

THE YEAR OF BECKETT, FALL SEASON

by Christine Shives

December 5, 2006, Tuesday. In the midst of the Atlanta holiday season, as one scans and scrounges through the theater listings of local Atlanta papers, it is nearly impossible to find a show that is “non-holiday.” Both The Shakespeare Tavern’s *Troillus and Cressida* and Synchronicity Theater’s *Voices Underwater* closed this past weekend, and some Atlanta theater goers might find themselves tempted to forego the live experience for a few weeks and rent the first season of *Lost* on DVD, a desert island of dark strangers and bad mojo being perhaps the only rightful place for soulless scrooges who see the holiday season as a disruption to the theater season. However, before hanging it up and resolving to see more live theater in 2007, Collective Works, in partnership with Dad’s Garage Theatre Company, will offer us the bitter end, the final (and highly inappropriate) production associating itself with Atlanta’s *The Year of Beckett 2006*. This is a yearlong festival commemorating the 100th anniversary of the birth of playwright Samuel Beckett and celebrating the publication of the first volume of *The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett* (whose editorial offices are at Emory University).

The Spring 2006 portion of *The Year of Beckett* saw productions by various companies throughout Atlanta, its suburbs and the state of Georgia with PushPush Theater in Decatur and Emory University’s Correspondence offices being the hotbeds of activity and connecting points for artists and admirers of Beckett. The second half of *The Year* saw a few familiar faces and a small following of Beckettians managed to make it to the other side of summer with Beckett still on the brain, but the scope of the productions were considerably more concentrated, the “festival” finding itself distilled down to two production companies (Théâtre du Rêve and 7Stages) in one venue (7Stages theater in Little Five Points) over the course of about one month (from mid September to mid October). And so all is darkness with the exception of one pool of light focused on one Atlanta venue, and this Beckett festival becomes itself “Beckettian” as full stages are reduced to pools of light in vast void (compare spring’s *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days* to fall’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*, *Rockaby* and *Footfalls*.) And, finally, thanks to Steven Westdahl and the upcoming production of *The Complete Lost Works of Samuel Beckett as Found in a Dustbin in Paris in an Envelope (Partially Burned) Labeled: “Never to be Performed. Never. Ever. EVER! OR I’LL SUE! I’LL SUE FROM THE GRAVE!!!”* at Dad’s Garage (also in Little Five Points), the year will, after a “PAUSE.” in the second half of October and all of November, last a little longer than is comfortable and say a little more than it should...as well it should be.

Before launching into Théâtre du Rêve’s *Trois Pièces Courtes de Beckett* (September 29 through October 8), a brief introduction of the company is in order because the scenario in which these three pieces, *Catastrophe*, *Come and Go* and *Footfalls*, are seen holds as much interest as the production itself. Théâtre du Rêve is Atlanta’s French-language theatre founded by one of Atlanta’s favorite actresses, Carolyn Cook. The company produces a play each year, performed in French by some of Atlanta’s finest actors. In addition to evening performances for average Joe Francophiles, there are also several matinee perfor-

mances for high school groups studying French. The French classes come and see the performance and then Cook (now the Education Director of Théâtre du Rêve) and members of the cast share a talkback session in English with the students.

So it was deliberate when I chose my seat for *Trois Pièces Courtes de Beckett* that I sat at the centermost point I possibly could in 7Stages backspace. Students sprawled out from all sides around me, caught in varying states of anticipation or dread about the task at hand (watching a play in French), that response mingled with a greater apathy or preoccupation that follows every audience into a theater. Whether chatting or quietly waiting, sleeping or meditating, surely none of them can predict what they are about to experience. *Catastrophe* is met with some laughs and the general good feeling associated with the beginning of an event such as a play. Adam Fristoe (Co-Producing Artistic Director of Out of Hand Theatre) and Carolyn Cook play *Metteur en Scene* and *Assistante* with energy and precise timing, punctuated with sharp reactions and gestures, and they immediately have all of the crowd engaged: we are watching theater, we are listening to French language. This is so exciting. Theater is so exciting. It is even kind of funny. French is so exciting. And yet, it is a little disconcerting to look at this hairless guy in long underwear (Marc McPherson of PushPush's *Endgame*) standing on a pedestal on a stage behind Fristoe and Cook's animated exchanges. It is hard to imagine what it must be like to play the role of *Protagoniste* in *Catastrophe*, and yet it is impossible *not* to imagine it as you watch this figure with increasing awareness until the moment when he acknowledges that he is aware of you (or at least aware of "your" applause, your presence) when he lifts his head and the expressionless form reveals a face full of meaning. Marc, by the way, is more than happy to talk about what he undergoes as *Protagoniste*, grinning like a kid with a secret to tell in the talkbacks afterwards when students ask.

This brief piece eases us in as Beckett seems to make fun of himself or people like him or just the idea of theater in general, but the final moment is a look into emotional eyes, and from there we fall into the soul and psychology of Beckett's characters. When the scene ends, a drape descends in the back to suck in more of the light: ever darker as the plays go further inward. A bench is placed and lights come up on three women sitting: Flo, Ru and Vi. *Va et Vient* is not set in a clearly defined place or time and the language is vague about the exact situation of the women and is equally vague as to what they might be whispering to one another; however, there is something familiar enough about the situation that all of the student-audience are at this point telling themselves some story to make sense of the scene (as evidenced by the several interpretations, ranging from widowhood to disease to infidelity, offered by students during the talkbacks). Additionally, the simplicity of the language means everyone is still interacting as audience members *in French*. At this point, some of the lengthy pauses may have caused a few to fall by the wayside, but for the most part, everyone in the audience is missing school to be here; and difficult to "understand" or not, *Va et Vient* is visually beautiful and graceful, and Carolyn Cook, Park Krausen (Artistic Director of Théâtre du Rêve and Beckett returnee from *Not I* at PushPush) and Ariel DeMan (Managing Director of Théâtre du Rêve and Co-Producing Artistic Director of Out of Hand Theater) perform with elegance, physical and vocal. This is perhaps the most aesthetically pleasing of Beckett's short plays. Théâtre du Rêve has been kind to this audience thus far: the characters we have met are tinged with sadness, but in the most palatable way possible.

Then we are met with a sadness that may be deep enough to call it despair. Park Krausen takes the stage for part two of her season. In the spring, we watched her mouth deliver



a rant that would send anyone reeling when she performed *Not I* at PushPush Theater. For *Footfalls*, we see the full actress, disheveled and in a raggy old dress, evenly pacing a narrow shaft of light, prisoner to madness of a different kind, but no less horrifying to watch than the angry orifice. There is a story about a woman caring for her mother, a girl obsessed with pacing and the sound of footfalls, told three times, in three different ways until lights come up a fourth time to reveal she is gone completely. It really is hard to remember any specific passages or lines from this piece as the voices drone on and run into each, creating a rhythm with the feet hitting the stage at the same dull interval throughout. Cook and Krausen do noteworthy vocal work in this piece, both of them really locking in to a vocal style that is unique and hard enough for one person to find and perform consistently, much less two people to build together. It is toneless without being flat. Droning without becoming lifeless. It is no wonder the company invited longtime Beckett director Walter Asmus (in town to direct 7Stages' *Beckett's Memories*) to work on this piece.

As for the students, they make it through all three versions of the story, but applaud through the fourth, light-on-empty-stage portion of the show. We are all proud of ourselves for sitting through a difficult piece. We are applauding ourselves as much as we are applauding Théâtre du Rêve or Beckett. We are all grateful Théâtre du Rêve chose to present *Footfalls* in English. (Afterwards, few students are willing to brave a discussion over this one although some can relate to the idea of caring for an aging relative and latch onto that aspect of the piece.) And then the company of Théâtre du Rêve guide us back out of the dark heart of Beckett and into the light again, going through *Come and Go* and *Catastrophe* in English and leaving the stage set to begin the whole cycle again: complements for structuring their production of Beckett shorts in a Beckettian style.

Running during the same time period in 7Stages' main space was 7Stages' own production of *Beckett's Memories* (September 14–October 8), which included *Rockaby* followed by an intermission and then *Krapp's Last Tape*, both directed by the world-renowned director of Beckett, Walter Asmus. The character in each of these pieces is an aging figure, each inhabiting a pool of light on stage, surrounded in darkness, each waits for death while remembering, or struggling to remember.

Rockaby featured Martha Fehsenfeld as Woman. Fehsenfeld is one of the women (along with Lois Overbeck) who have been editing the Beckett letters for the Cambridge University Press. She has observed Beckett directing in London, performed herself in productions of *Happy Days* and *Footfalls* and is what we might call “an expert in the field.” And so watching this legend of Atlanta's avid Beckett following sit down to *Rockaby* seemed momentous just reading about it. Here faithfulness to the letter of the text are vital as it is a story slowly told, a story that gradually descends into itself as the woman in the story sinks more into her own world, sinks down into her chair, as the lights dim and dim and dim, as her eyes open less and less frequently, as the chair rocks more and more slowly. It is a role that demands close study for successful execution. Fehsenfeld and director Asmus are a natural pairing for the task, and the play does not lose its intensity or get trapped in the dullness that can manifest from a lazier slowness than Beckett's *Rockaby* demands. Add to this formula the work of lighting designer Jessica Cole, and a delicate tale is told that captures the breath of a dying body. In the words of one blogger from the 7Stages website (www.7stages.org), “in *Rockaby* the way the lighting comes from off stage rather than over head or straight on created an almost dreamlike effect”; this can be attributed to the lovely interaction between the sequined

dress from costume designer Johanna Schmink (this style of dress is called for in the text) and Cole's simple, yet precise lighting design.

In *Krapp's Last Tape* we meet a male counterpart to the *Woman of Rockaby*, with 7Stages artistic director and experienced Beckett actor, Del Hamilton, playing Krapp. Krapp is an old man who has sat down at his desk, listening to old reel-to-reel tapes of himself before making a new, recorded diary entry. Thus a great deal of our time as audience is spent listening--and watching Krapp listening. Thanks to the bit with the banana peel in the beginning and Hamilton's giggle-inducing revelry in the word "spool" (as scripted), we go into this endeavor confident that Hamilton/Krapp's reactions are worth the watching, and they prove to be so throughout. Hamilton's Krapp makes for an engaging host on this journey into his memory. Perhaps just listening to or reading these journal entries would not induce as great a sympathy were we not watching the maker of those memories as he delights in, feels ashamed by, agonizes over and longs for those past moments. Isolated under a hanging light on a vast black stage the words of scattered recordings illuminate a few memories. One entry in particular, about a girl and a boat, stands out. In the cycling of the tape I can hear the lively breeze, in the swaying of that sad and solitary lamp overhead, I feel the rocking of the boat. These are works that require the utmost concentration to achieve the deeply personal impact for which Samuel Beckett is known.

And finally, when it seems like all should be said and done for *The Year of Beckett*, it is not. December 8 through 16 in Dad's "Top Shelf" space (a smaller venue devoted to the Edgy, the Bizarre and the Low-budget) *Collective Works* and Dad's Garage Theatre Company will present *The Complete Lost Works of Samuel Beckett...* Originally co-produced by The NeoFuturists and Theater Oobleck, *Lost Works* caught the attention of Emory graduate and Beckett-head Steven Westdahl when he performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival several years ago. This evening of short works is the supposed lost works of Samuel Beckett, ostensibly found in an envelope in Paris. Throughout the evening of supposed short Beckett pieces, the cast receives several supposed letters from the Beckett estate and even a visit from Beckett's ghost, demanding that the company "cease and desist" this offensive and unapproved production. The first piece (*Table Talk*) greets us with the stage picture of a man holding up a table where two legs are missing from one end. The man does not speak, but on the table is a brain in a jar that *does* speak, incessantly. The catch, Beckett-style, comes when the man needs to relieve himself (having earlier drank some water on the brain's insistence), perhaps an homage to Beckett's *Endgame*. The evening includes parodies of *Not I* called *Not Me*, *Rockaby (If)*, *Footfalls (Foot Falls Flatly)* and a piece entitled *if*. The evening is also to include a short puppet play by 7-year-old Sammie Beckett, performed by Beckett bad-boy Raymond Carr. Carr presented a puppet version of *Ohio Impromptu* in the first half of the season, but it was done unofficially as part of a workshop *after* the evening of estate-approved shorts. Beckett's works are released under strict requirements, and Beckett himself was strict about how his work was done. Naturally this issue finds its way into the parody. Also, you may have noticed only six of the supposed seven lost and found works are mentioned here. This is because the seventh piece, *Come See Come Saw*, was lost again somehow. There will be no attempt to recreate it; that would be offensive to Mr. Beckett's work and memory.