VITAL SYMBIOSIS: ESTABLISHING THE THEATRICAL TRADITION OF SAMUEL BECKETT

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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The Ohio State University
2004

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“It’s all symbiosis…” Samuel Beckett, on *Waiting for Godot*.

**Symbiosis**

1. A close, prolonged association between two or more different organisms of different species that may, but does not necessarily, benefit each member.

2. A relationship of mutual benefit or dependence.
ABSTRACT

Throughout his life, and since his death in 1989, Samuel Beckett has maintained the somewhat troubling reputation of being a tyrannical arch-controller of his work. This reputation resulted from almost saturation coverage in the international press of two or three major cases. The truth of his position in writing, adapting and directing his works is more complex than this caricature suggests, and included more than one major player throughout his productive career. In this work, I have sought to discover the drive behind the other key players committed to producing the definitive versions of his plays, director Alan Schneider and actor Billie Whitelaw, and to reconsider the tyrannical reputation behind the playwright.

Samuel Beckett certainly believed that the text of the playwright should be respected by a director. He also strongly believed that this fidelity should extend to the stage directions, particularly when they were carefully planned as his were. However, he still believed this left the director with plenty of freedom to maneuver.

Alan Schneider, an American director quickly rising to the pinnacle of Broadway, was committed to Beckett’s works and collaborated with the playwright on each line, stage direction, and prop. This commitment, however unpopular his subservient director position might have seemed, provided the theatre world with an impressive collection of the definitive works of Beckett.
British actress Billie Whitelaw, considered by many to be Beckett's foremost interpreter, worked with Beckett to present his vision onstage. She trusted him completely and followed his direction without question. Whitelaw became Beckett's muse, as many of his shorter female plays were written with her mind. Since his death, she has dedicated her life to lecturing on his works, describing his creative process, and revealing anecdotes about the creative relationship between Beckett and his favorite actress.

Because of theatre luminaries such as Alan Schneider and Billie Whitelaw, we now have a clear vision of what Samuel Beckett intended with his pieces through vast documentation, correspondence, and photo evidence. We also have a personal explanation of why he was so adamant regarding the presentation of his works, which is in direct contrast to his reputation as a tyrannical dictator. Beckett's relationships with friends and colleagues were far more important than was originally understood, and resulted in many of his most celebrated plays and performances. He was not, as once believed, a controlling tyrant, but a firm visionary with an unyielding loyalty to his friends.
For Nick
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank my adviser, Dr. Alan Woods, for his realistic encouragement and support throughout the process, and for proofreading early drafts, much of which has made the final copy bearable.

Thanks is due to Dr. James Knowlson, Samuel Beckett's companion and biographer, for offering his valuable time to talk with me over fish and chips. His encouragement and enthusiasm for his friend, Sam Beckett, gave me the confidence to join the ever-growing group of Beckett devotees.

Thanks goes to Dr. Joy Reilly for her proofreading skills and enduring encouragement throughout the latter part of the process.

I owe particular thanks to Julian A. Garforth III., curator of the Samuel Beckett Archive in Reading, England, who was willing to make time in his busy schedule to answer questions and search through past production histories.

I also wish to thank Dr. Thomas Postlewait for prompting me to hatch the larger ideas out of which this project was born.

This project was made possible in part by a PEGS grant from The Ohio State University Department of Theatre.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"Sam was loyalty itself to those he liked—and steady in his dislike of those he didn’t." –Peter Hall

Samuel Beckett has long been considered the shining example of the tyrannical arch-controller playwright, not permitting changes, innovations, or alterations to his texts. It is widely believed that he cancelled hundreds of productions because they deviated from his text, and would frequently explode over tiny issues such as the number of footsteps taken across the stage, or the color of a prop. This view of Beckett is inaccurate, and I seek to separate the truth from the caricature of Beckett. I will also discuss the importance of his specific vision and study a few of the key people in his life who contributed to the initial productions of Samuel Beckett, Alan Schneider and Billie Whitelaw. They did much to establish a tradition: an approved way of doing Beckett. I will be describing and analyzing how their contributions, in union with Beckett, contributed to the tradition that was established quickly within a few decades.

For my argument, I will define a “definitive production of Samuel Beckett” as one in which he was directly involved, either as director, advisor, or coach, and satisfied by the end result, as noted in correspondence and other writings. This is to differentiate

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between those productions on which Beckett worked, but was not fully pleased, and those
which he openly regarded as the production most closely resembling what he envisioned
as he created the work.

Samuel Beckett is one of the most studied and researched theatre practitioners in
history. Thousands of books have been written detailing his life, works, philosophy,
criticism, and methodology. Few, however, have dealt directly with how he directed his
works, how others directed them, and what significance these original productions have
to the theatre world today. The few pieces that have dealt with this issue directly are Lois
Oppenheim’s *Directing Beckett*, John Haynes and James Knowlson’s *Images of Beckett*,
as well as the autobiographies of Beckett’s closest associates, Billie Whitelaw and Alan
Schneider. The only biography authorized by Beckett himself was written by his close
friend, James Knowlson, and was entitled *Damned to Fame*. These works have formed
many insights into Beckett’s personal and professional life, while utilizing essential
anecdotes and personal information from his closest friends and colleagues.

*Directing Beckett* concentrates on the directors who have attempted Beckett’s
pieces, either as a faithful reproduction of the original production, or as an innovative
new creation. Oppenheim collected essays and interviews from some of theatre’s
greatest directors, including Walter Asmus, Edward Albee, JoAnne Akalaitis, Roger Blin,
and Robert McNamara. The volume presents the challenges associated with attempting
to direct a Beckett play, and inspired me to discover the difference between the struggles
when Beckett was alive and after his death. Oppenheim fails to uncover the breadth of
Beckett’s compassion and dedication to those directing his plays during his life, and,
instead, focuses on the various directors struggling against his vision. Although it fulfills
its purpose as a chronicle of the effort exerted in working with his difficult and fixed pieces, the book neglects to discuss Beckett’s own struggles and compromises throughout his life with the same pieces. I seek to bridge that gap in this thesis.

*Images of Beckett* is one of the newest additions to the Beckett collection, written by his biographer James Knowlson with pictures by John Haynes. It focuses on Beckett’s life and influences, though the final chapter entitled “Beckett as director” outlines his career directing his works. The first study of its kind, Knowlson seeks to uncover the truth about Beckett’s collaborative and generous spirit, establishing a new vision of the controlling playwright.

The autobiographies of Billie Whitelaw and Alan Schneider, as well as Knowlson’s biography of Beckett, provided essential information regarding the inner workings of Beckett’s relationships. The prevailing importance these connections had to the creation, vision, and implementation of his pieces has long been overlooked as an insignificant component of his process. By delving into the reasons he wrote specific pieces, the productions he authorized for friends, and the trust he had in Whitelaw and Schneider, I have discovered a different Beckett than the one found in many theatre history books.

Beckett set the stage for his works by maintaining a strong vision of his pieces, conceived during the formation of the texts. This vision was flexible, pliable, and easily adjusted, but only by Beckett himself, or with his express permission. He had immense trust in those with which he chose to associate, but a distrust of questions from anyone regarding his works. The numbers of people who can recall the pieces of theatre extant with Beckett’s own authorization are diminishing quickly. Those directors that strive
now to present Beckett's original vision, or seek a "Beckettian" style or thrust are often left with mere descriptions of the final product and must devise a way to arrive at a similar conclusion. Because of people such as Alan Schneider and Billie Whitelaw, the theatre world now has examples of what Beckett intended with his difficult pieces.

Schneider and Whitelaw respected Samuel Beckett as a creator, and not simply as a playwright. They understood that his works were to be viewed as a whole and were not to be interpreted or changed to suit the producer's wishes. Those who choose to produce a Samuel Beckett work must understand a few basic principles, the first of which being that Beckett did not create these works for public fame or fortune. The second enforces that Beckett's stage directions are intrinsic to the overall shape of the production and are not to be ignored or changed. The third is that Samuel Beckett's works are open to interpretation within the parameters set by Beckett. Though these might seem harsh and overly precise, these beliefs have now provided us with examples of exactly what he intended.

Today, Edward Beckett, the executor of The Estate of Samuel Beckett, has the privilege of maintaining what he believes were his uncle's wishes. The close grasp Edward Beckett keeps on the rights of the playwright's works is coloring what we now view as Beckett's original intentions. Through my research, I have discovered that the Estate's general beliefs regarding who should produce a play and how it should be performed are far from Beckett's intentions. However, we must return to the genesis of the pieces and the original productions to discover the original vision intended by the playwright, and what alterations he was willing, or not willing, to authorize.
CHAPTER 2

SAMUEL BECKETT: THE PRODUCTS OF INTENSE GENEROSITY

"Please forgive me…and don’t think of me as a purist bastard.” —Samuel Beckett\(^1\)

In the final years of his life, Samuel Beckett gained a reputation for objecting to productions of his plays that adapted, changed, or deviated radically from what he had written. I will demonstrate that this is not the case and, in reality, two or three highly publicized events in which Beckett was driven to take legal action are what were used to immortalize the tyrannical behavior of the late playwright. Beckett granted many of his friends the liberty of altering his works as they saw fit. Now led by his nephew, Edward Beckett, the Estate of Samuel Beckett has taken an even more determined stance on impeding the interpreting, manipulating, and changing of Beckett’s works than the playwright did during his lifetime. Today, theatre actors, designers and directors are encouraged to look to a few specific performances led by Beckett to discover what he intended to portray, and the meanings behind his words. I am seeking to discover what drove Beckett to create such explicit and detail-oriented plays, and to express the importance his personal relationships had in creating what we now view as the definitive performances of Samuel Beckett.

\(^{1}\) Jordan R. Young, *The Beckett Actor: Jack MacGowran, Beginning to End* (California: Moonstone Press, 1987) 120.
Samuel Beckett's life, career, and works have been well-researched and documented throughout his life and since his death in 1989. Few writers, in fact, have been more celebrated during their lifetime than Beckett. It is widely known that his ideas regarding theatre and stageable action were revolutionary for their time; he continued to "push back theatre's once immovable boundaries."\(^2\) Though Beckett began his literary career as a novelist, he gained popularity and fame through his stage plays, the first of which was _Eleuthéria_ (1947), not publicly released until 1995.\(^3\) Beckett had little knowledge of the theatre, and turned to it for "relief and for the sake of a challenge."\(^4\) Importantly, _Eleuthéria_ specifically parodies many features of traditional plays, mocking the traditions of farce and melodrama, as well as Ibsen and Molière.\(^5\) It appeared that Beckett was attempting to work through his own opinions of the theatre in this first piece. At one point in the final act, the stage directions suggest that Beckett is attempting to create a threat of a total collapse and stasis, which was to become the chief ingredient in his next, more available, play.\(^6\)


\(^3\) Beckett originally offered French director Roger Blin a choice of premiering _Eleuthéria_ (Greek for freedom) or _Waiting for Godot_ in 1950. Blin soon decided only to produce and direct _Godot_ because of the cost at staging _Eleuthéria_: it calls for a cast of seventeen with elaborate, and numerous, scene changes. After Blin refused it, and throughout his lifetime, Beckett adamantly refused to have this play either published or produced. In 1986, Beckett presented the manuscript to his American publisher, Barney Rosset, and allowed him to publish an English version. Still in its original French, Beckett began translating the work, only to abandon it shortly before he passed away in 1989. Rosset sought another translator for the work, but was barred the rights to translate it by The Estate of Samuel Beckett. A legal battle between The Estate and Foxrock (Rosset's publishing house) ensued and delayed the printing for nine years, when it was published in New York in 1995.


\(^5\) Knowlson 329.

\(^6\) The final stage directions for the main character read as follows: "Victor seated on the bed. He looks at the bed, the room, the window, the door. He gets up and undertakes to push his bed to the back of the
En attendant Godot (Waiting for Godot) was written in 1950, and exploded onto the Paris theatre scene as a powerful new example of the Avant-Garde stage. London theatre critic Kenneth Tynan once said, “Above all, Godot forced people to reexamine the rules which have hither-to governed the drama; and, having done so, to pronounce them not elastic enough.” Most critics and early supporters of Beckett praised him for creating a new definition for theatre, but director Alan Schneider disagreed:

In actuality, the real Beckett, as most of us gradually realized, was engaged in restoring to the theater its original qualities of metaphor and myth, creating stage images of classic proportion, extending the possibilities of stage language—and in the process transforming the very nature of theater itself.

Knowing that Beckett had worked through his knowledge and beliefs regarding theatre’s history in Eleuthéria, it is easy to agree that he was interested in experimenting with what it would mean to reduce his works to the very core of theatre. However, it is obvious that he questioned that core and strove to reinvent and redefine it.

Although theatre has long been connected with art and music, no other playwright has been described so often as a sculptor, conductor, and composer. Actor Alan Rickman once said Beckett’s works are “not plays, they’re sculptures.” Most often verbalized by

room, as far from the door and the window as possible, that is, toward the side of the footlights with the Audience member’s stage-box. He has a hard time. He pushes it, pulls it, with pauses for rest, seated on the edge of the bed. It is clear that he is not strong. He finally succeeds. He sits down on the bed, now parallel to the footlights. After a while, he gets up, goes to the switch, turns it off, looks out the window, goes back and sits down on the bed, facing the audience. He looks perseveringly at the audience, the orchestra, the balcony, to the right, to the left. The he gets into bed, his scranny back turned on mankind.” (Beckett, Eleuthéria 69)


those who knew him best, such as director Alan Schneider, actress Billie Whitelaw, and designer Jocelyn Herbert, but understood by all who study Beckett, there has always been a strong connection between musical composition and his work. Schneider once said that, as the director, he “functions largely as a conductor” of a Beckett play.\textsuperscript{10} Instead of conventional rehearsal practices, when Whitelaw and Beckett would work on a piece together, they would speak it together, “conducting” one another with their hands.\textsuperscript{11} This musicality of his works was most apparent when Beckett himself would work on a piece. The orchestration of the lights, set, costumes, words, pauses, and action was seen so specifically by Beckett as he composed his pieces that many Beckett supporters have cited this fact as confirmation of the authority he demanded as playwright. For future directors to ignore his vision would be defying the work of a composer. Eve Adamson once wrote:

Performing a Beckett play is like sight-reading Bach. When you follow the notes to and through the phrases and observe the rests without predetermining or interpreting anything, you find yourself in a musical universe that has declared its own rules. The less you do, the more you simply read the language, the more you will allow Beckett’s resonances and nuances to flow through you to the audience.\textsuperscript{12}

However, Beckett did not write his plays to become museum pieces; even pieces of music are interpreted by various composers and orchestras.

Samuel Beckett was an unconventional playwright for many reasons, including his subject matter and orchestration of the elements. He also never wrote with an interest in fame or money. In fact, he rebelled against both on many occasions throughout his

\textsuperscript{10} Schneider, \textit{I Hope 5}.


lifetime. Beckett and his partner Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil guarded their privacy fiercely, with the invaluable help of Jérôme Lindon, Beckett’s young French publisher. Lindon was on the front line defending Beckett from academics, would-be playwrights, and, worst of all, awards. When, in 1969, Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize, Lindon sent the vacationing Beckett and Deschevaux-Dumesnil a telegram: “Dear Sam and Suzanne. In spite of everything, they have given you the Nobel Prize—I advise you to go into hiding.”¹³ Suzanne regarded the award as a “catastrophe” and Beckett was openly “distressed,” both words that found their way into the press as the couple went into hiding for close to four months.¹⁴ Beckett telegraphed Stockholm that he was honored by the award but that he hoped His Majesty would forgive him for not attending the ceremony.¹⁵ Lindon accepted the award in Beckett’s place.¹⁶

Although writing was, for the very early part of his career, a means to an end, he continued to live modestly even after the great success of Waiting for Godot.¹⁷ He was famous for granting large sums of money to friends, schools, and libraries throughout his

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¹³ Knowlson 505.

¹⁴ Knowlson 507.

¹⁵ The award was presented in the Stockholm Concert Hall by the eighty-seven-year-old King Gustav VI Adolf of Sweden, for Samuel Beckett’s “writing which-in new forms for the novel and drama—in the destitution of modern man acquires its elevation.” (Knowlson 506)

¹⁶ One major reason Beckett did not simply decline the Nobel Prize was that he did not wish to appear publicly discourteous; Jean-Paul Sartre had earlier caused something of a public scandal by turning it down in 1964. Another was that he had an intense respect for his publishers, and wanted to reward them with an increase in the sales of his books. (Knowlson 507)

¹⁷ Knowlson 354.
lifetime. Indeed, he divided his Nobel Prize award money, 375,000 kronor (worth about $45,000 at the time), between Trinity College in Dublin, and many individual writers, directors, and painters. For many, the money arrived anonymously, though the recipients could not fail to be aware of the source for Beckett was known for his generosity. Jérôme Lindon said in a tribute on Beckett’s sixtieth birthday, “I have never met a man in whom co-exist together in such high degree, nobility and modesty, lucidity and goodness.” Billie Whitelaw pointedly noted, “Beckett didn’t give a damn about becoming more famous or getting more prizes, nor did he care for money.” This was a fact he made obvious to anyone who came in contact with his person, career, or works.

Although he was clearly not concerned with the broad theatrical success of his pieces, Beckett obviously cared about his works and strove to please his close friends. He would often send plays to friends saying, “I hope you like it” and “It’s yours if you enjoy it.” The concern he showed in the presentation of a new piece, his drive for perfection and the importance he placed on details indicate that he had an intense desire to please those for whom he cared.

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18 There are numerous instances of Beckett’s generosity: contributions to the Interaid charity, checks to help with the medical expenses of an operation for the son of an acquaintance, helping his cousin’s widow with medical expenses, a car, and living expenses. (Knowlson 533)

19 Knowlson 507.

20 Jérôme Lindon’s full tribute read as follows: “I do not dare to express the enormous admiration and affection that I have for him. He would be embarrassed and on that account I should be so too. But I would like this to be known, and only this: that in all my life I have never met a man in whom co-exist together in such high degree, nobility and modesty, lucidity and goodness. I would never have believed that anyone could exist who is at the same time so real, so truly great, and so good.” (Knowlson 505)

21 Whitelaw 135.

22 Knowlson 515 and Whitelaw 134.
Many producers, directors, and theatre owners came to believe that, due to Beckett’s success, they might use a play of his to make a profit. Time after time, they were disappointed. In fact, beginning with his first production of *Waiting for Godot*, Roger Blin speculated that Beckett chose Blin as director for two reasons after seeing his earlier production of *The Ghost Sonata*. Blin stated, “I strongly suspect that he was interested in me because, first, without wishing to boast, he might have thought I wouldn’t let him down, that my way of working was appropriate, and second, that it would be quite unsuccessful.”

In a 1956 letter to Alan Schneider Beckett explained how, with a London production of *Waiting for Godot* being mooted, he told the producers, “If they did it my way, they would empty the theatre.”

When *Rockaby* went to NYC in 1982, Billie Whitelaw noted that the theatre owner Jack Garfein “didn’t realize that there is no big money to be made out of Samuel Beckett. That wasn’t the way it worked.”

Indeed, though *Rockaby* sold out for the run, it made little profit due to the necessary intimate setting the play demanded. To a certain extent, Beckett initiated the pessimistic view of the success of his plays from the very beginning of his career. However, the nature of each of his plays usually demanded a specific venue, audience, or pacing. None of these were usually the most profitable or popular choice to capitalize on Beckett’s name.

Although Beckett originally turned to theatre because his prose was not supporting him and Deschevaux-Dumesnil as much as he had hoped, many of his later

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23 Oppenheim 303.


25 Whitelaw 193.
pieces developed by request from a friend of colleague, as a gift for a loved one, or were inspired by his favorite actors. Beckett received requests for original pieces almost as often as he was requested to interview. Most of these were respectfully denied by Jérôme Lindon, but a few of the playwright’s closer friends received the gift of a lifetime. Four of these resulted in *Act Without Words I* (1956) written for dancer Deryk Mendel, *Film* (1963) for the Evergreen Theatre in NYC, *Breath* for Kenneth Tynan’s review *Oh! Calcutta!* (1969), and *Ohio Impromptu* (1981) for S.E. Gontarski’s Samuel Beckett Symposium at The Ohio State University.  

Beckett never accepted actual commissions for plays, but as his career and circle of friends grew, he was inspired by the vocal and physical abilities of some of his close actor-friends. Although one could make the argument that many of his plays were written with a specific actor in mind, Beckett only confirmed a few of these precious gifts.  

*Krapp’s Last Tape* was originally called the *Magee Monologue* in reference to Patrick Magee. Beckett had heard Magee reading extracts from Molloy on the BBC in 1957 and was so moved by the cracked quality of Magee’s distinctively Irish voice that he composed *Krapp*, his first unashamedly personal monologue work. In 1963, he wrote to Jack MacGowran on July 4, saying “I haven’t a gleam for the new work for you at the moment and feel sometimes that I’ve come to an end. It’s a comfort to know you understand and won’t press me.” This “new work,” *Eh Joe*, arrived a few months later

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26 Knowlson 377.
27 Knowlson 582
28 Cronin 571.
29 Knowlson 474.
with another note, "I hope I did not seem to assume that you would necessarily want to do it because it comes from me. I assure you I don't. I do hope you will take it but if on reading it again and thinking it over you decide it is not for you no one will better understand than I."³⁰ Beckett had written *Eh Joe* with Jack MacGowran's doleful, haunted eyes and expressive face in mind, and MacGowran was overjoyed with the result. In fact, only in *Eh Joe* under Beckett's direction, was MacGowran wholly pleased with his performance.³¹ The work of actress Billie Whitelaw for Samuel Beckett will be discussed in Chapter Three, however Beckett wrote a total of three pieces for his favorite actress: *Not I, Footfalls,* and *Rockaby.*

In 1977, the actor/director David Warrilow wrote to Beckett asking for a solo piece to perform. When asked what he had in mind, Warrilow wrote back saying that he "had an image of a man standing on stage lit from above. He's standing there in a sort of cone of light. You couldn't see his face and he's talking about death."³² Beckett replied with the sentence "His birth was my death," but said he couldn't manage to get past those words. Even so, Beckett wrote a bit here and there on what he began calling "*Gone,*" only to leave it unfinished for over a year. When Martin Esslin wrote to ask Beckett if he had an unpublished piece for *The Kenyon Review* in 1978, Beckett told him about the piece he had attempted to write for Warrilow: "It broke down as usual after a few thousand groans, but is not perhaps definitely down the drain. [...] I'll dig it up and clean

³⁰ Knowlson 475.
³¹ Young 46.
³² Knowlson 572.
it up...and send it on. To give you a little pleasure would give me much.” On April 13 of the same year, Beckett sent a copy to Esslin and one to David Warrilow, saying,

I send you as to its instigator this unsatisfactory abandoned monologue. I do not expect you to use it. But on the off-chance of your wishing to I have checked with Barney Rosset and you would have his blessing. It was written some years ago on the spur of your suggestion and put aside until now.34

*A Piece of Monologue* was performed by Warrilow at La Mama Theatre Club in December 1979.

One of the most poignant examples of Beckett’s generosity with his writing was *Catastrophe*, written in 1984. He dedicated this short piece to Václav Havel, a promising existential playwright, anti-communist activist, and future president of Czechoslovakia.

Beckett was asked to write such a piece by AIDA (the French acronym of the International Association for the Defense of Artists) to be performed as part of “A Night for Václav Havel.”35 Beckett took an avid interest in the well-being of intellectuals, writers and artists in Eastern Europe and, as Havel was imprisoned for the fourth time for his defiance of government repression for four and a half years, Beckett was appalled to learn that Havel was also forbidden to write. This seemed the ultimate oppression, and inspired Beckett to write *Catastrophe* as his one and only poignantly political piece.36 Havel was overwhelmed with the gesture, “You not only helped me in a beautiful way during my prison days, but by doing what you did you demonstrated your deep

33 Knowlson 573.
34 Knowlson 574.
35 Knowlson 596.
36 Knowlson 596.
understanding for the meaning of affliction...."37 After his release from prison, Havel wrote a play in response called *The Mistake* and dedicated his new work to Samuel Beckett.

It was obvious that Beckett did not write with hopes of fame or fortune. He created his works for his own enjoyment and the enjoyment of others, and it delighted him to see others made happy with a simple gesture as a play from his hands. In this same vein, Beckett redefined many elements of theatre throughout his career, from the drive to write them, his involvement in the premiers, and the painstaking care with which he directed his own works.

Beckett was closely involved in the production of his stage plays from the very beginning of his theatrical career, but the strength of his involvement gradually grew over time. *Waiting for Godot* was the first play Beckett allowed to be produced, and was only accepted by French director Roger Blin in 1950 at the urging of Beckett’s partner, Suzanne Déchevaux-Dumesnil. Blin was known more widely as an actor at this point, and was at the beginning of his directing career in Paris. However, Beckett was happy to have a director who appeared to have “artistic courage.”38 Blin was the first to admit that he had no idea what the play was about, just that he “must stage it.”39 Although it took nearly two years to secure a theatre and money for production, rehearsals began in the fall of 1952. At the invitation of Blin, Beckett attended almost all of *Waiting for Godot*’s rehearsals. He was totally inexperienced in the theatre at the time, so he rarely intervened

37 Knowlson 598.
38 Knowlson 348.
39 Oppenheim 302.
with Blin’s direction and explained little. He would speak with Blin quietly before and after rehearsals, making discreet suggestions and a few cuts.\textsuperscript{40} Anthony Cronin mentioned in his biography that “Beckett would not impose himself. He was merely a silent presence, often apparently disapproving of what was going on.”\textsuperscript{41} He had many second thoughts about the text and made several changes, as he would still be doing twenty years later for the same play. Nonetheless, \textit{Waiting for Godot} opened on January 5, 1953, at the Théâtre de Babylone, to a puzzled audience and mixed reviews, but only gained momentum as controversy developed around the shocking and unconventional play.\textsuperscript{42}

Due to the growing success of \textit{Godot}, in late September 1953, Blin remounted the play with a new cast. Beckett was present for most of the rehearsals, taking a more active approach with the new actors. Spending a few days in Berlin attending the German premiere, he sent Suzanne to Blin’s rehearsals in his stead, only to discover a breach in his “direction.”\textsuperscript{43} On September 1, Beckett made this first documented assertion of his stage directions\textsuperscript{44} in a letter to Blin:

There is one thing that disturbs me, that’s Estragon’s frock. I naturally asked Suzanne if it falls well. She tells me that he stops it halfway. He absolutely must not, nothing could be more wrong. … The spirit of the play, to the extent that it has one, is that nothing is more grotesque than the tragic, and it must be expressed

\textsuperscript{40} Knowlson 349.

\textsuperscript{41} Cronin 420.

\textsuperscript{42} Cronin 421.

\textsuperscript{43} Knowlson 359.

\textsuperscript{44} Beckett’s stage direction, near the end of the play, reads: “Estragon loosens the cord that holds up his trousers which, much too big for him, fall about his ankles. They look at the cord.” (Beckett, \textit{Waiting for Godot}, 60)
up to the end, and above all at the end. I have many other reasons for not wanting to skip this stage business, but I'll spare you them. Just be kind enough to restore it as indicated in the text and as we had agreed upon in rehearsal, and have the trousers fall completely around his ankles. This must seem stupid to you, but for me it is essential.45

Beckett was clearly upset at the thought of his stage directions being ignored, and grew even more disturbed as Godot grew more popular.

As word of the “existential” play by the Irish playwright blew across the Atlantic to off-Broadway, Alan Schneider was chosen to be the director for the American premiere of Godot.46 His work with Beckett throughout Schneider’s life is detailed further in Chapter Two; however, it is important to note that Beckett was clear with Schneider from the very beginning of what Beckett believed to be his place in the directing process, “although [he] is not averse to a director’s changing an odd word here and there or making an odd cut,” he demanded “the opportunity of protesting or approving.”47

Beckett had begun work on his next major play, Fin de partie (Endgame), in 1956, which he entrusted to his friend and director Roger Blin. They planned a premiere in Paris at the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre but, due to contractual problems within the theatre, moved it to the Royal Court Theatre in London at the behest of artistic director George Devine.48 With Roger Blin and Jean Martin as Hamm and Clov, respectively, Beckett had

45 Oppenheim 297.


47 Harmon 2.

48 Knowlson 377.
confidence in the production, though discussion was far more heated between the men than in *Godot*. By this stage, Beckett felt more certain of his own knowledge of the theatre and was determined that his new play, which he believed to be a better work than *Godot*, should be played with the minimum of compromise and according to principles of which he approved.\(^49\) Although their friendship was unaffected by these disagreements, Blin remained sure in his process. He maintained that Beckett knew nothing about the theatre, and that his “directing” style was very heavy-handed.\(^50\) Blin believed that Beckett’s instructions, silences, pauses in the stage directions were more for the reader, and that it was up to the director to decide when and if they should happen.\(^51\) *Fin de partie* opened on April 3, 1957, without further incident, though Beckett was ultimately dissatisfied with Blin’s production; “the actors had imposed their own ideas and their timing was off.”\(^52\) Beckett eventually called it an “aberration,” though, admittedly, his estimation of productions of his plays worsened over time.\(^53\)

A great admirer of Beckett’s work, George Devine was thrilled to have Beckett choose the Royal Court again for the premier of the English translation of *Endgame* in late 1958. Devine insisted on directing the play, and enlisted Jack MacGowran to play Clov to Devine’s Hamm.\(^54\) *Endgame* was being presented as a double bill with *Krapp’s*

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\(^{49}\) Knowlson 391.  
\(^{50}\) Oppenheim 305.  
\(^{51}\) Oppenheim 305.  
\(^{52}\) Young 59.  
\(^{53}\) Knowlson 393.  
\(^{54}\) Young 59.
Last Tape, being directed by Donald McWhinnie with Patrick Magee as Krapp, and Beckett was flown in to ensure it was properly done.\textsuperscript{55} He had never intended to be involved in the production of Endgame, though after seeing a run-through, became troubled and discussed it with Devine. Neither MacGowran nor Devine were comfortable in their roles; it was hard for Devine to simultaneously direct and act, and MacGowran found little rapport with Devine.\textsuperscript{56} Though Beckett was disturbed by the progress of the production, he was still very timid in suggesting changes, as noted by McWhinnie, "Sam didn't involve himself then as he did later. Beckett had a suggestion [for Endgame] and he wanted me to pass it on. I told him to tell George. Sam said, 'No, I can't criticize.' I told him if he didn't, no one else was going to and if it isn't right, you must tell him. Sam was like a child; he felt it wasn't his place to impose."\textsuperscript{57} Beckett asked for some stylistic corrections, and worked to achieve the "toneless voice" he was after.\textsuperscript{58} Another director might have asserted his own authority, but Devine submissively accepted Beckett's instructions, however impossible they seemed to the young director. The result was a far "subtler Endgame than the noisy French original," though Devine himself felt that he had failed in the role of Hamm, and critics were inclined to agree.\textsuperscript{59} In his own comments on the production, Beckett praised only MacGowran, who he felt could have been really good but never received enough direction, partly because Beckett

\textsuperscript{55} Knowlson 409.

\textsuperscript{56} Young 59.

\textsuperscript{57} Young 59.

\textsuperscript{58} Knowlson 409.

\textsuperscript{59} Young 60.
was only present for the final few rehearsals. In contrast, he described *Krapp's Last Tape*, with which Beckett had worked from the first rehearsal, as the “best experience in the theatre ever.”

As Beckett grew more comfortable working with directors on his pieces, he received more requests for his consult on performances, and insisted on being part of certain productions. In 1963, he worked with Billie Whitelaw for the first time at London’s National Theatre, during the English premiere of *Play*. He was taken immediately with the rich vibrancy and musicality of her voice, her care in line delivery and her remarkable flexibility as an actress. Although Beckett was very susceptible to the physical beauty of a woman, Whitelaw struck him with a beauty of spirit that he found particularly moving. George Devine was again directing, though Beckett seemed to trust him more this time than during *Endgame*. Whitelaw said “[Beckett] seemed to have absolute faith in George. He also knew that George would listen to what he had to say—when there was something he wished to say.” Devine gave notes directly after rehearsal, and Beckett would speak to the actors in private in their dressing rooms. Beckett favored the strong bond between playwright and actor, and used it to his advantage as his plays narrowed their focus to one or two characters.

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60 Knowlson 410.
61 Knowlson 410.
62 Whitelaw 86.
63 Knowlson 461.
64 Knowlson 462.
65 Whitelaw 77.
66 Whitelaw 78.
Not I was the next chance Beckett had to work with Billie Whitelaw, with
Anthony Page directing at the Royal Court. Again, Whitelaw described Beckett in
rehearsals as “courteous, but a little distant.”67 He made it clear that Page was in charge,
though Beckett began to rehearse privately with Whitelaw, further developing their
shorthand. On rehearsing Footfalls in 1976, Whitelaw said that “working with Beckett on
Footfalls, I began to feel like an extension of his hands.”68

As Beckett’s plays grew more popular amongst actors as well as directors, more
and more productions surfaced that were less than satisfactory to the playwright. It was
not that he felt there was only one way of doing his work. In a letter to Michael Haerdter,
his assistant on the 1967 German Endgame, “I don’t claim my interpretation is the only
correct one. It is possible to do the play quite differently, different music, movements,
different rhythm; the kitchen can be differently located and so on.”69 This is not to infer
that we may exaggerate his tolerance, as he was often dismayed, annoyed, even infuriated
at times when he learned of directors making obvious mistakes or taking gross liberties
with his work. He noted this most often in German70 productions of his plays and in a
letter to Alan Schneider said, “I dream sometimes of all German directors of plays with
perhaps one exception united in one with his back to the wall and me shooting a bullet

67 Whitelaw 119.
68 Whitelaw 145.
69 John Haynes and James Knowlson, Images of Beckett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
2003) 99.
70 In the same vein, Beckett wrote of the production by Deryk Mendel in Ulm, Donau. “It will be a very
careful and conscientious production, without more, but at least no director’s improvements, which is a rare
thing in Germany.” (SB, letter to Henry Wenning, 10 June 1963.)
into his balls every five minutes till he loses his taste for improving authors.” 71 He was not above appreciating how much staging the plays with different actors and in different theatres inevitably changed a work; however, he understood there to be a huge difference between a faithful interpretation and a distortion.

Beckett’s work as advisor to other directors provided him with a strong base for directing his own plays, though he was constantly learning more about the theatre itself. Through his work as a consultant, he also realized how important the staging of his pieces was to revealing the full scope of meaning. 72 As early as his 1963 Play, he “[realized] that no final script is possible till [he] had [worked] on rehearsals.” 73 He viewed the staging of his pieces to be vital to their progress, in working out what could not be expressed on the written page, such as pauses, precise gestures, the quality of a look, the pace and rhythms of dialogue, or the duration of a pause. 74 The directing process only encouraged his love-hate relationship with the theatre; he loathed the social dimension of theatre going and the pressures of deadlines, but adored the practical challenges of the live stage and what it revealed in his pieces.

Rehearsals were captivating affairs whenever Beckett was directing. Billie Whitelaw has confirmed, “Apart from his unique intellectual and artistic gifts, Samuel Beckett also had a natural quiet authority, of which everyone who knew him quickly became aware. As a director he didn’t need to impress that authority on anyone; he

71 Harmon 59.
72 Haynes and Knowlson 100.
73 Harmon 144.
74 Haynes and Knowlson 100.
certainly didn’t need to shout and stamp about.” 75 He quickly established, whether purposefully or not, a working atmosphere of intense concentration. 76 Even when surrounded by close friends, such as Jack MacGowran and Patrick Magee, Beckett could appear anxious and tense in rehearsals. This caused tension in the actors as well. Clancy Sigal, a writer for the New York Times, spent eleven days in his company during rehearsals of Endgame in 1964. He reported that, though Beckett “is both decisive and terribly afraid of giving offence to the actors,” the “actors [MacGowran and Magee] are more hesitant, much less sure of themselves in his presence.” 77 This might have appeared to be the case, but Beckett’s closest actor friends were just that, his closest friends. They didn’t hesitate to correct the great playwright, or to express frustration. “At the end of the day, Beckett says: ‘Don’t look for symbols in my plays.’ Magee lights a cigarette and grins, sotto voce: ‘He means don’t play it like symbols.’” 78

It is a well-known myth that Samuel Beckett claimed he did not intend for many of the apparent symbols seen in his pieces. Indeed, throughout rehearsals, he steered clear of questions of meaning and abstract philosophical concepts. “I only know what’s on the page,” he said to Patrick Magee during a rehearsal of Endgame. This denial is not to say that his pieces do not deal with these questions. It was obvious in watching Beckett direct plays and in private discussion that he was acutely aware of the philosophical issues, hidden resonances, and ambiguities that are deeply embedded in his

75 Whitelaw 135.
76 Haynes and Knowlson 101.
77 Clancy Sigal, “Is This the Person to Murder Me?” The London Sunday Times Magazine 1 March 1964: 22.
78 Sigal 19.
writing. Directing his own work, he was able to silently pick up on these issues. But he
treated them purely as dramatic materials, as elements in a complex poetic and musical
structure.\textsuperscript{79} One of the major reasons Beckett was specific as the director of his works
was because he did, indeed, know the meaning behind the words his actors were saying.
In fact, in letters regarding \textit{Endgame} to Alan Schneider, he was happy enough to detail
the relevance of the arguments of the Sophists to the play.\textsuperscript{80} Yet he warned Schneider,
"Don't mention any of this to your actors!"\textsuperscript{81}

Having memorized the entirety of the play he was directing, Beckett much
preferred a pragmatic directing style, tackling tones of speech, specific actions, and
pacing.\textsuperscript{82} His precision was legendary, as the theatrical notebooks can attest with their
painstakingly precise notes, seemingly insignificant alterations, and specific blocking.\textsuperscript{83}

After one rehearsal with Beckett, \textit{Eh Joe} actress Siân Phillips recounted:

It was explained to me that every punctuation mark had a precise value and I
began metronoming my way through the text, reading appallingly but gradually
remembering that a full stop is not a colon is not a hyphen is not an exclamation is

\textsuperscript{79} Haynes and Knowlson 101.

\textsuperscript{80} Schneider wrote in a letter of November 8, 1957, "Have you remembered who 'that old Greek' was?"
and Beckett replied on November 21, 1957, "Old Greek: [...] The arguments of the Heap and the Bald
Head (which hair falling produces baldness) were used by all the Sophists and I think have been variously
attributed to one or the other. They disprove the reality of mass in the same way and by means of the same
fallacy as the arguments of the Arrow and Achilles and the Tortoise, invented a century earlier by Zeno the
Eleatic, disprove the reality of movement. The leading Sophist, against whom Plato wrote his Dialogue,
was Protagoras and he is probably the "old Greek" whose name Hamm can't remember. One purpose of
the image throughout the play is to suggest the impossibility logically, i.e. eristically, of the "thing" ever
coming to an end. "The end is in the beginning and yet we go on." In other words the impossibility of
catastrophe. Ended at its inception, and at every subsequent instant, it continues, ergo can never end.
Don't mention any of this to your actors!" (Harmon 21-23)

\textsuperscript{81} Harmon 23.

\textsuperscript{82} Haynes and Knowlson 109.

\textsuperscript{83} See James Knowlson, S. E. Gontarski, and Dougald McMillan, eds., \textit{The Theatrical Notebooks of
not a semicolon. We worked like machines, beating time with our fingers and, after some hours, the relentless rhythm and the beautiful, but equally relentless, blue eyes were making me feel ill, so I suggested that I should go home and continue working on my own.  

Beckett was as particular as a musical conductor when he was directing, as Clancy Sigal noted, at a rehearsal for the 1964 Endgame, "the actors tend to want to make the play abstract and existential, gently and firmly Beckett guides them to concrete, exact and simple actions." Beckett left nothing overlooked, and ensured that no motion or utterance was gratuitous or superfluous.

Even though he was notorious for his precision, the organic rehearsal process was an integral part of creating Beckett's finalized works. Consequently, the playwright surrounded himself with a remarkable group of talented friends and theatre workers in order to create the vision he had in mind. He was more than willing to allow something unrefined to develop during rehearsal, particularly when one of his close friends was the actor involved. His notebooks contain many erasures, once with "unrealizable" written across the page, and many amendments. Therefore, the finished production did not always correspond exactly to the blocking of his initial notes. For example, in the original Krapp's Last Tape with Patrick Magee in 1958, Magee accidentally hit the lamp that hung low over the solitary table and set it swinging. Beckett was delighted with the

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84 Knowlson 478.

85 Sigal 19.

86 Haynes and Knowlson 114.

resulting alternation of light and dark and retained it in future productions.\textsuperscript{88} He was constantly aware of the strengths and the limitations of his actor or actress, and keenly aware of the practical limitations the theatre space could involve.

Although Beckett dreaded the thought of changes being made to his works by those not under his control, he was more than willing to alter lines, stage direction, and dialogue during his rehearsal period. This, along with publishing blunders and printing errors, accounts for the many versions of his plays we now have. It further explains how Beckett could lament to James Knowlson, “My texts are in a terrible mess.”\textsuperscript{89} However, Beckett’s willingness to alter texts to suit the situation, actor, or producing country, is apparent throughout his life. During the original production of \textit{Footfalls}, directed by Beckett in 1976, he changed the phrase “South door” to “North door” because he believed it sounded colder. When the production moved to Australia later that year, there was a question as to what sounded colder in the southern hemisphere. Sam left the choice up to them, and they changed it back to “South door.”\textsuperscript{90} In 1979, though it caused her much grief, Beckett altered the text of \textit{Happy Days} with Billie Whitelaw until she and the stage manager asked him to leave for forty-eight hours, allowing Whitelaw time to re-memorize the long monologue. Nonetheless, the exhausted Whitelaw still maintained that Beckett’s “slight alterations to the text were deliberate and pointed, and not to be ignored.”\textsuperscript{91}

\textsuperscript{88} Haynes and Knowlson 119.


\textsuperscript{90} Whitelaw 222.

\textsuperscript{91} Whitelaw 151.
It was a combination of Beckett’s perfectionism and the deaths of Roger Blin and Alan Schneider in 1984 that caused Beckett to relinquish directing altogether. Three months after attending Blin’s disturbingly miserable funeral, Schneider, Beckett’s friend, confidant, and most trusted director, was killed after being hit by a motorcycle in London. His death affected Beckett greatly, and “no longer felt up to directing” after losing Schneider, particularly so soon after Blin.\textsuperscript{92} Ironically, he had written to Schneider regarding his frustration with directing his works, “I’m sick and tired of theatre and of \textit{Godot} in particular. To have to listen to these words day after day has become torture.”\textsuperscript{93} It is also notable that, the final time Beckett directed his favorite actress, Billie Whitelaw, had ended in her asking him to leave so that she could regain her battered self-confidence during \textit{Happy Days}.\textsuperscript{94} The pressure he placed on himself, as the playwright as well as director, was enormous, and he tended to blame himself for problems throughout the rehearsals. However, it was the growing realization that, no matter how well everyone performed, the final performance could never live up to the vision he had in his head, that caused him much grief.

As stated above, Beckett’s reputation as the oppressor of directorial creativity is weakly founded on a few highly publicized events surrounding his works throughout his lifetime.\textsuperscript{95} The most celebrated case was the American Repertory Theatre Company’s

\textsuperscript{92} Whitelaw 122.

\textsuperscript{93} Knowlson 537.

\textsuperscript{94} Whitelaw 151.

\textsuperscript{95} After Beckett’s death, his reputation was, and is, prolonged and further reinforced by his nephew, Edward Beckett, the executor of his Estate. Edward is notorious for prohibiting various worldwide productions of his uncle’s plays, with his discernment not always following Samuel Beckett’s example.
production of *Endgame* directed by JoAnne Akalaitis in December 1984. This case is further detailed in Chapter Two; however, the production was impeded by Beckett and his publishers based on changes to the set, incidental music, and omitted stage directions. A compromise was reached before the case was taken to court, in which Beckett included a letter in the program renouncing the production as his work and not allowing it to continue on a planned tour.

Based on Beckett’s insistence that the genders of his characters not be interchangeable, Beckett frequently turned down requests to stage entirely female versions of his male-dominated plays, most often *Waiting for Godot*. The most public airing of this argument concerning gender occurred in 1987 when Beckett refused a Dutch theatre company, De Haarlemse Toneelschuur, the rights to perform an all-woman *Godot*. The case was brought to court, and the judge ruled in favor of the theatre company, saying that the performance did not violate the integrity of the play. Beckett, still insistent that the gender was a vital distinction in his pieces, reacted strongly, instituting a ban on all productions of his plays in the Netherlands.

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96 Knowlson 607.

97 Knowlson 607.

98 Beckett sometimes made comparison between different musical instruments; he clearly saw the roles in terms of their vocal qualities as well as their physical sexual difference. He also has been quoted as practically stating, “Women don’t have prostates!” This was an allusion to the fact that Vladimir, on account of his enlarged prostate, frequently has to leave the stage to urinate. (Knowlson 610)

99 Knowlson 610.

Robert Brustein, artistic director of ART, legitimately questioned why legal action was threatened against his production of *Endgame* when no action had been taken in other cases in violation of Beckett’s text and stage directions.\(^{101}\) He was referring to cases such as David Warrilow’s film of *The Lost Ones*, a short prose text. Beckett responded to his request, “OK for *Lost Ones* film with the stipulations you indicate. No such request from you will ever be refused by me.”\(^{102}\) It is important to understand that when people approached Beckett with requests to perform his plays in a different way than he had originally intended, whether it be a different venue, style, or dialogue, he did not immediately refuse them. The answer depended entirely upon who was doing the directing, producing, or acting. One very human factor was that Beckett did not like to disappoint a friend. People within Beckett’s circle of friends such as Deryk Mendel, David Warrilow, Fred Neumann, Lee Breuer, Pierre Chabert, Barry McGovern, Michael Colgan, Katherine Worth, and S.E. Gontarski were allowed to do things with his work that Beckett would have refused outright if the proposals had emanated from anyone else, simply because Beckett knew them, cared for them, and trusted them.\(^{103}\)

Beckett’s relationships were clearly an important part of his life, as they defined his works, his editing process, and the granting of production rights. His associations with his close friends, happily some of the most talented individuals in theatre, were how many of his works were created, through correspondence and rehearsals. By assuming the responsibility of directing his own plays, and responding to the problems and

\(^{101}\) Knowlson 607.

\(^{102}\) Knowlson 608.

\(^{103}\) Knowlson 608.
challenges therein, he provided future directors and actors with a solid example of his vision, should they endeavor to adhere to his text and interpretation. The next two chapters examine the two most important contributors to his life’s work, Alan Schneider and Billie Whitelaw.
CHAPTER 3

ALAN SCHNEIDER: SAMUEL BECKETT'S LOYAL DISCIPLE

"I have been able to interpret [Beckett’s plays] more precisely because I have understood the pauses as well as the words." – Alan Schneider

Samuel Beckett’s plays form a body of theatrical work unmatched for its intensity and its cohesiveness. He redefined the norms of playwriting, freeing it from traditional bonds of length, plot and character development, while at the same time placing upon it a system of stage movement, set, and props that encouraged the organic creation of timeless themes. However, Beckett was, and is, still seen as the tyrant playwright, not authorizing “revision” or “interpretation” of his works.

When Beckett found director Alan Schneider to direct the American premiere of Waiting for Godot, a bond of trust and loyalty formed between the two men, and Schneider became Beckett’s foremost American director. Throughout the twenty-eight years of their friendship, Alan Schneider enjoyed a close relationship between playwright and interpreter of which most directors only dream. This helped to solidify Schneider’s personal directorial beliefs and theories. In a theatrical climate where directors were encouraged to reinvent works, and Beckett was seen as oppressing theatrical creativity,

Schneider remained steadfast and loyal to his talented and deserving friend. Although Alan Schneider assumed the unpopular role of subservient director to authoritative playwright, he and Beckett formed an essential symbiotic bond that produced works still viewed as definitive in the Beckett circle. This working relationship served as an example of how following a playwright’s ideals produced important and impressive works while illustrating the positive link between playwrights and their directors.

The playwright—director conflict has produced a number of published studies expressing the problem at hand. Jeane Luere’s books, *Playwright Versus Director* and *The Theatre Team*, provide a wide range of articles addressing the issue, from definitions to descriptions and suppositions. Amy Green in *The Revisionist Stage* offers a look at American directors and what it means to reinvent the classics, focusing on the importance of “rewriting” [sic] and encouraging revision. Many articles have also discussed this topic, including many by Alan Schneider himself discussing what he believes a director’s place to be, and giving detailed description of how it was directing for Samuel Beckett. Many playwrights have taken on the conflict; the most outspoken, Edward Albee and Tennessee Williams, have expressed themselves in lectures, books and articles. Most of these works discuss revising the classics, validating the position of the director, and singling out those directors daring and adventurous enough to reinterpret well-known texts. Rarely do they speak of those directors who agree with the playwright’s vision and who fight to be the definitive interpretation of a play, and seldom do they laud the efforts of said directors and the important work they did for their respective authors. The case of Alan Schneider merits scrutiny for the above stated reasons.
Alan Schneider was born in Kharkov, Russia on November 28, 1917,3 in the midst of the Russian Revolution.4 His parents, Rebecka and Leopold, were both medical doctors, heavily involved in the war efforts and rarely spared a moment of sanity amidst changing military orders, unsanitary living conditions and the failing health of their son. They settled in Moscow, Russia, when Alan was four years old, and his father became chief physician at a nearby camp for young “orphans of the Revolution.”5 His earliest memory of theatre included his parents taking in a show at the Moscow Art Theatre, directed by one Constantin Stanislavski. While his mother completed her Saturday morning shopping trips, he was left at the Moscow State Children’s Theatre, which was currently under the direction of Natalya Zats.6 His father made the wise decision to emigrate to the United States when Alan was six years old. The process of leaving the country was a difficult one, but the Schneiders finally arrived in New York Harbor on July 4, 1923.7

As physicians in America, the Drs. Schneider held a number of different jobs before they settled at a hospital in Washington, D.C. Soon after they arrived in the country, they began work at a sanatorium in Connecticut, where Alan spent his days

3 However, since the calendar was changed by the Bolsheviks from Julian to Gregorian on February 14th, 1918, the true date would read today as December 11th, thirteen days later. Because of a miscalculation by his mother at the time of the calendar change, however, his birthday was always celebrated on December 12th. This mistake was not discovered until years later, long after his birth date had been solidified in his mind.


5 Schneider, *Entrances* 12.

6 Schneider, *Entrances* 15.

7 Schneider, *Entrances* 23.
producing plays he had seen in Moscow in his backyard, and enjoying long weekends at the movie theatre. He spent his high school years in Maryland and attended Johns Hopkins University upon graduation, pursuing, at first, a scientific career. It was during this time that his growing interest in literature, drama, and journalism drew him to the University of Wisconsin, where he wrote for the school newspaper and participated in most of the dramatic productions on campus. He spent his post-university years writing for various newspapers, dabbling in radio broadcasts, directing high school productions, and acting in a few Maryland and Connecticut community and semi-professional productions. After a short career as a speech writer, he acquired his Master’s in dramatic art and literature at Cornell University in 1941. It was there that he began his study in the dichotomy of representational and presentation theater under Alexander Drummond. It was under Cornell’s academic umbrella that he began his journey into theatre and art history, and sparked his enthusiasm for revolutionary playwrights which would eventually include Beckett, Pinter, Albee, and Brecht. After receiving his degree, he began work with the young Dominican priest, Father Gilbert V. Hartke, the head of the new speech and drama department at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. The original one-year teaching assignment turned into a twelve-year stay from 1941 until 1953, where he remained lecturer and director in the speech and drama department. It

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9 Schneider, *Entrances* 48.

10 Kellman 24.

11 Schneider, *Entrances* 63.
was from this flexible position that Schneider moved to participate in various productions in Washington, D.C., and Off-Broadway in New York City.  

By 1955, Alan Schneider had directed over 55 productions in Washington, D.C., New York City, and Massachusetts and was gaining a reputation as an established New York director. In the fall of 1955, Alan Schneider was approached by New York producer Michael Myerberg with the opportunity to direct the “Broadway-bound” American premiere of Waiting for Godot.  

Thornton Wilder had recommended Schneider to Myerberg after Wilder had seen Schneider’s production of The Skin of Our Teeth at ANTA Theatre in New York City in August 1955. This was the first time Schneider had been given the chance to direct one of Beckett’s pieces, though Schneider had seen Godot in Paris in 1954, and, without understanding a word, had been moved “beyond all reason—or expectation.” It was that performance that first instilled in Schneider an ultimate respect for, and trust in, Samuel Beckett. Schneider says in his autobiography, Entrances, that he “didn’t have to ‘understand’ in order to be moved” and that “without knowing exactly what, I knew I had experienced something unique in modern theater.” It was that blind trust in the playwright which exceeded language boundaries, understanding, and meaning that caused Schneider to falter in his acceptance of Myerberg’s outstanding offer. He responded to Myerberg “halfheartedly,” and

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12 Schneider, Entrances 90.
13 Schneider, Entrances 221.
14 Schneider, Entrances 186.
15 Schneider, Entrances 187.
admitted that he “could not imagine a production [of Godot] in Broadway terms.”  

When he discovered that Bert Lahr and Tom Ewell, two well-known American comedians, were slated to play Vladimir and Estragon, he explained to Myerberg that he was “a bit worried about doing it with stars.”  

Even at this early date, Schneider was taken by the nature of this work by a man he had only admired from an academic standpoint. He seemed to understand intrinsically that this was not a “normal” piece of theatre to be produced as a Broadway hit. Although he had his doubts, he “somehow couldn’t say no to it” and was soon on a boat to France to meet the elusive Samuel Beckett and ask him a “bookful” of questions.  

Beckett had allotted Schneider one half-hour in the lobby of the Lancaster hotel in Paris. Greetings were stiffly exchanged, and Schneider boldly asked the infamous question “Who or what is Godot?”  

When Beckett famously responded with “If I knew, I would have said so in the play,” Schneider tried different tactics and discovered that Beckett was more than willing to answer specific questions, provided they did not touch on metaphysical backgrounds or symbolic meaning.  

This tendency was to continue throughout his relationship with Beckett, and show itself in Beckett’s other relationships. Beckett felt relaxed around Schneider largely because of his easy, straightforward

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16 Schneider, *Entrances* 221.

17 Schneider, *Any Way* 29.

18 Schneider, *Entrances* 224.


manner, and well-developed sense of humor.\textsuperscript{21} Not surprisingly, the original one half-hour turned into many hours of discussion that first night and, soon after, a joint trip to London to see Peter Hall’s English premiere of \textit{Waiting for Godot} at the Criterion Theatre.

During the five performances the duo attended, Schneider witnessed the pain the Irish playwright felt watching his play performed differently than he had intended. Beckett, not known for his ability to mask disapproval, commented throughout the performances, saying in a clearly heard stage whisper, “It’s ahl wrahng! He’s doing it ahl wrahng!” about a bit of stage business or the interpretation of a certain line.\textsuperscript{22} It was all Schneider could do to keep Beckett from giving notes to the actors after the performances. Instead, Beckett took three pages of notes for Hall citing corrections to the blocking, lighting, set, acting, casting, and delivery, which he delivered to the director days later.\textsuperscript{23} Beckett’s loyalty to his work and the depth to which it pained him to see it done “incorrectly” deeply affected Schneider, and he left the playwright with a “greater measure of devotion than I have ever felt for a writer whose work I was translating to the stage.”\textsuperscript{24} Schneider returned to America with new-found excitement for the production and exceptional knowledge of the play itself.


\textsuperscript{22} Schneider, \textit{Entrances} 225.

\textsuperscript{23} Maurice Harmon, ed., \textit{No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider} (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998) 2

\textsuperscript{24} Schneider, \textit{Entrances} 225.
Schneider arrived back in New York, where Myerberg presented him with a new “improved” symbolic set, two supporting actors sadly miscast (Jack Smart as Pozzo and Charles Weidman as Lucky), and no hope of respect from the two “star” actors playing Vladimir and Estragon. However, the first few weeks of rehearsal encouraged Schneider, until Myerberg informed the cast and director that Godot's run was moved to the Coconut Grove Playhouse near Miami, Florida, as a preliminary tryout run. This move was the beginning of a series of problems amongst the cast and director, not to mention the problems caused by the production itself publicized as “the laugh sensation of two continents.” Schneider attempted to guide the work towards the ideal he had discussed so thoroughly with the playwright, and follow Beckett’s vision to the letter, but to no avail. The comedic egos of the leading men, the abilities of the supporting actors, and the misleading publicity in the wrong venue all led to the painful opening on January 3, 1956. An eyewitness, Robert Kistler, described the audience’s mood on opening night as “gala—until the play began” and, as it advanced, “the audience seemed extremely bored.” At the end of the play, what was left of the audience “clapped politely, but not enthusiastically. People were trying to be kind to the actors because their roles were so boring.” He concluded that he “couldn’t tell what it was about. Anyway, it was not for

25 Jack Smart was a radio actor who had built a minor career in films and television, and spent most of rehearsals as “catatonic,” as noted by Schneider in Entrances (231). Charles Weidman was a dancer and choreographer who had no experience as an actor, and was terrified throughout most of the first rehearsals. Weidman, unfortunately, understood the part of Lucky perfectly, but simply could not learn it and suffered from terrible stage fright. In the end, Lucky was played beginning on opening night by his understudy Arthur Malet.

26 Schneider, Entrances 227.

27 Cronin 455.

middle America.” 29 Kistler was only too right. Baffled by the metaphysical ramblings of
two “clowns,” a third of the audience left at intermission, and countless others lined up at
the box office to ask for refunds. 30

The American premiere of Waiting for Godot closed after two weeks in Miami,
which was a welcome decision for Schneider, however painful. In an interview with Mel
Gussow in 1966, Bert Lahr likened Godot in Miami to “trying [Godot] out in a truant
school” and claimed it was “the biggest flop in the history of the theatre.” 31 However,
Lahr had faith in the work still, and convinced Myerberg to transfer Godot to New York
City, insisting on approval of the director and new cast if he were to join them. 32 Herbert
Berghof was chosen as director, with a cast of E.G. Marshall as Vladimir, Kurt Kasznar
as Pozzo and Alvin Epstein as Lucky. The revived production received respectful if
divided reviews, though Schneider could not bring himself to see it. 33 He was left in
despair, stating years later that “the failure in Miami depressed [him] more than any
experience [he] had had in the theatre.” 34 He wrote immediately to Beckett describing the
experience and received nothing but admiration, gratefulness, and affection in return.
Beckett wrote him lengthy letters, explaining his views on the situation: “Success and

29 Proctor 15.

Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider, ed. Maurice Harmon, New York Times, 31 Jan

31 Gussow, Conversations 19.

32 Gussow, Conversations 19.

33 Schneider, Entrances 235.


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failure on the public level never mattered much to me, in fact I feel much more at home with the latter, having breathed deep of its vivifying air all my writing life up to the last couple of years....I told [Donald] Albery and [Peter] Hall that if they did [Godot] my way it would empty the theatre.” This introduced to Schneider Beckett’s definitions of achievement and disappointment, and only reinforced what so many people understood to be Beckett’s finest quality: humility. Schneider was encouraged by Beckett’s words and mused, “somehow, [Beckett] made me feel that what I had at least tried to do in Miami was closer to what he had wanted- though he never criticized the efforts of anyone else.”35 This production set the pattern of encouragement and obedience that was to be the foundation of the working relationship between Schneider and Beckett.

Even before meeting Samuel Beckett, Alan Schneider was well-known in theatre circles for his intense drive to be true to the intentions of the playwright when he was directing a play, and found a few supporters of his efforts. Peter Hall36 once said of Schneider, “His fidelity [to the playwright] could verge on the mechanical and his productions were sometimes more accurate than inspired.”37 However, Hall also believed Schneider “was the right man for Samuel Beckett” and undoubtedly respected Schneider’s loyalty, though, throughout his career, Hall never claimed to take it upon

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35 Levy 40.

36 Peter Hall made his debut at Windsor in 1953 and ran the Arts Theatre London 1956-59 where his productions included the English language premiere of Beckett’s Waiting for Godot. Hall created the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1960 and opened the RSC’s first London home at the Aldwych Theatre. He became Director of the Royal National Theatre in 1973, spending 15 years with the company and transferred it into the new theatres on the South Bank.

himself to fight for the playwright’s vision.\textsuperscript{38} Nonetheless, Schneider’s loyalty was sought out by playwrights known for their specificity of stage direction, including Edward Albee.\textsuperscript{39}

Edward Albee became one of Schneider’s greatest supporters, and revered him for upholding the “integrity” of the playwright’s intentions, a fight near to Albee’s heart. He once said that Schneider’s great virtue was that “his main concern was with getting the playwright’s work on the stage the way the playwright intended it. Too many directors are interested only in doing the splashy thing.”\textsuperscript{40} Albee, of course, was, and is well-known for his insistence upon the theatrical rights of playwrights. Readers of Albee’s own texts soon find that he, like Beckett, provides “careful blueprints for a theatrical performance, with detailed indications of how he wishes the play to emerge in performance.”\textsuperscript{41} In lectures and interviews, Albee has stated his views on theatre hierarchy, stipulating “If a playwright can learn the considerable craft of direction, if he can overcome the actors’ being taught to mistrust the author, and if he can be objective about his own writing, no other person than the author can give as accurate a translation of what the playwright saw and heard when he wrote the play—no more accurate

\textsuperscript{38} Hall 29.


\textsuperscript{40} Levy 44.

representation of the author’s intent." He explained to the directors that “if you respect a work, you try to translate it from the page to the stage as clearly and accurately as you can. And if you’re directing [a dramatist like Samuel Beckett] he doesn’t need your help.”

Regardless of one’s particular view of a director’s place in the production process, it is true that the modern theatre landscape has been dominated by strong directors, and that it was, and still is, very rare to find a director who will subsume himself to the more traditional role as merely the playwright’s mouthpiece. Evidence of custom and practice in the theatre industry could be mustered to demonstrate that directors and performers have exercised wide latitude in interpretation and artistic control, particularly in the case of unprotected plays in the public domain. Clearly, however, there are limits on the liberties a director can take under the guise of artistic interpretation and legitimate creative expression. When does interpretation become distortion and who owns the play?

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43 Albee may seem here to give a definitive view of his beliefs, but it is important to note that, at the same seminar, the 1991 Inge Festival, he paradoxically mentioned in Jean Luere’s book that “some playwrights should not be allowed into the theatre. They’re hysteric” (12). He also directed a controversial double bill of Beckett in 1991 at the Alley Theatre in Houston, Texas, pairing Ohio Impromptu with Krapp’s Last Tape. Krapp closely reflected Beckett’s staging intent but Ohio Impromptu greatly deviated from the script. Though Beckett specifies an exact abbreviated performance time, Albee performed it three times in succession for each performance. He also set it in a bright room with one black and one white actor. The stage directions clearly state that there is to be one light over a table with two actors “as alike in appearance as possible” (285). The reviews of the play were divided, and Beckett scholar Robert Scanlan reported in Luere’s collection, “I don’t think Beckett would be pleased” (113).

44 King 12.


46 Garbus 2.
The matter of directorial freedom and the boundaries placed upon the director is a highly complex issue, and can rarely be polarized as one or the other as the main controller of the work. In the December 28, 1984 volume of the New York Law Journal, Martin Garbus and Gerald E. Singleton wrote a provocative article called “Playwright-Director Conflict: Whose Play is it Anyway?” This article was in direct response to the American Repertory Theatre’s production earlier that year of Endgame\(^{47}\) directed by JoAnne Akalaitis. ART presented a revised version\(^{48}\) of the Beckett piece, enraging not only the playwright and his supporters, but his American publisher, Grove Press. Grove Press’s President Barney Rossett noted in a letter to ART artistic director Robert Brustein: “Beckett, for better or worse, writes in an extremely precise way. Apparently, some people believe in a play only the dialogue counts. With Beckett, the silence, the set, the costumes, the lighting all count. It’s all of a piece.”\(^{49}\) Since 1856, the copyright laws in this country have reserved the playwright, as author and owner of the copyright to the work, the sole right to impose any condition he or she wishes in granting permission

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\(^{47}\) Beckett’s stage directions for Endgame included a “Bare interior. Grey light. Left and right back, high up, two small windows, curtains drawn. Front right, a door. Hanging near door, its face to wall, a picture. Front left, touching each other, covered with an old sheet, two ashbins. Center, in an armchair on castors, covered with an old sheet, Hamm. Motionless by the door, his eyes fixed on Hamm, Clov. Very red face. Brief tableau.” (Beckett, Endgame 2)

\(^{48}\) The ART production was set in an underground subway tunnel, with a bombed-out, vandalized subway car extending halfway across the stage from stage left and a large puddle of water across the stage. In the rear, a wall rose the full height of the stage, with long, narrow iron ladders climbing to the top in the places where the windows were supposed to be. Instead of two ashbins, the ART production substituted seven beat up oil drums. Where Endgame demanded silence, ART provided an overture composed by Philip Glass (then Akalaitis’ husband) to precede the play, open the play and accentuate lines of the dialogue. At one point in the ART production, the actors froze silently in position, only to have their words emanating rear of the theater. None of these elements were meant to be in the Endgame which Beckett wrote.

\(^{49}\) Garbus 2.
for the performance of his or her work.\textsuperscript{50} Before a performance is presented, the licensor will provide an agreement, and retain "injunctive relief to halt the production."\textsuperscript{51} The main law that is used to protect authors and playwrights against the misrepresentation of their works, and the public from being deceived as to the source of the production, is called the Federal Lanham Act.\textsuperscript{52} This concerns "false designations of origin" and is designed to not only put a stop to false advertising, but also ensure that if the public pay to see a Beckett play, for example, they have the right to see a Beckett play.\textsuperscript{53} Legally, any deviation from the playwright's stage directions, not specifically approved, should be actionable based upon this law.\textsuperscript{54} However, who is to judge whether changes made by the director amount to distortion, the director or the playwright?

In her book \textit{The Revisionist Stage}, Amy Green discussed the vision and talents of the directors who, depending upon perspective, have either revitalized or disfigured canonical dramas by adapting them for the American stage.\textsuperscript{55} She began her discussion with the thought that many "revisionist" directors sense that most theatrical texts are "unstable" and "interactive" and that authors are less reliable sources of meaning and stage direction than we once believed.\textsuperscript{56} Unfortunately, this assumes the fact that the

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\textsuperscript{50} Garbus 2.

\textsuperscript{51} Garbus 2.


\textsuperscript{53} Long 5.

\textsuperscript{54} Garbus 2.


\textsuperscript{56} Green 4.
playwrights were not living and available to consult at the time of the productions, and/or that their wishes regarding the staging of the play were never recorded. Of course, in the matter of ART’s *Endgame* and, indeed, the entirety of Alan Schneider’s directing career, Samuel Beckett was fully alive. In a letter to Brustein, Peter Stone, president of The Dramatists Guild, addressed this issue and sharply criticized the position taken by ART in regards to *Endgame*:

> What could be more preeminent to any author’s right than a faithful execution of his or her intention, especially when, as in the case of Mr. Beckett’s *Endgame*, it is so clearly expressed in the text? A sin that is more often committed against dead playwrights, an offense against the author’s dramatic intention could, in this case, easily have been avoided by submitting your proposed changes to this living playwright for his approval. […] We are truly shocked when as knowledgeable and sensitive a dramaturg as yourself encourages its practice at the expense of one who is as energetically extant as Mr. Beckett.⁵⁷

Although Beckett was very much alive, Green still negatively summarized the ART -- *Endgame* contretemps: “Mr. Beckett insisted that one vision—his—prevail over the staging of his play. Postmodern challenges to textual authority and authorial intention clearly held no place in this notoriously precise playwright’s theatrical schema.”⁵⁸

Unfortunately, this conclusion assumes that the director’s challenges were correct, and that directors, though the playwright created the piece and is still very much available for comment, have a right to challenge not only the text, but the author. It is necessarily to admit that the playwright also has a right to see his or her play performed the way he or she imagined it; the theatre world deserves a definitive version of the great works of theatre.

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⁵⁷ Garbus 2.

⁵⁸ Green 91.
This dispute points to the need for an agreement between playwright and director. Though many theatre practitioners may disagree with the dry objectivity when it comes to creative matters of art, the legal solution demands that both parties carefully define their expectations in a written agreement.\textsuperscript{59} In the case of ART’s \textit{Endgame}, Beckett and Barney Rosset agreed that the production could continue, but it could not be advertised as “Samuel Beckett’s \textit{Endgame},” and an insert from Beckett was included in the production playbill stating Beckett’s disgust.\textsuperscript{60} The insert also included a note from Rosset\textsuperscript{61} defending Beckett’s position, and from ART’s Robert Brustein, who stood by his director. His rebuttal appeared in the program alongside Beckett’s complaint: “To threaten any deviations from a purist rendering of this or any other play—to insist on strict adherence to each parenthesis of the published text—not only robs collaborating artists of their interpretive freedom but threatens to turn the theatre into a waxworks.” Beckett and Grove Press also chose to include the first page of the text of \textit{Endgame}, which included the detailed stage directions, clearly allowing the audience to choose for themselves who held the true artistic power in the production.

Beckett communicated exactly what he envisioned for his texts utilizing specific stage directions, such as the ones found in \textit{Endgame}, which is problematic for directors who may view the importance of said directions differently than originally intended.

\textsuperscript{59} Garbus 2.

\textsuperscript{60} Beckett’s statement read: “Any production of \textit{Endgame} which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me. My play requires an empty room and two small windows. The American Repertory Theatre 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.”

\textsuperscript{61} Barney Rosset’s statement deplored “the refusal of the ART to accede to Beckett’s wishes to remove his name from the production, indicate that this staging is only an adaptation or stop it entirely.”
Stage directions are defined in the *Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre* as “notes added to the script of a play to convey information about its performance not already explicit in the dialogue itself. Generally speaking, they are concerned with (a) the actor’s movements, (b) the scenery or stage effects” (478). Unfortunately, the origin of the stage directions in any given text is rarely truly known, so it is up to the director to discern whether or not to follow them. This gives full artistic power to the director. Amy Green hypothesizes that, over time, where once it was assumed that playwrights’ intentions could be discerned and “realized” by a production that “served” the play, playwrights’ authority, like that of authors in general, is no longer considered absolute. Once again, playwrights differ in the way they choose to define their intentions, whether it be within the pages of the text or outside discussion, and theatre history includes many more “definitive” productions of contemporary plays.

Mel Gussow’s *New York Times* article “Enter Fearless Director, Pursued by Playwright” addresses this issue in the context of contemporary playwrights, including Beckett, who are more exactingly specific about where the plays are set and how they should be performed. He even admits that “Beckett would seem to occupy a special position; though his plays are abstract, they are rooted in particular environments. Symbolism rises organically from the material. Because of the specificity of Beckett’s

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62 The origins of stage directions are often questionable, as in the case of a Shakespearian stage direction, entered well after the fact, or stage directions which are added by the stage manager after the opening of the first performance of a text.

63 Green 4.
scenic demands, it is actually easier to follow his instructions than to ignore them."  

Also, by providing us not only with stage directions, but also with the authoritative productions and masses of written instruction regarding the plays, we now have a solid idea of where to begin in reconstructing a version of the playwright's original intention, should a director so desire.

Schneider went farther than simply following Beckett's stage directions to the letter. Schneider communicated with Beckett on every aspect of the production, and kept to what he viewed as true to his beliefs as a director. Schneider answered the playwright-director question, and had a very specific view on what a director should be to a production:

I really am most satisfied when nobody knows I was there at all. A director shouldn't be inventive just for the sake of being inventive. I can be plenty inventive, but I don't want the audience to know I am.... A director is a necessary evil. He's a means to an end. He's there as a kind of midwife, but the child depends on the parent.  

In a piece written for the *New York Theatre Review* entitled “What Does a Director Do?,” Schneider sums up the role of a director by saying that a director, “takes the playwright's bare words, together with his stage directions...and tries to clothe them in flesh and blood reality.”

This is not to say that Schneider believed that the director's sole function was to serve the playwright. It is obvious that he viewed the role of the director as important to

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65 Levy 44.

the overall shape of the piece: it is the “director who, at the very beginning of the entire adventure, decides on the concept, the idea from which the entire production evolves and flows.” Even though there is much debate about the degree of freedom that the playwright should or should not grant directors in subsequent productions of their plays, few will dispute the fact that Schneider’s drive to give the early performances of a play the most exacting and faithful attention possible was noble and necessary for Samuel Beckett.

Schneider and Beckett molded Beckett’s works together, while separated by thousands of miles, communicating through over five hundred letters they would write from December 1955 through March 1984. These letters helped to preserve and explain clearly the nature of their professional and personal relationship. Beckett was well-known among his friends as a faithful and eloquent correspondent. His letters, which may have been mere quarter-sheet notes, postcards, or lengthy paragraphs, were coveted by the recipients and are now being gathered and published a bit at a time. The letters between Schneider and Beckett are now collected in *No Author Better Served*, by Irish scholar Maurice Harmon. In the first letter dated 14 December 1955, Beckett alluded to the shape he wanted his working relationship with Schneider to take. Beckett wrote, referring to the Miami *Waiting for Godot*, “I feel my monster is in safe keeping.” Enclosed was the

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67 Schneider, “What Does” 16.

68 Though extremely protective of his private correspondence, over 500 of Beckett’s letters to Alan Schneider have now been collected in *No Author Better Served*. The correspondence is currently held in the John J. Burns Library at Boston College and is made up of letters, postcards, telegrams, and notes to productions. Many of Beckett’s letters have been edited in accordance with the wishes of the Samuel Beckett Estate, which stipulates that only letters, or parts of letters, relevant to Beckett’s work may be published. The gaps in communication have been noted, as a few letters have been lost over the years.

69 Harmon 2.
three-page list of notes given to Peter Hall at his London Godot, simply saying he
“thought [Schneider] might like to have them.”\(^{70}\) Beckett also made, for the first time, a
request he would make of all his future directors, “All I ask of you is not to make any
changes in the text without letting me know…please let me have the opportunity of
protesting or approving.”\(^{71}\) Schneider took these requests to heart, respecting Beckett’s
direction, criticism, appeals, and encouragement.

Over time, and noted throughout their correspondence, Beckett began to grant
Schneider more latitude in interpreting his plays, and freely expressed his trust in the
American director. It took only a few years before he would reply to Schneider’s
questions with “Do it the way you like, Alan, do it any way you like.”\(^{72}\) Other directors
might have started to test their limits and take advantage of the freedom, but Alan
continued to seek Beckett’s advice on every detail of his productions, ever faithful. There
was only one occasion in 1964 when Schneider was directing Play for the Cherry Lane
Theatre in New York City in which he asked Beckett’s permission to alter something
written in the text. The producers of Play thought that it was “insulting their
intelligence” to perform the text twice, as specified in the stage directions.\(^{73}\) They
threatened to shut down the production if Schneider could not get permission to slow the
piece down and speak the lines only once, so he wrote to Beckett. Beckett, surprisingly,
offered Schneider his reluctant permission, something he never allowed other directors.

\(^{70}\) Harmon 1.

\(^{71}\) Harmon 1.

\(^{72}\) Hall 29.

\(^{73}\) Schneider, Entrances 342.
Years later, Schneider learned through a mutual friend that Beckett had actually felt hurt and betrayed by Alan. Schneider understood, "...as well he should! I should have resisted or quit or anything but give in to the producers' wishes. Why Sam continued to have faith in me after that, I shall never know."\textsuperscript{74} Schneider never asked to change Beckett's stage directions again.

One well-documented example of the strong collaborative working process between Beckett and Schneider is the 1961 world premiere of \textit{Happy Days}. During the rehearsals at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York City, Schneider's commitments kept him from traveling to Paris, and Beckett was unwilling to go to America. The letters are filled with minute directions for action corresponding to speech, detailed descriptions of lighting, physical properties, brand name and positioning of each individual lighting lamp, and a series of drawings in pen and ink done by Beckett to show exactly how he wanted Winnie and her mound to appear and what the position of Willie should be at all times in relation to her. Schneider followed these to the letter, and Beckett expressed his overwhelming gratitude throughout each response, "I feel the great effort you are all making and am very grateful."\textsuperscript{75}

Alan Schneider's beliefs regarding the position of a theatre director and the role of the playwright were only solidified by his continuing work with Beckett. In 1975, Alan Schneider wrote an article for \textit{Theatre Quarterly} entitled "'Any Way You Like, Alan': Working with Beckett" describing the process of directing Beckett's texts.

\textsuperscript{74} Schneider, \textit{Entrances} 343.

\textsuperscript{75} Harmon 107.
Purporting to defend himself from critics he claimed had accused Schneider of
“hypnotizing Sam into giving [him] a stranglehold on [Beckett’s] work” and “seriously
distorting his plays,” the article provides a touching account of Schneider and Beckett’s
symbiotic directing process. Time and again, Schneider likened the process of working
with Beckett to a marriage, and the resulting performance to a child. Surprisingly,
Beckett was always the absent parent, having never been present as Schneider was
directing (except for Film). Schneider “always rehearsed as though [Beckett] were in the
shadows somewhere watching and listening, ready to answer all our doubts, quell our
fears, and share our surprises and small talk.” Schneider was absolutely determined to
present Beckett’s texts to his audiences in precisely the way Beckett would have done. In
fact, he made sure that each actor, designer, producer, and stage technician agreed that
they would produce the play “more or less in the way [Beckett] would want it to be
done—at lease insofar as I, as the director, can understand that and transmit it to you.”
In return for his devotion, Schneider was rewarded with five Beckett premiers in this
country and went on to stage a total of six productions of “Godot,” six of “Krapp’s Last
Tape,” five of “Rockaby” and two of “Endgame.” He fully admitted that he was no

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76 Thus far, Schneider mentions these unnamed critics only a few times, once in his “Working with
Beckett” article, and again in letters to Beckett. I have been unable to find the specific critics and reviewers
with such harsh views. Of course, Schneider was often referred to as the “Beckett specialist” and
“Beckett’s frequent collaborator,” but it was rarely laced with derision or spite. It remains to be seen if
Alan Schneider was looking for critics of his relationship with Beckett and could possibly have been overly
sensitive to the adjectives attached to his association with the great playwright.

77 Schneider, “Any Way” 27.


80 Brustein 13.
longer appalled by seemingly anti-Beckettian play concepts and, in theory, could conceive of portraying Vladimir and Estragon as homosexuals, or cast an entirely female Godot. However, he rejected all such “colored lights” school of production and maintained his preference to uphold an author’s “inalienable right to the relative satisfaction of his own intentions.”  

Alan Schneider’s tragic death in 1984 ended the symbiotic relationship between a great writer and his faithful disciple. At the age of 66, he was hit by a motorcycle while crossing a street in Hampstead, London after posting a letter. Beckett was understandably distressed when he received that same letter from Schneider three days after his death and called Billie Whitelaw for condolence. He only hoped that his was not the only letter that caused Schneider to cross the street to the post office. It remains to be seen, of course, how Schneider’s views of producing Beckett’s plays would have differed had he outlived the playwright. He was clear to admit it was, and is, foolish to believe that Beckett’s pieces will forever retain their preserved quality of the first performance, and even went so far as to speculate that “Beckett will one day be performed in 17th century armor or space suits, with Godot as an extra-terrestrial intelligence....” He has even limited, though only once on record, the time frame in which we must respect the playwright’s wishes as “within the author’s own span of life

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81 Schneider, “Any Way” 29.

82 Hall 29.


84 Schneider, “Any Way” 29.
and awareness. However, because Beckett, his muse and inspiration for Schneider’s ideal director-playwright relationship, outlived him, we will never know how he would have proceeded without Beckett’s essential correspondence and encouragement.

Although Samuel Beckett has been accused of being a tyrant playwright, maintaining full authoritative control of his works and preventing the “rewriting” of his texts, it is important that we, as a theatre community, respect his beliefs. During his twenty-five years of association with Beckett, Schneider found “lots to open up” and sought “the best way to do the opening up,” insisting that “much remains to be done by the director.” Yet Schneider did not alter the script. Schneider has attested, “I stuck strictly to the text.” He shepherded Beckett productions, believing that a director should respect the purity of a script when an author’s intent is clear and explicitly throughout its pages. Because of Schneider’s tireless efforts and loyalty to Beckett, we now have many records of how Samuel Beckett saw his esoteric and innovative works, and also his detailed suggestions as to how to produce them so as to draw upon the inherent symbolism within the words.

85 Schneider, “Any Way” 29.
86 Schneider, Entrances 228.
87 Schneider, Entrances 365.
88 Luere 109.
CHAPTER 4

BILLIE WHITELAW: SAMUEL BECKETT'S FUNDAMENTAL INTERPRETER

Samuel Beckett was once asked why he so enjoyed working with Billie Whitelaw. “Because she doesn’t ask a lot of damn-fool questions,” the great playwright is said to have replied.1

More than any other actress, Billie Whitelaw has become associated with the plays of Samuel Beckett. Often called his “muse,” she has played nearly all the parts Beckett has written for women, and three of his plays were written specifically for her.2 Even when not the acknowledged director, Beckett worked directly with Whitelaw, helping her on the particular nuances of the character and her speech cadences, tempos, and rhythms. She was his favorite actress; a title that some said prevented her from achieving theatre stardom. But celebrity was not something she sought, much like her playwright counterpart. Instead, she fought to present Beckett’s plays with his exact intention, never asking questions, just simply interpreting his words.

Billie Whitelaw was born in Coventry, England on June 6, 1932.3 Whitelaw and her father were close, even though he made it very clear that he was disappointed that he

had two daughters and no sons. In fact, he was given orders to list Whitelaw’s name as Diana on her birth certificate and wrote “Billie” instead.\(^4\) Her mother was a descendant of an old Lancastrian family, and had been raised with training in music and entertaining. Whitelaw described her mother as a “hopeless housekeeper,” who thought she was “cut out for better things.”\(^5\) Whitelaw has said that she always believed that her older sister was the mistake that forced her parents to marry, as her father was clearly not what her mother had in mind for a spouse. He was a man’s man, a womanizing electrician who liked his drink and his buddies.\(^6\) For the first few years of her life, Whitelaw lived in the shadow of her beautiful and poised older sister, but still happy visiting family and being a young girl. When she was seven, World War II began and her family life ended as Coventry was targeted by the Germans as a major site of war production industry in England.\(^7\) She was evacuated to a small village in Warwickshire with other children from her town, and her sister joined the WAAF. One year later, Whitelaw was finally reunited with her parents when her father bought a house in Bradford. The major bombing finally ended in August of 1942, though Coventry had been completely leveled throughout the two straight years of raids.\(^8\) Though the family was together again for a short time, her father died of lung cancer soon after. Whitelaw’s mother went to work for fourteen hours

\(^4\) Whitelaw 4.
\(^5\) Whitelaw 6.
\(^6\) Whitelaw 4.
\(^7\) Whitelaw 17.
\(^8\) Whitelaw 23.
of the day at a greeting card plant. As her sister was still working as a radar mechanic for the WAAF, this left eleven-year-old Whitelaw to become the housekeeper.

Her mother soon remarried, to a man named Tommy Moore.9 When Whitelaw was eleven, she received a role in a radio drama because her mother thought it would help Whitelaw rid of her developing stutter, which seemed to disappear as she received job after job at the BBC radio.10 A great fan of the arts, Moore was determined to further her theatrical career, and she began working at small theatres in Bradford and continued her work with the BBC radio. She was well-known in her grammar school as the “radio star” Billie Whitelaw. When she was thirteen, Whitelaw met Joan Littlewood and Ewan MacColl, of the Theatre Workshop, at the BBC in Manchester.11 Although her mother and stepfather objected, Littlewood invited Whitelaw to join their communal theatre that, at the time, met in a dormitory outside Middlesbrough and rehearsed in a barn. Studying theatre, movement and dance based on the work of Rudolf von Laban, Whitelaw felt she had “found her element.”12 Whitelaw felt her first sparks of rebellion against the commercial theatre world and, from then on, thought of Littlewood as a “second mother.”13 Her parents, though they removed Whitelaw from what they thought was quite an “undisciplined lot” and “Communist Littlewood,” still agreed that theatre was her true calling, and continued to encourage her to audition for companies and various

9 Whitelaw 39.
10 Whitelaw 40.
11 Whitelaw 49.
12 Whitelaw 49.
13 Whitelaw 49.
shows around Bradford. Over the next few years, she landed small roles in plays and radio shows, and moved to London after she landed her first TV role with the BBC in *The Secret Garden* in 1950.\textsuperscript{14} Whitelaw worked steadily throughout the next ten years, during which time she met and married her first husband, the less-successful actor Peter Vaughn, and divorced him thirteen years later. In 1961, she was invited to the Old Vic, then home to the National Theatre, to speak to the artistic director Laurence Olivier. He invited her to join the National Theatre, where she took her first role, alongside Rosemary Harris and Robert Stephens, in Samuel Beckett's *Play* directed by George Devine.\textsuperscript{15}

Although Whitelaw had merely heard of Beckett’s *Happy Days* with Brenda Bruce, *Play* was Whitelaw’s first personal experience with Beckett. However, she seemed to immediately grasp the depth of the piece and playwright at hand. The play is, simply, about a man, his wife, and his mistress all stuck in urns and prodded to speak by a spotlight. But she “somehow felt the story wasn’t all that important. What mattered was the way the story was presented.”\textsuperscript{16} The other actors focused on the background and history of the characters, but she knew “the excitement would come from the musicality of the piece, rather than the story-telling. [She] wasn’t in the least bothered by the lack of characterization or psychology.”\textsuperscript{17} Beckett traveled to London to assist George Devine with the esoteric new work a week into rehearsals. Whitelaw noted Beckett’s “air of intense concentration” while he observed, always allowing Devine to do the talking at

\textsuperscript{14} Whitelaw 63.
\textsuperscript{15} Whitelaw 76.
\textsuperscript{16} Whitelaw 76.
\textsuperscript{17} Whitelaw 77.
rehearsals, and only approaching the actors after rehearsal in their dressing rooms. Her first solo encounter with Beckett was one of these note-giving sessions, where Beckett pored over his script for ten minutes in silence, and then said “Billie, will you bring your pencil over here and look at page 2, speech 4, fifth word. Will you make those three dots, two dots.”18 She immediately knew what he wanted, a slight difference in the pauses. This inherent understanding was to become the basis of their working relationship for the next twenty-eight years. Her strong trust in a director was something she realized early on, “I’ve always needed a strong director. I want a director to give me the confidence to go down a blind alley. Like a frog, I need someone to pat my bottom, someone who can get me jumping. […] What I need is a director who, when I’m in doubt, can say: ‘Try that road, off you go.’ Once I know the road I’m on, I can build from there.”19

Though Laurence Olivier disagreed with the way that George Devine and Samuel Beckett (and Whitelaw) wanted to perform *Play* (a fast, almost unintelligible, piece of Morse code), it opened as intended to curious yet positive reviews.20 After this first experience with Beckett, Whitelaw said that “working with Beckett was to be a watershed in my life.”21 Though she admits she was not turned overnight into a single-minded Beckett convert, and that she “didn’t rush out to read everything he had written,” she did recognize that *Play* was a turning point in her life: “I found myself in a theatrical situation that mirrored the state of my own personality. I realized that my emptiness was

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18 Whitelaw 77.
19 Whitelaw 196.
21 Whitelaw 81.
something I could utilize. I felt far less restricted working on this piece that I had done before. I began to sense within myself a growing feeling of freedom.”22 She stayed with the National Theatre for three more plays, including replacing Maggie Smith as Desdemona to Laurence Olivier’s Othello. In 1965, though she received a best supporting actress nomination by the Evening Standard Awards for Desdemona, Olivier let her go from the National Theatre because he said “we simply have nothing suitable to offer you, nothing that’s worthy of you.”23 This independence and recalling the anti-commercial theatre murmurings instilled in her by Joan Littlewood, softened the blow for Whitelaw and, soon after, she met the critic, novelist, and dramatist Robert Muller. Within a year, she and Robert had welcomed their son Matthew into their family, though Robert was merely separated from his wife and two daughters. He and his wife Eileen did not finalize their divorce until after Matthew’s third birthday.24 When Matthew was five, he almost died of bacterial meningitis, not taken off the hospital’s “at-risk” register until he was ten. This experience was to mature Whitelaw faster than any prior, and emotionally prepare her for her future, increasingly difficult, work with Beckett.

Whitelaw received the script for Not I from director Anthony Page at the Royal Court Theatre in 1972, and had an immediate emotional affinity for it. She said later that “with Not I what happened for me was a terrible inner scream, like falling backward into Hell. It was the scream I never made when my son was desperately ill.”25 Although

22 Whitelaw 84.
23 Whitelaw 98.
24 Whitelaw 104.
25 Gussow Conversations, 85.
Beckett and Whitelaw had not seen or spoken to one another in over nine years, Beckett admitted to his London publisher John Calder that he had carried around her voice from *Play* in his head, and written *Not I* for that voice. 26 Beckett came from France to help with rehearsals, yet distancing himself at first so Anthony could feel free to direct. Soon, however, Whitelaw and Sam began rehearsing privately, developing a “shorthand” they would use throughout the rest of their relationship together. 27 Beckett would repeat “Too much colour [sic], flat, no emotion, no colour [sic], flat,” and Whitelaw would understand that to mean, “For God’s sake, don’t act.” 28 They seemed to be in constant agreement regarding the way the monologue should sound, as she noted, “I knew what Beckett wanted, there was no argument and I agreed with him absolutely.” 29 Whittlewaw also said that she felt that she “was becoming joined to Sam by some sort of umbilical cord,” and once referred to him as her “mother.” 30 It was clear that, through the emotional stress of creating a piece as difficult as *Not I*, and a very sick child still at home, the actress found solace in the calm of the playwright. She also had the great fortune to be supported by a strong collaborative team including designer Jocelyn Herbert, Anthony Page, stage manager Robbie Hendry, and Beckett behind her every challenge. 31

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26 Knowlson *Damned*, 578.

27 Whitelaw 119.

28 Gussow *Conversations*, 85.

29 Herbert 221.

30 Whitelaw 126.

31 Herbert 221.
Jocelyn Herbert,\textsuperscript{32} who was Beckett's foremost British designer, was an important source of comfort during this time, and in future partnerships with Whitelaw. Herbert realized early on that, though seemingly simple, \textit{Not I} is an incredibly difficult text to realize. The stage directions dictate: "Stage in darkness but for \textit{mouth}, upstage audience right, about eight feet above stage level, faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow. Invisible microphone."\textsuperscript{33} Herbert had terrible technical difficulties with these instructions: "It was a technical problem to black Billie's face up and light her mouth since the whole point is to have the rest of the face and body invisible... I built a big chair and put it up on a rostrum—it was rather like being in an electric chair—and gave Billie something to hold onto... she wore a black hood and I made a mask from black gauze which fitted exactly."\textsuperscript{34} Though Jocelyn was, in effect, the creator of what was to be Whitelaw's torture for the run, she considered Herbert a "tower of strength." and admitted she "had to lean on her a lot" throughout this time.\textsuperscript{35}

\textit{Not I} opened\textsuperscript{36} to rave reviews, and Sloane Square (home of the Royal Court Theatre) was packed night after night with queues for the box office.\textsuperscript{37} The reviews were extraordinary, and Whitelaw's dressing room was honored with theatre celebrities night

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\textsuperscript{32} See Appendix, Jocelyn Herbert: Beckett's Chief Designer.


\textsuperscript{34} Herbert 87.

\textsuperscript{35} Whitelaw 122.

\textsuperscript{36} It was also during the first run of \textit{Not I} that Jack MacGowan died. Whitelaw sent Beckett, now in Paris, a telegram: "From now on every performance is for Jackie." Sam replied by letter: "Dear Billie, Thank you for your moving telegram. I can't find a word. I think of you a lot, with wonder and gratitude. Much love, Sam." (Whitelaw 129)

\textsuperscript{37} Whitelaw 128.
after night. These guests included *Waiting for Godot* premiere director Roger Blin and another of Beckett's great actresses.³⁸ Madeline Renaud.³⁹ *Not I* ran for two months and left Whitelaw a changed woman, having been through the most challenging personal and professional time of her life. She did, however, agree to revive it at the Royal Court two years later in a double bill with Athol Fugard's *Statements after an arrest under the Immorality Act*, and then again for the BBC soon after.⁴⁰ After the filmed version, she has refused to perform *Not I* again, based on the incredibly draining experience it was for her. It was while previewing the filmed version of *Not I* that Whitelaw received Beckett's first—and only—word of praise to her face, "At the end of it all, out of the darkness, came one word, spoken with an Irish accent, a whisper that just managed to float across to me: "Miraculous."³⁴¹

*Not I* proved to be the "most telling event" of Billie Whitelaw's professional life.⁴² In Beckett's eyes, after a piece as challenging as *Not I*, she could do no wrong; this experience solidified their trust in one another for the remainder of their work together. Unfortunately, after her work on *Not I* was applauded by Beckett and, indeed, the theatre community as a whole, Whitelaw admitted that she shifted from her normal

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³⁸ Whitelaw describes Madeleine Renaud as "Beckett's most important interpreter," though she was known in France primarily as a classical actress, the "grande dame of French theatre," and not often associated with avant-garde drama (Whitelaw 128). Roger Blin first suggested her for the French premier of *Oh les beaux jours* (*Happy Days*) in 1962. Though clearly not her usual type of role, her performance was universally praised by critics, and she became etched into Beckett's mind as "the supreme embodiment of Winnie." (Damned 454) His fondness for Renaud lessened after her 1975 *Pas moi* (*Not I*) and refused to allow her to premier *Berceuse* (*Rockaby*) in Paris. (Knowlson 605)

³⁹ Whitelaw 128.

⁴⁰ Whitelaw 132.

⁴¹ Whitelaw 132.

⁴² Knowlson 529.
feelings of insecurity and inferiority to overconfidence and arrogance. She started refusing work because she felt she was too good for it, and fully admitted to having accepted work because it paid well, became ashamed of it, and publicly scorned it.\textsuperscript{43} This struggle between humility and hubris had haunted Whitelaw since her work with Beckett; she had to solve the problem of being an actress who needed to work yet, simultaneously, was the "mouthpiece of the greatest playwright of the twentieth century." The amount of jobs available for Beckett pieces was limited, though highly publicized, which weighed heavily on the actress. Though \textit{Not I} marked the beginning of the impenetrable trust between playwright and his muse, it also marked the beginning of many of Whitelaw's personal and professional struggles as well. She has said, "...when I come to think and write about \textit{Not I}, I am not only filled with pride, but also some shame."\textsuperscript{44}

Whitelaw's role as the most important Beckettian actress both narrowed and widened her influence and opportunity, beginning with \textit{Not I}. Though she was viewed as "Mrs. Beckett" in the eyes of her closest friends, she understood this title to be both out of respect and distain.\textsuperscript{45} Friends greet Whitelaw, knowing she to be the "lady Samuel Beckett wanted in his plays," but also understanding that with that title comes a complete identity shift. Although she did turn down some important work after \textit{Not I} due to questioning her place in the theatre, she has since accepted many chances throughout her career and has never been at a loss for work. Strangely enough, however, she has yet to become a household name, even after roles in popular films such as \textit{The Omen} (1976),

\textsuperscript{43} Whitelaw 133.

\textsuperscript{44} Whitelaw 132.

\textsuperscript{45} Whitelaw 133.
The Secret Garden (1987), and The Krays (1990). She is still known to most as the Beckettian actress who would do anything for the playwright, including trusting him with her acting career.

Whitelaw’s understanding of acting and her place in a Beckett work grew throughout Not I, and only increased throughout the next several years with his works. She explains in her autobiography, “You simply allow your own core to make contact with what comes off the page. Eventually everything then falls into place, the material takes off on its own. If you allow the words to breathe through your body, if you become a conduit, something magical may happen.” Although she admits to sometimes enjoying “acting” Beckett’s words, she understood that was precisely what he did not want. He was striving for some unconscious center, with the actor resisting all efforts to impose herself upon the text. She describes the process as “a bit like painting. It starts to take on a life of its own. My main job is to keep out of the way of the life that it starts to have.” Her core acting beliefs seemed to always focus on Beckett’s favorite direction, “Too much color!”

Billie Whitelaw had her next chance to work with Beckett in 1976 on Footfalls. He wrote this piece specifically for her, and subsequently also requested to direct it himself. In his letters to her leading up to the announcement of his new piece he wrote,

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46 Whitelaw 254.
47 Whitelaw 120.
48 Whitelaw 120.
49 Gussow Conversations, 85.
50 Whitelaw 120.
“I have a little play for you that I’d like to put in your fair hand (11.3.75),” and “Dear Billie, [Footfalls is] Yours only if you like it and want it (2.10.76).” Footfalls is a play for one woman pacing seven (or nine, depending on the size of the stage) steps along a strip on the stage, speaking to her mother, a disembodied voice. After receiving the script, Whitelaw felt she must meet Beckett in person to discuss the tempo. They met in a Paris bistro soon after, and Beckett paced out the seven steps of stage direction between the tables in the restaurant, explaining, “the movement is most important, the way you hold your body.” It was immediately obvious to Whitelaw that he was interested in something other than the text; it was more about the posture of the character turning slowly inward.

It was during this first rehearsal that Whitelaw said she realized why Beckett wrote such incredibly detailed stage directions, “He did this in the hope that his intentions concerning the staging of a piece should be absolutely clear.” She is horrified that, “Now that he’s dead, some directors feel all that can be disregarded.” Specifically, she has spoken out against both the famous JoAnne Akalaitis Endgame, and the 2001 Deborah Warner Footfalls. She has taken this one step further in her University “chatterbox sessions” detailed later in this chapter. By teaching students what she and Beckett did in creating the definitive versions of his plays, she sought to instill the

51 Whitelaw 139.
52 Whitelaw 141.
53 Whitelaw 141.
54 Whitelaw 141.
55 See Chapter 2: Alan Schneider: Samuel Beckett’s Loyal Disciple
importance of his stage directions, and the significance of the gift of his own direction of his plays. The actress trusted Beckett’s direction completely, only asking one question throughout the whole process: “Am I dead?” Beckett’s reply was short, “Well, let’s just say you’re not quite there.” Beckett’s authority did not, however, stifle Whitelaw’s own instincts. She used her beliefs that one cannot exist in one moment and be dead the next; there must be a sort of passage or transfiguration where the body must grasp the message that it is dead, which is an idea she used in the play. She never discussed this with Beckett, however.

Footfalls was performed at the Royal Court with Jocelyn Herbert as designer. She created an extraordinary costume; it was truly the perfect example of Beckett’s dictated “faint tangle of pale grey tatters.” This production also marked the first time Beckett would direct Whitelaw. This new relationship allowed the actress to experience Beckett’s vision first-hand. “Sometimes I felt as if he were a sculptor and I a piece of clay. At other times I might be a piece of marble that he needed to chip away at. He would endlessly move my arms and my head in a certain way, to get closer to the precise image in his mind. I didn’t object to him doing this. As this went on, hour after hour, I could feel the ‘shape’ taking on a life of its own. Sometimes it felt as if I were modeling

56 Beckett, in September 1935, attended a lecture at the Tavistock Clinic, London. At this lecture, the psychologist Carl Jung told a story of a ten year old girl who died because “she had never been born entirely.” The girl’s fatal problem was that she remained in her own private world, failing to develop personal intimacies and social relations. Beckett used this analogy and description in many of his works, including All That Fall, Molloy, Not I, and, most famously, Footfalls. (Jeffers 91) See also Paul Lawley’s “The Difficult Birth” in Robin Davis’ Make Sense Who May.

57 Whitelaw 143.

58 Beckett Shorts, 239.
for a painter, or working with a musician. The movements started to feel like dance.”
One of the most important points that arose from this process was that Whitelaw began to feel like “an extension of his hands.” It excited both of them to be working on *Footfalls* together, and creating something so definitive and specific; Beckett was obviously energized by directing on his own, as he was not involved in conflict with anyone. This piece, though Whitelaw admits to not understanding it “academically” but, instead, “emotionally,” had a great effect on people. Martin Esslin wrote: “There is usually some image in a Beckett play that one takes out of the theatre, and which remains with one for the rest of one’s life. With *Footfalls*, the image of a tangle of grey tatters, gradually vanishing, had an extraordinary effect on people.”

The next Beckett piece Whitelaw tackled was *Happy Days*, produced two years later in the summer of 1979. This reunited the group at the Royal Court, including Jocelyn Herbert as designer, Robbie Hendry as stage manager, and Beckett as director. *Happy Days* is one of Beckett’s longer pieces. It calls for the actress, as the character Winnie, to be buried up to her waist in earth in the first act, and up to the neck in the second, while her husband, Willie, sits behind the mound reading a newspaper. Whitelaw spent three months learning the two hours of dialogue, during which she came to the realization that *Happy Days* was about her own life. This was, of course, realistically impossible, as *Happy Days* had been written well before Beckett had been

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59 Whitelaw 144.
60 Whitelaw 145.
61 Whitelaw 147.
62 Ben-Zvi 5.
introduced to Whitelaw, but she made the connection that Winnie reminded her entirely of herself. This was a feeling she would revisit throughout her future work on Beckett texts. This personalization of the character and text unfortunately did not help her memorize the lengthy dialogue, and she struggled until opening night. Her work with Beckett began well, with the two of them conducting one another, face to face. This was fitting, as Sam described the play as “a sonata for voice and movement,” meaning that everything was precisely timed like a musical score, the props, texts, and actions.

Gradually, though, because of the very preciseness of his detailed direction, and the fact that Beckett began to rewrite some of the dialogue, Whitelaw had the feeling of “rolling backwards.” Frustration set in; though, not surprisingly, she was the third actress Beckett had worked with on Happy Days who felt similarly aggrieved. Whitelaw called Dame Peggy Ashcroft, who had performed the same play in 1974 and expressed her concern. Ashcroft replied with “You’ve got to ask him to leave, dear. He’s impossible. Throw him out.” Though this was the last thing Whitelaw wanted to do; she and Robbie agreed that forty-eight hours simply working on the text without Beckett

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63 Knowing from past experience how meticulous Beckett was, Whitelaw had learned her lines before rehearsals began. Unfortunately, Beckett then made many small changes in the script, adding to its recurrent verbal patterns. For example, “And now” for “What now,” “talk” for “speak,” and “Ah well” for “Oh well.” Beckett was no less meticulous in enforcing these “important” new changes. (Knowlson 579)

64 Whitelaw 151.

65 Dame Peggy Ashcroft was only too familiar with the difficulties of working with Beckett. Ashcroft played Winnie at the National Theatre in London, directed by Peter Hall during the autumn of 1974. Beckett was present for most of the rehearsals and, as expected, clashed with the strong personality of Dame Peggy. Beckett was frustrated and impatient with the actress’ reluctance to follow his suggestions, and Ashcroft found Beckett unwilling to appreciate the problems of an actress trying to come to terms with memorizing and interpreting his text. Although Beckett admired her, Beckett never felt that Ashcroft was really suited to this role. (Knowlson 534)

66 Whitelaw 152.
would help. Beckett “tried to seem unconcerned” as he agreed to the separation, though Whitelaw “felt [her] heart was going to break.”\textsuperscript{67} When they reunited, however, the actress felt energized and Beckett understood the importance of the hiatus. Even in the most ideal of working relationships, sometimes a break is needed. Beckett confided to Whitelaw more than once during this time that “I’m not going to work in the theatre any more; I haven’t got the energy for it.”\textsuperscript{68} Whitelaw thought that Beckett found directing \textit{Happy Days} a strain, and believed that it depressed him that, like every other actress who had ever attempted Winnie she, too, had become distressed during rehearsals. She worried that she had made him feel that he had failed as a director, as even he could not work ideally with his ideal actress. However, as we have seen, Beckett did not leave the theatre world. \textit{Happy Days} had a short run, but was well-received. Unfortunately, it was the final time Beckett directed Billie Whitelaw.\textsuperscript{69}

In 1980, Whitelaw received a call from the University of Buffalo asking her to appear in \textit{Rockaby}, a new Beckett play written by request from Daniel Labeille, head of the Drama Faculty in Buffalo. Beckett had given this project his immediate blessing, largely because two of his favorite people were involved, Alan Schneider and Billie Whitelaw. Schneider was signed on to direct the piece, and D.A. Pennebaker and wife Chris Hegedus\textsuperscript{70} were assigned to document the process of creating a Beckett production.

\textsuperscript{67} Whitelaw 153.

\textsuperscript{68} Whitelaw 155.

\textsuperscript{69} Knowlson 586.

\textsuperscript{70} Donn Alan Pennebaker has spent his long career documenting the worlds of music, politics, theatre, and literature. He has filmed popular culture greats such as Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, Stephen Sondheim, Germaine Greer, John Lennon, David Bowie, and JFK. Some of his greatest works include \textit{John Lennon and the Plastic Ono Band} (1969), \textit{Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars} (1973) and \textit{Down From the
It became immediately apparent to Whitelaw that this documentary was a main draw for the financial supporters of the production. However, she understood the importance of the venture, as this was to be the first full examination of the creation of a new work by Samuel Beckett, starring none other than his favorite actress and director. Pennebaker, along with his wife and sound technician, Chris Hegedus, filmed every moment of rehearsal from the first read-through the London run at the Aldwyck Theatre. When the performance moved to Buffalo, Pennebaker filmed the opening night in Buffalo as the climax of his film.

A few months after the Buffalo premier of Rockaby, Schneider and Whitelaw were asked to perform Rockaby and the short prose Enough at the National Theatre. Sam arrived from Paris to help with the production, rehearsing over the phone with Whitelaw and detailing the technical aspects with Schneider. After receiving rave reviews in London, Schneider asked Whitelaw to add Footfalls to the evening of plays and revive them in New York City a few years later, where a new theatre was to be built. She would christen it the Samuel Beckett Theatre. After a chaotic launch on February 16, 1984, Whitelaw won over the hearts of every New York critic that attended, including the “butcher of Broadway,” Frank Rich, who wrote “It’s possible that you haven’t really

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Mountain (2000). In 1977, he began collaborating with Chris Hegedus, who later became his wife, together produced documentaries such as The Energy War (1977), Town Bloody Hall (1977), and The War Room (1994).

71 Whitelaw 175.

72 Knowlson 584.

73 Whitelaw 148.
lived until you’ve watched Billie Whitelaw die....”74 Schneider wrote to Beckett shortly afterward, “The main thing is that Billie was just splendid, like a piece of exquisite music, and the evening is a total triumph for her—and you....”75

The response to the trilogy of Beckett pieces was overwhelming, most of all for the British actress not acclimatized to a New York success. Schneider noted in a letter to Beckett, “The Rockaby evening is the most sought-after theatre event of the season. All hell is breaking loose. We are selling out at the Samuel Beckett Theatre, turning away hundreds on weekends. We are the talk of the town, and Billie has been absolutely besieged by newspaper and TV people; she has had hardly a moment to herself.”76 Virtually unknown in New York prior to this spectacular event, Whitelaw received accolades from critics, directors, and actors from all over the States. Jack Kroll’s review is just one example of the impression she made, a “remarkable actress who [brought] all three pieces to life/death...who has become the voice, the body, the soul of Sam Beckett. Whitelaw developed her performance in what has become a symbiotic relationship with Beckett. [...] She has become the personal extension of Beckett, his onstage alter ego....”77 After the remarkable performances and outstanding reviews she was, and still is, considered the embodiment of Beckett in most American theatre circles.

74 Whitelaw 190.
75 Harmon 469.
76 Harmon 471.
When Beckett passed away just before Christmas in 1989, Billie described it as an "amputation." She had not fully prepared herself for the large hole that his death would leave in her life, and gradually realized that "a whole era in theatre seemed suddenly to have ended." She contributed to the Beckett memorials in London, Paris and New York, by reading bits of *Footfalls* and *Rockaby*, joined by Jocelyn Herbert, Barry McGovern, Peggy Ashcroft, and Harold Pinter, among others.

Since Beckett's death, Whitelaw has refused to perform his pieces, citing only that it would be too painful for her. She has devoted her life to her "chatterbox" sessions, lecture-like talkbacks in American Universities where she discusses Beckett, his works, and her relationship with him. This has evolved into "An informal evening with Samuel Beckett," a one-woman session made up of a selection of her work with Beckett, linked with anecdotes and stories of their preparations and rehearsals. She has performed this show for charity and at colleges all over the world. She hopes to bring clarity to the process of working on a Beckett piece and understanding of the importance of her work with him.

Becoming Beckett's muse had its drawbacks, however. Whitelaw suffered many health problems throughout her life, most of which can be directly correlated to working on one of Beckett's plays. Because of the "dinosaur-like" pose Beckett envisioned in

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78 Whitelaw 239.
79 Whitelaw 241.
80 Whitelaw 246.
81 Whitelaw 244.
Footfalls, her spine began to curve, a condition that has only worsened throughout time.\textsuperscript{82} During Not I, her lower back and neck began to spasm because of the tense, motionless pose necessary for the performance. She attributes the chronic dryness of her eyes to her rehearsals of Rockaby, where the script dictated that it was necessary for her to keep her eyes open for long periods of time. She complied with each of his requests, however, with no thought for her health or future complications. At a lecture in Boston, someone shouted out, in genuine curiosity and anger, “Why in God’s name did you put yourself through all that?” Whitelaw answered “If, as an actress, I’m going to wreck my health, I’d rather do it working for a genius than do it all through drink or drugs, or being eaten up and spat out by Hollywood….”\textsuperscript{83} She has also said “He knew I would walk over red hot coals to try to help him fulfill his vision. […] There are some things I will never, ever be able to do again, but I think it has been worth it.”\textsuperscript{84} Her willingness to do everything in her power to meet with Beckett’s approval is the stuff of enduring fascination.

She has also become quite an advocate for the preservation of his works. She has maintained her view that Beckett’s works should not be changed, Beckett did not write [his plays] as experiments for actors. “The plays were, in themselves, experimental. He wanted them to be done as he wrote them. To him, the speaking of the lines was only a small part of the whole work. If you throw out his detailed stage directions, you lose the play. An actor and director should have faith in what is on the page, and that comprises

\textsuperscript{82} Whitelaw 147.


\textsuperscript{84} Crew 2.
both the text and stage directions.” Billie also noticed that, in Beckett’s later pieces, he was beginning to involve himself in more than just words for actors. He was becoming more and more specific regarding position, atmosphere, and action. She feared that this important visual aspect may fall by the wayside in future productions.

In the summer of 1999, Whitelaw agreed to perform for one night “An Evening with Samuel Beckett,” a compilation that evolved from lecturing at American campuses. She appeared at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London as part of Nick Cave’s Meltdown Festival on the South Bank, an event that stretched from June 17-July 2. This marked the first time she put herself in front of a London audience in since 1987, and also the first time she had read Beckett’s words to an audience since his death in 1989. Dominic Cavendish met with her at her home a few days before her performance on June 27, and was able to witness her preparation process first-hand. As she moved through a scene from *Eh Joe*, she stopped, saying “Oh, Lord, I’m going to have to get on with this if I’m going to get it right on Sunday. I must do it as near as possible to the way he wanted.” Cavendish recalled “you get the impression of a faithful servant tiptoeing round the genius of her master, anxious to avoid his groans of displeasure.” However, it did feel

85 Whitelaw 147.

86 Whitelaw 227.

87 Britain’s Meltdown Festival on the South Bank gives a celebrity guest director a chance to produce his or her own fantasy festival, mixing artists and art forms and reflecting their own personal passions and interests. It began in 1993 and has had such artistic directors as David Bowie, Lee Perry, and Laurie Anderson.


89 Cavendish 11.

90 Cavendish 11.
like a collaborative relationship for Whitelaw, and she seemed eager to express it; “for
the first time, [she] felt part of the creative process.”

The night consisted of a screening of her film version of Not I, anecdotes
regarding her working relationship with Beckett, and a few acted scenes from Footfalls,
Happy Days, and Eh Joe. Reviews were electrifying, as many critics felt honored to be
in the presence of someone so connected and dedicated to her teacher. Ian Shuttleworth
commented that the evening was “on the one hand endearingly scatty and informal, and
the other the definitive Beckett actress.” Another review by John Thaxter lamented,
“An evening is scarcely enough to encompass Whitelaw’s 25 years as Beckett’s favorite
actress and muse” and concluded “It takes genius to breathe life and death into
[Beckett’s] minimal words and Whitelaw remains that genius.” The single night on the
South Bank had an intense effect on Whitelaw’s place in the Beckett world. It solidified
her position as the definitive interpreter of his works, and reminded the theatre world that
her body of work with Beckett has provided an invaluable resource to theatrical
practitioners, critics, and researchers alike.

The remaining question is, why did Billie Whitelaw make the quintessential
Beckett muse? To ask her, she claims that her lack of formal training and education
prepared the blank slate Beckett needed to fully embody his works. “The reason that Sam
and I got on so well together was I don’t know the rules. I’ve got my own rules, but I
don’t know anybody else’s. Sam was—to put it mildly—a little more intelligent that I

91 Cavendish 11.
am, so I said to myself, ‘Pick his brains, Whitelaw.’”\textsuperscript{95} She was an organic actress in the purest sense, working with the raw emotions drawn from her own life and experiences. This understanding clearly represented Beckett’s own process, “…a mixture of painting, music, dance and sculpture. It was a whole different art form. I felt that we were working with smoke, or weaving a sweater out of cobwebs.”\textsuperscript{96}

From a director’s standpoint, Beckett’s plays require little mise-en-scène and more solving of a series of practical problems. Beckett addresses the actor directly and inhibits the unnecessary theatricalization of the text, which places full responsibility on the actor and leaves little for the director’s imagining.\textsuperscript{97} Beckett’s plays also lack a stable indication of character, mood, emotional register, and the information from which these may be inferred. In many cases, as in \textit{Not I} and \textit{Eh Joe}, the actor’s instrument, his body, is literally disabled throughout. Beckett demands an almost mathematical precision and discourages naturalistic acting and emotional subtly. Whitelaw was malleable material for the requirements of a Beckett piece, if not for her lack of formal instruction in traditional acting, then for her excitement and willingness to be molded.\textsuperscript{98}

Even though Beckett’s demands on Whitelaw could be considered “tyrannical,” she responded willingly, with a confident sense that he knew exactly what he wanted and she could give it to him. She “just accepted totally what he said and what he wanted. I

\textsuperscript{95} Crew 2.

\textsuperscript{96} Gussow 9.


\textsuperscript{98} Cronin 551.
had total, absolute respect for his vision, which was obviously far better than mine.”

She had always had a great need for a serious, strong director, and doesn’t appreciate one who lets actors “find their own way” or joke around during rehearsals. This also made her a good candidate for a respectable and vital Samuel Beckett actor. Her devotion to Beckett throughout even the most trying pieces, such as Not I and Happy Days further exemplifies the solid working relationship between the two, as Whitelaw simply followed his lead. “All I can do is to draw on my own early experience of life, my childhood, my remembrance of loss, of fear, of death. That’s all acting has ever been for me- the digging up of personal feelings, of experiences I’d rather not have had. […] Perhaps that is why I got on so well with Samuel Beckett: I always understood the feelings he wanted to convey, even when I didn’t understand the words.”

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99 Crew 2.

100 Whitelaw 196.

101 Whitelaw 47.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

"Beckett didn’t write [his plays] for actors to ‘experiment’ with. The plays were, in themselves, experimental. He wanted them to be done as he wrote them. To him, the speaking of the lines was only a small part of the whole work. If you throw out his detailed stage directions, you lose the play. An actor and director should have faith in what’s on the page, and that comprises both the text and stage directions.”
—Billie Whitelaw

As shown above, the public stereotype of Samuel Beckett as the perfectionist Irishman is inaccurate. The true image should bring to mind a collaborator and friend who was willing to adjust for the sake of directors and performers. This is not to say that Samuel Beckett allowed anyone to perform his productions in the way they saw fit; it is obvious that he had much to say on the subject. However, the image of Beckett as arch-controller of his work is incorrect; he would allow changes when necessary, and allowed friends the opportunity of trying new things with his work.

Although the playwright-director debate rages on, Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider enjoyed a close working relationship. The productions shaped as a result of this collaboration, taking place through multiple letters, phone calls, and trans-Atlantic travels, are true treasures of theatre history. Thanks to the hundreds of letters saved by

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Schneider, we have detailed descriptions of Beckett’s intentions and vision. Through these, the esoteric and seemingly unapproachable works are made concrete.

Billie Whitelaw was a rare find for any playwright, as an actress who not only inspired, but did everything in her power to transform the original vision into physical action. This was particularly important for Beckett, who grasped the imperative connection between text and physical manifestation immediately as he put pen to paper. The relationship between Beckett and Whitelaw allowed the playwright to fully express himself and present his plays as closely to what he intended as possible.

Contrary to what is agreed upon by most Beckett enthusiasts, Samuel Beckett’s works should be creatively reinvented by today’s directors. I do not agree that by interpreting them we destroy the original intention. As a director, I understand the importance of connecting personally with a play and highlighting specific areas of a production the director finds particularly poignant. However, I do not believe that attempting to recreate the original vision of the playwright turns Samuel Beckett into a museum piece. On the contrary, I believe it is an honoring practice I hope will be taught to future generations. Through the dedicated works of Alan Schneider and Billie Whitelaw, we have extensive information regarding Beckett’s performances. Knowing we have the documentation and research available to grasp almost entirely what the playwright intended, we should be delighted with the ability to recreate a piece of theatre history today.
APPENDIX

JOCELYN HERBERT: SAMUEL BECKETT’S CHIEF DESIGNER

Jocelyn Herbert is generally considered Samuel Beckett’s foremost theatre designer. Herbert joined George Devine’s English Stage Company at The Royal Court in 1956 and designed her first production, Ionesco’s The Chairs, the following year. The Court became well known for giving new works a stage, and became a home for a new generation of writers.

She first collaborated with Samuel Beckett on the English language premier of Endgame (1957) directed by Roger Blin. Jacque Noel was hired to design the set, and Herbert was in charge of dressing the set. This was her first experience with the works of Beckett, yet even then she respected the importance of his stage directions.¹ Her next work with Beckett was Krapp’s Last Tape the next year, directed by Donald McWhinnie and George Devine. As the world premiere, she was determined to get it as close to Beckett’s vision as possible. For example, her original design for Krapp’s costume was very clown-like and, through discussion with Beckett, she morphed it into an “old man in raggedy clothes.”²

² Herbert 29.
She then moved on to design *Happy Days*, once in 1962 with Brenda Bruce and then again in 1979 with Billie Whitelaw. During the 1962 production, her major problems were the coloring of the sky and mound. The stage directions call for an “expanse of scorched grass rising centre to low mound. Gentle slopes down to front and either side of stage. Back an abrupt fall to stage level. Blazing light. Azure sky.” ³ She wasn’t happy with her original designs with a blue sky and yellow mound, and sent Beckett a design with an orange sky and yellow mound. He loved it, and from then on *Happy Days* was done with an orange sky.⁴ In 1962, Herbert concentrated more on the shape of the mound and concluded that her original design was too simple, but her final was too complex.

The first and only play she designed for Beckett at the National Theatre was *Play*, directed by George Devine in 1964. This was her first experience with Billie Whitelaw as well. Stage directions indicate “The play requires the three actors’ heads to appear at the top of identical grey urns.”⁵ Her main difficulties were finalizing the shape and texture of the urns. Herbert maintained her loyalty to Beckett’s vision, and the play was a tremendous success.

The next Beckett play she designed was *Come and Go* in 1970, and then *Not I* in 1973. *Not I*, though simply a mouth upstage and a hooded figure downstage, caused Herbert more trouble than any of her past collaborations with Beckett. Herbert’s main problem was finding a way to black Billie Whitelaw’s face and light her mouth only.


⁴ Herbert 54.

(For a full description of the final design with Whitelaw, please see Chapter Three.) Herbert's next work with Beckett also included Whitelaw in 1976 with *Footfalls*. The most important design element was the figure's dress, as the shape, color, and noise it made were all central images to the script. It took weeks to build the costume, beginning with an old lace evening dress and lacy net curtains. She dyed them different grays and added layers of taffeta to perfect the swishing noise. Beckett recalls that it was Herbert, not he, who had taken the details to the next level, "I remember the trouble she took over the costume for *Footfalls*. It seemed all right to me, but she still found details that were wrong. She took endless pains to get it right. She has great feeling for the work and is very sensitive and doesn't want to bang the nail on the head."  

*Footfalls* was the last time she worked on a Beckett piece, but her imprint on theatre history is still strongly felt today. Her work with and relationship to Beckett has provided us with countless definitive designs. Beckett was "always very happy when I was working with Jocelyn and [doesn't] remember any reserve on her part; she was wholeheartedly in harmony and [he] was lucky to have her." Billie Whitelaw also had a great love and respect for Herbert, and has said, "Jocelyn's presence in rehearsals has always been tremendously important."  

Herbert herself had a respect for Beckett's work, and realized the importance of creating the "definitive" work, and preserving it. In her book, *Jocelyn Herbert: A*

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6 Herbert 106.

7 Herbert 219.

8 Herbert 221.

9 Herbert 222.
Theatre Workbook, she wrote, "The things Sam Beckett has written are amazingly varied. He has such a specific feeling about the rhythm of his works and the pauses, it's all so musically orientated. Fewer and fewer people have seen the old productions and they don't know how to do them as he intended - or worse still, they don't want to do them as he intended."\textsuperscript{10} Because of Herbert, we have designs as he "intended" them to be, and a history of a strong relationship between a great playwright and his talented designer.
ABBREVIATIONS


---. "They’re playing it a different way, Sam: Beckett’s *Footfalls* at the centre of a theatrical storm." *The Vancouver Province*, final ed. 2 April 1994: D4.


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