

**„BABEŞ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY
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BECKETT DIRECTED BY BECKETT

**The question of interpretation in Samuel Beckett’s stage adaptation of
*Waiting for Godot, Endgame and Krapp’s Last Tape***

PhD. Thesis Summary

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In the 20th century the directorial attitude according to which the dramatic text is considered no more than a simple starting point of the theatrical performance, became more and more accepted and practiced. The dominance of the playwright started to be weakened. In comparison with the former theatrical practice and directorial attitude, which considered that the production has the role of serving the text, therefore the plays were considered untouchable, the appearance of the so-called „directorial theatre” changed essentially the attitude towards the dramatic text: directors started to change, not only the dialogues through cutting from it and rewriting it, but they also started to ignore the author's stage directions.

Samuel Beckett has been fighting against this unstoppable process already from the beginning of his career as a playwright. He always demanded that directors should stage his plays avoiding any kind of interpretation, which means he expected faithfulness towards the text and strict observance of the stage directions. Beckett's seclusion from the act of interpretation also includes the expectation that the performance shouldn't fill up the text with spare meaning, so the components of the performance must be as appropriate as possible to the elements of the text. Beckett wanted to see nothing else, but his own concept and ideas on the stage.

Beckett responded always with much sensitivity to the stage adaptations of his plays. He tied down the directors' hands already during the writing process of his plays. The reason of this kind of restriction is the fact that in the work of Beckett authorial and directorial attitude were never totally separated. The directorial point of view always prevailed strongly during the writing process of his plays, respectively in the case of his work as a director he frequently approached his own texts from authorial perspective.

The question of the refusal of specific interpretations and of searching for meaning in Beckett's plays becomes even more interesting in the cases when he directs his own plays, namely when Beckett, the director is faced with the expectations of Beckett, the writer. In these cases Beckett's authorial and directorial attitudes face each other and

together they try to create a performance which is as close as possible to the desired staging. The most important question of the „Beckett directs Beckett“-situation is if the occurrence of an interpretation which moves away from the original authorial meaning is avoidable or not, respectively if the production can be the equivalent of the dramatic text?

This thesis is searching for an answer to the above raised question through the analysis of three plays directed by Beckett, namely *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape* – all three of them being productions of the San Quentin Drama Workshop. In order to examine the relation between Beckett's authorial and directorial attitude, we have to analyze the whole process of creation, starting with the writing of the plays and ending with their premières. In Beckett's case this process consists of three different phases.

The first one is the stage of writing the play, which fundamentally is a writing process from the viewpoint of a director, since Beckett creates his dramatic texts with such mathematical punctiliousness, which is characteristic more to a screen-play, than to a drama. After he finishes the texts, he establishes truly rigorous requirements towards directors, who are unable to meet Beckett's vision in its fullness. Due to this the playwright decides that he is going to stage his own plays. In the second phase of Beckett's process of creation he makes a revision of his texts, which is considered necessary from his directorial point of view. After „revising himself“ he enters the third phase: the actual staging of the plays. It is important to mention that Beckett as a director never forgets the writer's instructions and expectations. Although it is truly hard to remain faithful to the text, this is the only acceptable path which Beckett could think of. Through the examination of the three creation processes we will see if Beckett as a director can fulfill the writer's expectation of avoiding interpretation during staging.

The hypothesis expands the question of interpretation and of the relation between the dramatic text and the performance by raising the problem examined through Samuel Beckett's work on a general level. The hypothesis states that due to the fact that a dramatic text consists only of verbal elements, while a performance consists of verbal and non-verbal elements, the staging cannot entirely correspond to the written text, therefore the interpretative relation between dramatic text and performance is inevitable.

In order to demonstrate the above raised hypothesis, the dissertation approaches its objective through four different steps.

The first chapter, **Theoretical approaches to the notion of interpretation**, presents and examines several theoretical approaches of the problem of interpretation (Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, E. D. Hirsch), due to which we will be able to define the notion of interpretation and meaning, respectively we will discover the angles from which interpretation was analyzed by different directions in philosophy, literary and theatre theory. The chapter also examines staging as interpretation of the dramatic text and the process of staging from the viewpoint of the three interpretative acts: the phase of reading (by the director, the actors and other artists – designers, composer, etc.), the phase of visualization and the one of materialization (the construction of characters by the actors including dialogues, gestures, mimicry, intonation, rhythm, the realization of the set, the costumes, etc.).

The second chapter, **Samuel Beckett – the writer becomes director**, aims to give introductory information about Samuel Beckett's biography, his place in the world of absurd drama and also about his principles as a writer and as a theatre director. The chapter examines in depth how Beckett's work as an author was defined by a strongly directorial viewpoint, and how he later, as a theatre director, could not disconnect from himself as a playwright.

The third chapter, **Samuel Beckett on stage**, presents the most relevant performances of *Waiting for Godot* (created by Peter Hall, Walter Asmus, Alan Schneider), *Endgame* (created by Roger Blin, Alan Schneider, JoAnne Akalaitis) and *Krapp's Last Tape* (created by Donald McWhinnie, Alan Schneider). From the endless number of performances those were selected to be included in the dissertation which either were related to Beckett himself (he attended the rehearsals of several productions even before he decided to direct), either approached the texts mainly according to Beckett's expectations, either from a totally different point of view. Based on these productions we can find out a lot of information about Beckett's thoughts, views, advices given to directors (emerging mainly from interviews and letters) and also about those directorial concepts and approaches, which are considered most relevant or notorious in the history of the Beckett-performances.

The fourth and at the same time final chapter, **Beckett directs Beckett – The San Quentin Drama Workshop – Trilogy**, includes the analysis of the three creation processes of Beckett – *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape* directed at the San Quentin

Drama Workshop. In the case of the three plays and their mise en scene four different topics are examined: the poetical techniques, the stage directions, the revision of the texts and the relation between the written text and its staging. The starting point of the analysis of this relation is Beckett's observation according to which, when we examine a theatre performance, we must deal with the space and with the people in it.¹ According to this the comparative analysis of the revised plays and the productions is devised in two subchapters: one examining the space and the other one inspecting all further layers of the performances connected to the characters: costume, text, movement, gestures, rhythm.

The chapters and the topics analyzed in them approach the problem of interpretation and of the relation between the dramatic text and its staging from several aspects. The thoroughness and punctiliousness of the analysis, every part of which approaches the problem raised in the hypothesis, allows finding the answers to the emerged questions, to draw the conclusions and to define the exact frameworks of interpretation within the context of a dramatic text's staging.

The following chapter includes the **Conclusion** of the thesis and further research opportunities. The **Appendix** of the thesis contains two interviews, one with Rick Cluchey and one with Bud Thorpe, a performance database of the productions mentioned and analyzed in the thesis, as well as a Beckett directed by Beckett-database and photographs from the San Quentin Drama Workshop Trilogy.

¹ *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett. Endgame.* Edited by S. E. Gontarski. Grove Press, New York, 1993. p. xiii.

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