

Love, Death and the Author:

Samuel Beckett at the 2006 Sydney Writers' Festival

Will Noonan

It has been a good couple of years for literary anniversaries, and this year's Samuel Beckett centenary seems an appropriate coda to four centuries of *Don Quixote* in 2005, and the hundredth Bloomsday of 2004. Celebrations have included a raft of conferences on every conceivable Beckettian theme, demonstrating, if nothing else, that the end of literature is very much alive and kicking. It thus comes as no surprise to see the author appear—posthumously—as a star attraction of the 2006 Sydney Writers' Festival.

The SWF programme reflects Beckett's influence in literature and drama of the last half-century, with events including a lecture by contemporary Irish heavyweight John Banville, and discussion panels on topics ranging from "Beckett's process of writing" to "Adaptation." But the main attraction (an entity constantly and unsuccessfully sought by the characters of *Waiting for Godot*) was the "world stage première" of *First Love*, a one-man, one-act play co-produced by the SWF and the Writing and Society Research Group at the University of Western Sydney.

Directed by Walter Asmus and performed by Lawrence Held (both veterans of productions under Beckett's own direction), *First Love* adapts a short prose monologue originally written as *Premier amour* in 1946 and translated into English by the author.¹ The text is framed as a retrospective, first-person account of a long-ago love affair with a Beckettian twist ("Yes, I loved her, it's the name I gave, still give alas, to what I was doing then," 34), and offers a catalogue of familiar themes, from fractured relationships and linguistic and epistemological anxiety, to the tragicomedy of love and death (25):

I associate, rightly or wrongly, my marriage with the death of my father, in time. That other links exist, on other levels, between these two affairs, is not impossible. I have enough trouble as it is in trying to say what I think I know.

Held's forty-five minute performance is given verbatim, deadpan and with minimal inflection or movement. The main impression generated is in line with the

standard perception of Beckett as a playwright who is nothing if not undramatic: the entire action of the play is taken up by narrative, and the unnamed speaker's account of his sexual experiences ("One shudders to think of her exertions," 42) displays a sustained and often comical tendency towards entropy. The stage adaptation does not entirely do justice to the richness of the printed text, as the stop-and-ponder effect of Beckett's puns ("I used the word marriage, it was a kind of union in spite of all," 45), Gallicisms ("I'll treat of my hat some other time perhaps," 40) and other language games is mostly lost in the delivery.

The stage (deep and black with a park bench, dead leaves, a garbage bin, a junk-filled pram and a speaking tramp) combines elements of the setting described at the beginning of the story with visual cues from *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. The impression is very much one of classic Beckett, the only obvious aberration being the presence of a wood-slatted, plastic-lined streetside bin straight from Australian suburbia. Despite the occasionally confronting self-consciousness of the text ("I abandoned the bench...for other reasons better not wasted on cunts like you," 33), the stage version seems unable to shake off the genteel shackles of the Sydney Writers' Festival. Given the background of both actor and director (and Asmus is described twice in the programme notes as "the greatest living exponent of Beckett's theatrical work") the sense of orthodoxy is hardly surprising. This does, however, seem rather ironic considering the subject matter. While *First Love* is billed as a new production, it is perhaps better seen as a eulogy to Beckett's theatre than as a work in any way representative of the author's role in revolutionising twentieth-century drama.

Arguably, the most interesting aspect of this production is its attempt to place a new adaptation within the context of a theatrical oeuvre that is both well established and jealously guarded by Beckett's literary executors. But this also begs the question of Asmus and Held's involvement: whether or not *First Love* was really (as the programme states) "conceived by Beckett as a cross-over from prose to theatre," one might well ask whether prior collaborations with the author constitute any claim to interpretative exclusivity.

An answer of sorts appeared two days later in the festival programme, in a discussion forum entitled "Remembering Beckett, Performing *Godot*." The panel (comprising Held, Asmus and University of Melbourne Emeritus Professor Colin Duckworth, and chaired by UWS academic Anthony Uhlmann) seemed mainly concerned with upholding a "classic" Beckett, a strategy much acclaimed among a

mostly-superannuated audience given to the whispered leitmotiv “Shh!...we’re in a salon.” The irony of setting versus subject matter was again confirmed by Duckworth’s rendition of a 1960s encounter (in Beckett’s Parisian living room, no less) with the *Godot* manuscripts: ““People are bloody ignorant apes’ – and it’s even ruder in the French!” Perhaps inevitably, discussion turned to tut-tutting about the controversy surrounding the 2003 Belvoir St production of *Waiting for Godot* and its unauthorised musical interlude: save for a whimper of protest from Held (“I do think these plays need to be strong enough to stand up to different treatments”), all seemed to approve of the Beckett Estate’s decision to squash the upstart elements after the first performance.

It is difficult not to sense a note of hypocrisy here, and hard to understand why the stage adaptation of *First Love* should receive a treatment any different to any other producer, director, or actor’s attempt at interpretation. The notion of an “authorised” (or perhaps “anointed”) dramatic canon is particularly troubling in view of Beckett’s critical reception in both French and English: arguably, no writer has done more to further the postmodern “death of the author” and the rise of textuality. If the role of a writers’ festival is to promote emerging directions in literature, the attempt to control production of the works of an established author seems doubly incongruous. While a degree of homage may be appropriate for an author—dead or alive—upon his or her centenary, the nature of Beckett’s achievement belies the conservatism of many of his most eminent representatives.

¹ For the complete English text, see Samuel Beckett, “First Love,” in *Complete Short Prose*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 25-45. All page numbers cited refer to this text.