perhaps, I suggested, this was because his former encounter with the play had not included a female on the block. Therefore, whether my decision provoked considerations of female objectification in some audience members or generated feelings of eroticism in others, these scholars were correct at least in maintaining that my production was not one that conformed to Beckett's intentions. When I said that I was interested in seeing how reception of the play changed when a woman was cast as the Protagonist, a critic said that he understood but that ultimately I was "compromising the text."

Somehow I also knew that informing my questioners about the process by which I made my other decisions, that the P-actor's muscles did not take well to being "de-naturalized" or worse that the A-actress wanted to give her character more depth, would in no way justify them. "Bless their hearts" might well have been their response, demonstrating the absurdity of forsaking aspects of "Sam's vision" for the sake of an actor's physical or emotional comfort. If we examine some of Beckett's own production notes, we see that such compromises have rarely if ever helped to shape a performance. Rather, a tremendous amount of discipline and self-mastery is required of the Beckett actor who often performs from inside an urn or an ashbin, while buried in the dirt or strapped to a high-backed chair with a device that locks her chin in place. Often, his vision, the "effect" he desires, results from the subjection of the actor's body to various sets of tables, charts, and diagrams, synchronized rhythms, timings, and pauses, pre-determined gestures, intonations, and movements.² The actor's mind, body, and emotions are trained and retrained, trimmed and tailored, sculpted and sustained, until all extraneous tendencies that might "conflict with the text" are extricated from the performance (Toscan 214).

If we consider Beckett's own statements about his expectations of the theatre, we see the ideology underpinning the process he requires of his actors. When asked why he decided to begin writing for the theatre, Beckett said that in the 1950's "when I was working on *Watt*, I felt the need to create for a smaller space, one in which I had some control of where people stood or moved." In response to a similar question in 1967, he said, "one must make a world of one's own in order to satisfy one's need to know, to understand, one's need for order. . . . There for me, lies the value of the theater. One

turns out a small world with its own laws, conducts the action as if upon a chessboard" (MacMillan 15). Given that the value of theatre for Beckett lay in its potential to satisfy his need for order, actualizing this vision required a very particular form of acting and actor-training. After twenty-five years in the business, however, we can see his apparent frustration with actors' continual reluctance to conform to his standards. "Not for me these Grotowskis and Methods," says Beckett, "the best possible play is one in which there are not actors, only the text. I'm trying to find a way to write one" (MacMillan 16). Hence, what began as a way to "control where people stood or moved" inevitably gave over to a realization that having such control required the absence of the people.

A few actors, however, did satisfy Beckett's expectations; Billie Whitelaw is one of these rare individuals. Billie Whitelaw's success is hailed, not simply as an example, but as a justification for Beckett's actor-regimen. In Billie Whitelaw, Beckett and his disciples have found the loyal subject whose obedience both exemplifies the practice of self-erasure that should be followed and provides testament to the fact that this practice "works." An interviewer asks her to explain the difference between her and other Beckett actors, what it is in her that produces the results that others do not.

I will totally accept what he has written, and I will then try just to give him what he wants . . . I will just go along with whatever it is. And I will turn myself inside out, and I have made myself ill, trying to complete the image he has in his mind's eye and in his ear . . . I feel that I place myself totally at his disposal, and I can be a tube of paint or a musical instrument or whatever. I won't argue, I won't argue, because I trust him totally, and have absolute respect for his integrity and his artistic vision. So I really just do as I'm told. (Kalb 235)

The ideal Beckett actor is painted as an individual willing to submit entirely to Beckett's laws, to refrain from questioning, to participate in a kind of self-negation in the face of a grander mind.³ Doing so expresses one's respect for Beckett, it produces the expression of reverence he deserves. As the interview proceeds, Whitelaw is asked how she feels about the seemingly negative effects she describes in performing Beckett's plays. "The back pains with *Footfalls*, the terror with *Not I*, the depression with *Rockaby*--how do you feel about all of those things" (Kalb 235). Whitelaw responds, "I feel miserable, miserable. That's why I don't do them all that often" and proceeds to say that she is going to have to think carefully before she decides to do another tour of the plays. She ends, however, with a remark that is perhaps more telling of her reasons for enduring what she has endured.

I'm not a Beckett actress; I'm just an actress who tries to earn a living, and Beckett by some grace of God happens to have crossed my path and the process of my work. I mean, I haven't, like you, read his plays and thought, "my God, I've got to meet this man." All I knew about him was that he wrote this play in which poor Brenda Bruce sat up to her neck in sand. That's all I knew. (Kalb 242)

Thus, Whitelaw temporarily undermines notions of deification, ceasing to represent herself simply as a disciple who, touched by the grace of Beckett, dutifully and reverently takes up her role of voluntary subjugation. Instead, she also maintains that it is all part of a day's work, that such practices keep her employed and that Beckett's presence in her life has been, not only an artistic boon, but provided a very rare and much appreciated opportunity "to earn a living." Like the Female Assistant who endures the power of her director to protect what little security she has, Whitelaw has found a way to work within Beckett's regimen to maintain her employability. Both women allow themselves to be acted upon in order to keep on acting.

Not all actors have found a way to embody Beckett's plays according to Beckett's expectations as easily as Whitelaw. The story surrounding Beckett's direction of the German production of *Footfalls* with Hildegard Schmahl exemplifies the process of training and discipline required of the Beckett actor. Apparently, Schmahl was as an actress who, used to working through the interior life of her characters, needfully underwent a complete about-face in her approach to the text. Walter Asmus, the production's assistant, writes that rehearsals were sites of continual frustration generated from Beckett and Schmahl's difficulties in relating to each other (Asmus 82-95). Jonathon Kalb recounts the process by which Hildegard Schmahl finally saw the light.

Throughout the following weeks, the actress struggled to fulfill the author's wishes, to imitate the cold conspiratorial quality of his monotone line-readings while going through the motions of pacing in the slumped, infolded posture he demonstrated. "I can't do it mechanically," she would say. "I must understand it first and then think." But her vocal deliveries remained scattered, unconvincing, and laden with superfluous 'color.' . . . Schmahl ultimately succeeded by means of a radical self-denial . . . for she eventually came to adopt the author's view of her task as primarily sculptural. . . . Despite her proclivity to inquiry, Schmahl managed to become an informed instrument like Whitelaw and Warrilow through a long and troublesome process of learning to trust the text. (Kalb 63-65)

Schmahl's desire to understand, her "proclivity to inquiry," and her tendency to justify a character's actions, created the "color" and "vital, revived image" that Beckett wished to excise from the performance. If we consider this in light of my production, my attention to the A-actress' process and indulgence of an interpretation that I thought provided an interesting perspective, appears unconscionable; my desire to supply A with an inner motivation--a "hidden text" that developed her character--filled in gaps that Beckett wished to leave empty. In Germany under Beckett's direction, however, Schmahl's performance finally emerged, her voice devoid of "color," her body--understanding its sculptural function--positioned to produce the same back pains Whitelaw endured, her psyche supposedly stripped of emotions to achieve the representation of absence Beckett wanted in spite of the actress' "maximum corporeal presence." Schmahl's initial wayward journey and eventual "radical self-denial" are now hailed as the story of an individual who repented and whose success once again provides proof that Beckett's House of Correction "works." The phrase "learning to trust the text" is romantically invoked, allowing tortuous procedures the disguise of euphemism and the justification of textual integrity. "The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body" (Foucault 26). Schmahl's bodily presence only became of use to Beckett when she decided to produce through her subjection, when she consented to act by being acted upon.

Perhaps even more arduous than Beckett's work with actors has been his confrontation with directors, his attempts to tame what he perceives to be the "omnipresent massacre and abuse of the directorial function." Like the actor whose process of filling in psychological and emotional gaps must be routinely disciplined, the director too must learn to reign in such tendencies.

The director should respect the absence of referentiality and avoid supplying, from his or her own ingenuity, the details that Beckett has deliberately avoided. To do otherwise is to divest the characters of the struggle that constitutes them: the effort to forge and to sustain a speculative notion of the self within the context of a world whose coordinates are uncertain. (Lyons and Becker 293)

The most famous example of a director committing this sacrilege surrounds Joanne Akalitis' production of *Endgame* which, despite Beckett's objections, was set in a New York subway with two of the four characters played by African-American actors. In a court settlement that was resolved hours before its opening, Akalitis and ART's artistic director, Robert Brustein, were required to include a note from the playwright in the program. Jonathon Whitaker extends his notion of "maximum presence" to analyze this historical

event. Bodies are seen as that which both fascinates and frustrates Beckett about the theatre.

Akalitis and Brustein assume that theater is a collaborative art and that a play can't release its meaning without the contributions of directors and actors. Beckett assumes that his legal rights of ownership over the text should enable him to prevent distortion of its form and meaning by a theatrical company. . . . As a citizen in a capitalist society, Beckett may choose to object, but he seems up against the fact that "maximum presence" is inherently prolific. (Whitaker 212-213)⁴

The unrelenting presence of "bodies" in conjunction with texts that fracture, that do not provide a notion of a continuous Self, offers a dramatic counterpoint unique to Beckett's texts. Achieving this counterpoint, however, requires the obedience of all bodies--both on and offstage. Hence, my directorial decisions in *Catastrophe* are perceived as distortions, as flagrant disobedience. "Maximum presence," the thing about theatre that provides a source of dramatic tension for Beckett's texts, is also the thing that "threatens their integrity" (Lyons and Becker 292). In the case of ART's *Endgame*, Akalitis' "body" was a little too unrelenting.

Any production of *Endgame* which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me. My play requires an empty room and two small windows. The American Repertory Theater production which dismisses my directions is a complete parody of the play as conceived by me. Anybody who cares for the work couldn't fail to be disgusted by this. (from program in 1984)

And many were dutifully disgusted. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the whole Beckett phenomenon is the part so many scholars and directors play in preserving the "integrity," the "sanctity," of his texts. How dutifully so many play the role of the Female Assistant, carrying out the orders of their director-dictator.

Even more than with other authors, the subject of directing Beckett is inextricably bound up with questions of faithfulness to text, mostly because this ordinarily reticent author has been extraordinarily vocal in his objections to faithlessness. Not entirely by accident, he had the good fortune of seeing many of his premieres staged by two paradigms of loyalty--Roger Blin and Alan Schneider--who not only

adhered to the very specific instructions in his scripts but also made frequent comments about the propriety of that strictness. (Kalb 71)

How well all components of the hierarchy denounced in Derrida's notion of the theological state are reinscribed in the production process of a Beckett play.

The stage is theological for as long as its structure, following the entirety of tradition, comports the following elements: an author-creator who, absent and from afar, is armed with a text and keeps watch over, assembles, regulates the time and the meaning of representation, letting this latter represent him as concerns what is called the content of his thoughts, his intentions, his ideas. He lets representation represent him through representatives, director or actors, enslaved interpreters who represent characters who, primarily through what they say, more or less, directly represent the thoughts of the "creator." Interpretive slaves who faithfully execute the providential designs of the "master." (Derrida 235)

Some take up their role as interpretive slave with reluctance, others, such as Billie Whitelaw, with an awareness of the practicalities of making a living, still others take it up with enthusiasm. As one of Beckett's foremost directors has said, "I have always rehearsed as though he were in the shadows somewhere watching and listening. . . . In work, then, all of his texts have always been 'Sam's' to me, a marriage *in absentia*, in which I have loved, honored, and obeyed as though he were always with me" (Schneider 238). Thus the notion of obedience that went out of the marriage contract long ago, is affirmed continually in the contract governing a Beckett production. This contract is one where authority and rule are placed entirely in the hands of only one of its co-signers. Never would anyone have asked Beckett to make the same vow in return.

Thus, as we saw Beckett eventually searching for a way to erase the actor in the theatrical production, we can see the same desire implicitly governing his attitude toward directors of his plays. As scholars research, write, and correct, attempting to reconstruct exactly what he meant, exactly what he intended, we willfully participate in a reinscription of the theological stage.⁵ In spite of Beckett's legendary reluctance to discuss his plays, several scholars jump on the few words he has afforded us (in the form of interviews, letters, production books, and angry program notes), piecing together a kind of Gospel According to Beckett by which all his plays shall be judged. It is hard to know if productions performed according to his intentions are done entirely out of respect for Beckett or out of fear of the wrath of The Beckett Police--the

self-appointed army of scholars, artists, and general enthusiasts who watch over a production's authenticity to "Sam's vision" and what they call a director's "egotism." As they deride a production of *Waiting for Godot* because the tree has too many leaves or because it is not there, when they criticize the addition of a musical score or a comic bit unintended by the author, when they patronizingly note a protagonist "decided resemblance" to a concentration camp victim (a craze for explicitation), all of the components of the theological stage critiqued in *Catastrophe* are preserved as naturalized practices whose subversion denotes a major aesthetic transgression and warrants public humiliation. This practice preserves our position as interpretive slaves, as Female Assistants who must light Beckett's cigar the way he wants it lit or as suppressed protagonists who must never raise their heads when "Sam's vision" needs them lowered.

In spite of the critique of theatrical hierarchies waged within *Catastrophe's* fictional text, an acknowledgement of the performance space as the site of intersecting operations of power working from various domains reveals the performance's existence as the locus of a reinscription, a reification, of the very interactions it condemns. Though its message seems to critique hierarchical practices, the exploitation of these practices in the performance process ensure, as far as Beckett and his interpretive slaves are concerned, the effectiveness, the intelligibility, and the "integrity" of this critique. Perhaps, as Gontarski notes, Beckett might well have been engaging in a moment of self-mockery in writing *Catastrophe* (Gontarski 406). The play might stand as proof of Beckett's recognition of his own complicity within the hierarchical model he condemns, thereby inviting us to use Beckett's text to critique Beckett's practices. If so, scholars, directors, and actors might do well to follow Beckett's lead and question our own complicity in such a hierarchy and our own tendencies to replicate patterns of domination. Perhaps the end does not always justify the means.

Finally, Samuel Beckett, his texts, his scholars, his theatrical community, and his practices exemplify the extent to which "a disciplined body is the prerequisite of an efficient gesture" (Foucault 152). To achieve the image of a catastrophe, D must first secure P's docility. To reach my *Catastrophe*, I secured the docility of my actors. To achieve Beckett's *Catastrophe*, he must secure my docility as he has secured the docility of so many followers. All of these bodies, whether a condemned protagonist, an actor, a director, or a "body of scholars," have been disciplined within a power apparatus. Each body has endured its moment before the scaffold, or before the 18-inch cube, when it voluntarily or involuntarily underwent the processes of surveillance, indoctrination, or aesthetic subjugation necessary to ensure its place as "informed instrument" and "interpretive slave." Nevertheless, many will

continue to justify it all by reminding us that such practices produce, that such constraints "get it right."

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Notes

1. All quotations are from *Catastrophe* as it appears in *Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett*. New York: Grove, 1984.

2. Documentation of Beckett's procedures is gathered in works such as (among others) Ruby Cohn's *Just Play: Beckett's Theater*, McMillan and Fehsenfeld's *Beckett in the Theatre*, Jonathon Kalb's *Beckett in Performance*, and Deirdre Bair's biography of *Samuel Beckett*.

3. I am not trying to dismiss what may have been extremely fulfilling artistic experiences for these actors who have found a way to produce within Beckett's confines. A sequel to this paper might explore the complexity of that fulfillment. For now, however, I feel it is important to examine the structural similarities between *Catastrophe's* metaphors and Beckett's own artistic process.

4. Akalitis' own words make a similar point.

Kalb: Did you ever consider changing the credits from "Endgame by Samuel Beckett" to "Endgame, from a play by Samuel Beckett" or "adapted from "Endgame," as was mentioned as a compromise before the opening.

Akalitis: But it's not. I mean, then you would say that anyone who does not take the Samuel French specifications on a play would have to have the same kind of billing. My example is that you get a Noel Coward play and he says that "a short, blonde woman walks into a room, lights a cigarette, and sits down on such and such a kind of chair." If you cast a tall brunette and have her not light the cigarette, and sit down on another chair, do you then say, "Private Lives taken from Noel Coward"? I mean, what we did with *Endgame* was what directors and designers do. Never was that even considered for one second. I mean, this is the play; it's a production of *Endgame*. Like with Sam Shepard and *True West*. He gave rights to Joe to do it; later he hated the production—which is a very legitimate thing to do, say, "This director has ruined my work." But once you give the rights, you've taken that chance. You don't give the rights and then say, "I'm going to stop the play."

5. I say "we" when referring to Beckett scholars not because I claim to be one but to implicate my own tendency to reproduce that which I critique.

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