

Active Interpretation/Deconstruction Play: Postmodern Considerations of Acting in the Late Plays of Samuel Beckett

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Robert W. Corrigan's 1984 article, "The Search for New Endings: The Theatre in Search of a Fix, Part III," challenged the makers of contemporary theatre to "discover those consonances that exist in the new paradigms that are emerging in our postmodern world" in order to develop a new poetics of theatre. Scholars and practitioners have taken on that challenge in ever increasing numbers and there has been a proliferation of investigations into new poetics. Multi-culturalism, New Historicism, Feminism, to name a few, have each offered their take on these consonances. For the purposes of creating a new poetics of acting praxis, however, it may be necessary to return to Deconstruction, the father/mother of postmodern critical discourse.

Corrigan based his challenge on what he saw as a need for theatre practitioners to respond to "an irreversible perceptual and cultural change" upon which our society had entered. Summarizing this change he wrote:

For a good part of the past decade we have been hearing more and more about postmodernism and the new medievalism of our times. Critics and cultural commentators point to the collapse of the paradigms of modernism and insist that what we are experiencing is not just a transition from one phase of modern culture to another. Rather they argue that there is a growing awareness that the basic premises of our industrial/urban culture are breaking down or not working. Or to put it more positively, we are becoming increasingly conscious of the fact that reality as we are experiencing it cannot be adequately expressed and dealt with by the structures of modernist thought. . . .

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Certainly the theatre has not been exempt from this condition.¹

We have come to understand this postmodern condition as one in which language and meaning have lost their stability as ways to organize and make sense of experience. According to postmodern, poststructural thought, the metanarratives of western culture no longer provide access to originary knowledge, and the Cartesian constructive subject no longer provides a basis for a definable self. These are the conditions that have infiltrated contemporary thought and culture and have become manifest in the development of a myriad of new styles of theoretical discourse and artistic experimentation. Though a number of scholars and practitioners have become disenchanted of late with a postmodernism they see as a proliferation of masterbatory art and a "deliberate evasion of any prescriptive evaluation,"² it is important not to reject those areas of investigation that illuminate a cultural phenomena that is such a direct reflection of our contemporary world.

In the theatre, this phenomena is reflected in stylistic changes that have occurred primarily as part of the contemporary avant-garde. Divorced from the precepts of linguistic signification and modern humanism (logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence), postmodern theatre has developed as non-mimetic, non-referential, non-matrixed performance that offers self-reflexive, formal presentations of absences. In the postmodern theatre actors find themselves part of a project that works to disrupt the concepts that have traditionally grounded their work in theatrical representation. Instead of working as interpreters of a unified concept or text; instead of working towards a self-revelatory expression of presence, they become operational tools in a process of active deconstruction. Unlike the actors of modern realism, or the actors of the American alternative theatre of the 1960's and 1970's, postmodern performers cannot base their work entirely on methods that are grounded in concepts of presence, i.e., those of Stanislavski, Grotowski, Brecht, or Chaikin. Their task becomes one of presenting absences: of center, of signification, of narrative present, of origin in a narrative past, and of a subjective self. In a theatre that demonstrates the "liberation of the sign,"³ actors demonstrate their own liberation as signifiers, and in the process become, themselves, deconstructed.

The deconstructive project of Jacques Derrida has included a reexamination of major western philosophers from Aristotle to Heidegger, and contemporary structural theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Mark Taylor credits Martin Heidegger with having influenced Derrida's investigation into "difference" through his rereadings of these thinkers and in his subsequent critique of the philosophy of the subject. As Taylor explains, "To overcome the

nihilism that lies at the heart of modern humanism, it is necessary to *deconstruct* the constructive subject by thinking what Heidegger claimed philosophers have never adequately thought—difference and otherness."⁴ Derrida's deconstruction of the constructive subject by thinking of such differences is not an attempt to discover new patterns or to present theoretical claims, but to uncover the limits of existing epistemologies based on a tradition of structure.

Derrida focuses his project on a critique of traditions in western metaphysics that he defines as "logocentrism" and the "metaphysics of presence." This project is vast and complex and has had significant influence on the discourse and thinking of a number of fields of contemporary thought. Among the many elusive terms Derrida has either coined or appropriated to this critical project, this essay examines "play," and "presence" as they relate to the conditions of postmodernism and to the challenges of acting in the postmodern theatre.

Derrida finds the privileging of the "logos," the spoken word, with access to truth, and the debasement of "writing" as a secondary representation of that truth, central to the metaphysics he criticizes. His project reverses this traditional hierarchy. For Derrida, writing precedes speech and creates language, but not, as in logocentrism, as a closed relationship between "signifier" and "signified." Writing operates, for Derrida, as "play," as the endless displacement of meaning, the deferring of signification that both defines language and places it beyond legitimation. Derrida uses his own term, "differance" to refer to "the origin or production of differences and the differences between differences, the play of differences."⁵ "Play," then, becomes the act of interpreting experience (writing) without dependence on legitimizing knowledge, stable reference, or structure. In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," Derrida concludes,

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, throughout his entire history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play.⁶

The concepts of "play" and "differance" as they disrupt traditional concepts of "being" are the basis of the Derridian critique of a "metaphysics of presence."

According to Derrida, logocentrism is grounded in the concept of structure, which in turn is dependent on a concept of origin, or center. History, Derrida contends, has consisted of a series of substitutions of different forms or names for that center. In "Structure, Sign and Play," Derrida claims that:

Besides the tension between play and history, there is also the tension between play and presence. Play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence. Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around.⁷

As part of his deconstruction of "logocentrism" and the "metaphysics of presence," Jacques Derrida criticizes the concept of "the determination of Being as presence"⁸ as part of the logocentric impulse that arrests play and closes the possibilities of interpretations that pass beyond humanism. Though Derrida's use of the concept of presence is elusive, its implications as a designation of "being" are relevant to the term "presence" as it is used to describe the charismatic qualities that an actor brings to a performance. In his book on his work with the Open Theater (1963-1973), Joseph Chaikin writes, "When we as actors are performing, we as persons are also present and the performance is a testimony of ourselves. . . . Through the working process . . . the actor recreates himself."⁹ As Chaikin expresses it, the concept of a definable self is central to the process of performance. By the time Chaikin published his book, *The Presence of the Actor* in 1974, the value of an actor's ability to create a strong "presence" on stage was generally accepted, though the techniques to establish the actor's presence varied greatly. As Philip Auslander points out,

Concepts of presence are grounded in notions of actorly representation—presence is often thought to derive from the actor's embodiment of, or even possession by, the character defined in a play text, from the (re)presentation of self through the mediation of character, or in the Artaudian/Grotowskian/Beckian line of thought, from the archetypal psychic impulses accessible through the actor's physicality.¹⁰

Whether theatrical presence consists of a strong identity as a character, or as the actor's own self-consciousness, it derives from a belief in a definable self to be made present in performance.

In a 1986 article titled "Just Be Yourself: Logocentrism and Difference in Performance Theory," Auslander provides a fairly complete critique of the dependence of the performance theories of Stanislavski, Brecht, and Grotowski on the idea of presence. He concludes this essay stating,

It has not been my purpose to discredit the theories under discussion here. I want to indicate their dependence on logocentrism and certain concepts of self and presence. . . . If we are to use them, we must realize that, like metaphysics, they demand that we take these assumptions on faith and understand that when we speak of acting in terms of presence, we are referring metaphorically to the creation of 'self' from the play of difference which makes up theatrical discourse.¹¹

The assumptions Auslander points to, the concepts of self and presence, have been questioned by postmodern poststructural criticism and are reflected in the absence of "character" in postmodern theatre. The Derridian concept of "absence," that is the "absence of the transcendental signified [that] extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely,"¹² can be seen as having infiltrated postmodern theatre in which the "play of signification" has begun to change the role of the actor from the representation of "presence" to the performance of "absence". This "absence" can be defined as a lack of narrative context with which character can be established, or the lack of a definable constructive subject to be made present through actorly representation.

Elinor Fuchs contributed an article to the 1985 tenth anniversary issue of *Performing Art Journal* titled "Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Rethinking Theatre After Derrida." In this essay, she explores the move away from the concept of a definable self, one which is necessarily made present in performance, as the move from modernism to postmodernism in the theatre. Fuchs points to the early 1970's as the beginning of a change in theatre artists' perception of, or affinity for, the "presence" of the actor. By illustration, she cites a 1975 Mabou Mines production of Beckett's *Come and Go*:

The audience was confronted by a mirror nearly the width of the stage, sunk slightly below platform level, then angled back and upwards. The actors performed the entire piece from a balcony above and behind the spectators; we saw only their ghostly reflections. Such

a staging undermined habitual expectations of bodily presence and actor-audience contact.¹³

Fuchs points out that in this work identification with the characters/actors is purposely disrupted. She goes on to point out that in similar works directors like Robert Wilson have refused to use "professional" actors who would "contaminate the performance with enlarged personal 'presence.'" These changes in attitude mark the beginning of a postmodern undermining of presence and the emergence of an absence of reference and a constructive subject as the focus of theatrical performance. Fuchs adds,

We can now see that the radical Presence of the earlier generation was only an extreme version of the traditional theatrical Presence that has always banished textuality *per se*, and enshrined the (apparently) spontaneous speaking character at the center of action. The earlier generation, while declaring, with Beck that "the Theatre of Character is over," was still carrying out the Renaissance humanist program of Cartesian self-centered signification. A theatre of Absence, by contrast, disperses the center, displaces the Subject, destabilizes meaning.¹⁴

In a theatre of absence, actors must find ways to express themselves as displaced subjects with a dispersed center. Without reference to character, Cartesian subjectivity, or a language of mimetic signification, actors become formal elements of a thematic design in which they embody an absence of referential context.

Nowhere is this absence more central, or is presence more attenuated, than in the plays of Samuel Beckett. His is a theatre of private vision; it is a provocative theatre of poetic abstraction that has often been labeled the beginning of postmodernism. This seems especially valid for his late works for the stage, whose dramaturgy becomes increasingly spare, formal and elusive. Beckett seems to have worked continually toward a refinement of what is needed to create a vivid dramatic moment, and an increased use of technical media. The dramaturgy that first led Ruby Cohn to say that Beckett "paints with words" evolved to include painting with visual and aural images, making use of technology of various media and the bodies of the performers.

In *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts*, S.E. Gontarski reminds us that from the beginning Beckett worked to discover a "formal" aesthetics that rejected the mimesis of realism or naturalism. Gontarski cites an "intentional undoing of a text's origins" as a discernible pattern to be

found in Beckett's alternative aesthetics. He describes this undoing as a deconstructive process involving more traditional drafts that are revised or reduced (Gontarski uses Husserl's phrase "phenomenological reduction") "towards a patterned disconnection."¹⁵ In an analysis that illustrates similarities between Beckett's dramatic structure and those found in the postmodern theatre of images he writes: "This process often entails the conscious destruction of logical relations, the fracturing of consistent narrative, the abandonment of linear argument, and the substitution of more abstract patterns. . . ."¹⁶

Critics disagree as to how Beckett's style had changed over the course of his career, for he was demonstrating in plays such as *Rockaby* or *Ohio Impromptu* the same human condition of temporality found in *Waiting for Godot*. Enoch Brater makes a good case for the plays of the late 1970's and 1980's as being "Beyond Minimalism,"¹⁷ not only in that they do more and more with less and less, but also in that by defining essentials of an experience of the theatre they create an aesthetic of refined yet palpable insight. From *Not I* onward, Beckett has not only looked for the essence of the experience to be communicated, but also for the various means of its theatrical expression.

Central to this exploration has been a probing of the actor's art, "to see how much could be done, not only while the performer's mobility was denied but even with a diminishing presence."¹⁸ As Brater points out, this later work is a fusion of language art and theatre art, in which the actor is one of the elements, sometimes as a character in action, but more and more without a narrative context on which to base or define character as such. Often, in these later plays the actor performs as the narrator of a story, of remembrance, of verse; a listener, of his or her own or another's voice; or is silent as in a mime, helping to create "a sustained dramatic moment."¹⁹ With restricted mobility, and minimal narrative references upon which to base character or motivational action, actors find themselves challenged by a theatre of "absence." As Gontarski points out in his chapter on Beckett's plays of the 1980's,

It is by now no longer surprising that Beckett's principal subject is the *absence* of subject. What continues to surprise, however, is the inventiveness, the variety of means for creating that lack of subject, that absence, which Jacques Derrida describes, "in which all presence is announced." Certainly one of those means is a decentering, a deconstructing of our world. . . .²⁰

However minimally, as in *Breath*, or however constricted, as in *Play*, *Happy Days*, or *Not I*, the human being illustrates this absence of subject in a deconstructed world. Denied the usual elements of character or plot, denied

physical mobility and the usual range of interpretive options, actors in the later Beckett plays are challenged by an absence of referential context and a subsequent "diminishing presence." Or, to return to Derrida, they are denied the metaphysical determinism of Being as presence and are forced into a play of differences.

Billie Whitelaw is perhaps the best-known Beckett actress in the English-speaking theatre, and her work with Beckett has earned his personal respect and admiration. She has shown an amazing vocal athleticism necessary for texts such as *Not I*. Often working directly with Beckett, she has also demonstrated an ability to hear and reproduce the essential rhythms of his texts. By following Beckett's instructions to "just say it," she allows the material to have an effect on her, rather than attempting to use the words to create an effect based on her own interpretive understanding.

In Ruby Cohn's 1980 *Just Play* she describes Whitelaw's work with Beckett at some length, continually making references to what Cohn describes as Whitelaw's "musicality."²¹ First cast in 1964 as W2 in Beckett's *Play*, directed by George Devine at the Old Vic, Whitelaw knew nothing about Beckett or his work. Beckett worked with Devine on this production, however, and was immediately taken with Whitelaw's ability to master the speed and clarity of articulation necessary to *Play*. As Cohn notes, "Lacking formal training in acting, Whitelaw never thought to ask psychological questions about her role."²² Instead, she paid close attention to the rhythms of the words, often having Beckett read along with her so that she could feel and hear his cadences.

In an interview with Jonathan Kalb, Billie Whitelaw discusses her approach to Beckett at length. She repeats her need to discover a verbal rhythm, and asserts that once she has heard Beckett say a few lines she can usually find his tempo and take over, allowing the piece to grow through constant repetition. Her respect for the power of Beckett's words is such that she tries to just say her lines in a robot-like fashion, tapping them out, allowing them to take her over as she knows they eventually will. She says,

Because to me it seems that Beckett doesn't write *about* something—about emotion, about some old lady rocking herself to possible death in a chair—he actually writes it, he writes the thing itself. And you don't have to add to that. He's done 90 percent of the work for you by writing the actual emotion on the page as a composer will write an emotive passage in a piece of music. It's there. And by the time you've gone through the process of learning it, which is no mean feat, of getting the words out so they're articulate, so that all the

notes and "t"s and vowel sounds are actually there, you don't have to do anything, because he's done it.²³

When Whitelaw talks about trusting the words of the play and not getting in the way, she is talking about what can be seen as a process of absenting herself as a definable constructive subject through which her experience is organized, a process almost in direct opposition to the self-awareness processes of actorly representation found in traditional acting methods. By removing "herself" and not insisting on the creation of a fictional self as "character" Whitelaw is able to effectively perform without Fuch's "contaminating personal presence" that might color the purposeful ambiguity of Beckett's performance text. In an interview in Linda Ben-Zvi's recent *Women in Beckett*, Whitelaw adds,

With *Not I*, every night before I went on, while I was being taken up the scaffold, I used to go through a ritual and say, "All right now, Whitelaw, let the skin fall off; let the flesh fall off; let the bones fall off; all right, let it all go; keep out of the way; you physically keep out of the way."²⁴

Whitelaw's description of her acting process is not an entirely new one, nor, as she has indicated, is it limited to her work on the plays of Samuel Beckett. Actors and directors often work to remove "themselves" as obstacles to the interpretation of a text. This approach is, however, particularly appropriate to postmodern theatre, where an absence of character, plot, and narrative make traditional interpretive acting based on actorly representation of a logocentric concept of "self" problematic. In an excellent study of acting theory, *The Idea of the Actor: Drama and the Ethics of Performance*, William B. Worthen includes a discussion of acting in Beckett in a chapter called "Self-Betrayal." Proposing an ethical dialectic between "representation" and "interpretation" to be found in the performance of Beckett, he indicates the inappropriateness of a Stanislavskian approach, claiming,

The Stanislavskian actor depicts a thoroughly motivated character within a detailed naturalistic environment, and clearly undertakes his performance primarily in the 'representational' mode. But Stanislavsky prohibits the actor from entirely *absenting himself* from the stage . . . that is, while he 'represents' a stage world clearly distinguished from the audience's by the fourth wall of the

proscenium, the actor is simultaneously driven to experience *himself* in performance, to achieve 'interpretive' presence. . . .²⁵

The process of the actor absenting himself or herself from the stage, of not getting in the way, of not inserting an "interpretive presence" into a performance, informs Whitelaw's personal approach and indicates the appropriateness of developing a postmodern acting theory based on the Derridian concept of "play" as the discovery of the difference between presence and absence, deferring representation through "active" interpretation.

There are interesting parallels between the work of Billie Whitelaw and actor David Warrilow. Like Whitelaw, Warrilow has no formal education in traditional Stanislavski-based methods of acting. Like Whitelaw, he talks about approaching the material as if it were a piece of music. In his interview with Jonathan Kalb, he says, "What works is finding what musicians have called the 'right tone.'"²⁶ In a 1985 interview with Laurie Lassiter, he says that it was during the run of *The Lost Ones* that he realized that his use of the modulation of his voice was very much akin to what a musician does playing a piano concerto. He decided to go ahead and approach his performance in this way, not paying any attention to the literal meaning of a phrase, but performing it "as if it were all notes." Feeling as though actors work as a channel through which impulses flow without literal understanding, he said,

What I discovered when I did that in *The Lost Ones* was that some other level of experience appeared both for me and for the audience. People seemed to receive it on a deeper level that they didn't quite know how to describe. The very fact that audiences who didn't speak English could be just as enthusiastic as those who did was and is very mysterious to me.²⁷

This ability to work as a channel, to be concerned with the audience's reception of his work and its theatrical effectiveness rather than a fidelity to a fictional reality, has stayed a part of Warrilow's acting process even after 1979 when he decided to leave Mabou Mines and work in a variety of different kinds of theatre. Warrilow's career in the 1980's ranged from roles in the works of Noel Coward to those of Peter Sellars and Robert Wilson. As a freelance actor he has also continued to work in the plays of Beckett, both in America and in Europe.

In an interview in *Théâtre Public*, Warrilow reports that after he left Mabou Mines, Joseph Papp of the Public Theatre approached him to do a solo evening of Beckett. Not wanting to repeat what had previously been very successfully done by the Irish actor Jack McGowran, Warrilow wrote to Beckett asking him

to write a piece especially for Warrilow. About a year later he received *A Piece of Monologue*, which he performed at the Annex at La Mama in New York City. This 50 minute monologue, in which Mel Gussow proclaimed "character is sacrificed to temperature" and "image is the essence," also won Gussow's praise for Warrilow as "a quintessential Beckett actor."²⁸

In 1981 Warrilow was cast in the world premier production of *Ohio Impromptu*, directed by Alan Schneider. *Ohio Impromptu* is typical of Beckett's late style in the theatre. Lasting about fifteen minutes, it has in common with *Rockaby* and *A Piece of Monologue* a tight and minimal construction in which the dramatic action is narrated and separated from the literal action of the production. It continues the exploration of duality, of self and other, by involving two identical figures. The conflict is between past and present, performance and actual, fiction and drama, language and action, being and seeming, reading and listening, and is made evident through this presentation of Beckett's absence of external reference, what Gontarski calls an "absence of subject," in which the poetic form becomes its content.

Warrilow describes the process of building a performance as structuring an acting score and then experiencing a sense of flow within that structure. He tells Laurie Lassiter that Alan Schneider was extremely particular with *Ohio Impromptu* about precision and accuracy and drilled the actors so that their positions and movement would exactly mirror one another. Warrilow says,

It is highly choreographed. I mean choreographed to the point where the conventional actor, if I can call him that, would probably find it absolutely intolerable and insulting. I have an entirely different experience of it. To me, the greater the degree of accuracy of the parameters, the greater the freedom of action within.²⁹

The ability to find greater freedom within a highly defined, and sometimes confined, performance structure is important for actors in postmodern work where performance options are often much more restricted than in realistic plays with representational productions. This "freedom" involves keeping interpretation open and avoiding closed definitions of meaning or reference outside the context of what Beckett refers to as the "local situation."³⁰

As an actor who practices precise control of breath and tonal modulation, Warrilow insists, perhaps even more emphatically than Whitelaw, that he pays little attention to literal or symbolic meaning or to psychological reality. In his interview with Jonathan Kalb, he says that he does not understand *Ohio Impromptu* and does not feel that he wants to. In fact, he states that he tries to avoid psychological motivations in his work. Kalb presses the point, insisting

that even though there may not be answers to the various questions one could ask in *Ohio Impromptu*, such as, Who is this person? What is this book? What is this story? When is this taking place? etc., there must at least be assumptions that an actor makes in order to act in such a play. Kalb writes, "Asking him how much he, as an actor, playing Reader, has to decide where he is, what the book is for him, etc., elicits the response, 'How much do I need to decide those things for you to have an experience of the play?' He claims, in fact, to have made none of those decisions. . . ." When Kalb asks Warrilow what kind of decisions he does need to make as an actor in preparation for a role, Warrilow responds, "That I will read the text. And that I will read at a certain pace, using a certain kind of voice, and that there will be an *intention*."³¹ Warrilow, probably due to the work he did with Mabou Mines in tying Stanislavski to performance work, uses Stanislavskian terms such as "intention" without feeling a need to establish the underlying psychological deterministic reality to which they usually refer. At a later point in the interview he states, "Meaning is whatever happens in the viewer's experience of it. I don't feel that there is really intrinsic meaning. I also think that ideas are valueless; everything happens in action. The action in performing a Beckett play is making the instrument resonate."³² This latter statement, that the action in performing Beckett is in the act of performance itself, differentiates Warrilow's approach from the traditional discovery of action as access to inner motivation and justification. That the action is contained in the performance itself, identifies this process as a postmodern self-reflexive presentation that denies legitimation through meaning and reference.

In a 1985-86 issue of *Comparative Drama*, Barbara S. Becker and Charles R. Lyons support the view that there are difficulties in using a traditional, Stanislavskian approach to acting Beckett, claiming that, "The work of actors can threaten the integrity of Beckett's dramatic texts." They explain the inherent problem as a conflict between the presence of the actor and the characters in Beckett who usually speak in the narrative past, absenting themselves as conscious of the immediate or narrated events. Becker and Lyons refer to the absence of context as an "absence of referentiality" made explicit by Beckett's stage directions. They point out that actors, especially those trained in American versions of the Stanislavski "method," usually base their work on the development of characters as representations of psychological processes that result from context. They write, "The coordinates of the actor's emotional work, the kind of experience represented, is strictly limited and defined by the absences that mark Beckett's representation of character, space, and time." This playing of an absent consciousness in an absent context necessitates that actors reverse their usual process, dissolving consciousness and "undermining the processes of self conceptualization."³³ The language of Beckett's characters, though evocative and

poetic, often defers signification, as the often disembodied voice denies its origin in a self-conscious subject.

Billie Whitelaw and David Warrilow, as actors without formal training in methods based on Stanislavski, have been successful as performers of the works of Beckett even though they have developed working processes that confound the traditional discussion of acting as interpretation or self-revelation. Though there are certainly many other actors who have been successful performers of the works of Beckett, Whitelaw and Warrilow's comments on their process point to adjustments to traditional acting techniques, especially those based on interpretive analysis, psychological determination of "character," or the revelation of a metaphysical self as the representation of "presence."

Jacques Derrida's critical writings, never arriving, always interrogating, are examples of interpretation without closure,³⁴ and any attempt to delimit a specific technique within his discourse would be contrary to his evocative and equivocal style. As Philip Auslander points out, "Derrida's philosophy is descriptive and analytical, not prescriptive and programmatic: deconstruction cannot exist independently of the thing it deconstructs."³⁵ Derrida's deconstructive analysis of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's criticism of the artificiality of the theatre focuses on Rousseau's concept of presence and the "evils of representation." The playful analysis in Derrida's discourse is evident in his essay in *Of Grammatology*, in which he proposes a difference between representation and its negative implications as re-presentation. Explicating Rousseau, Derrida writes,

But the theater itself is shaped and undermined by the profound evil of representation. It is that corruption itself. For the stage is not threatened by anything but itself, theatrical representation, in the sense of exposition, of production, of that which is placed out there is contaminated by supplementary re-presentation.³⁶

Speaking sometimes with Rousseau and sometimes as his critic, Derrida locates Rousseau's discomfort with the artificiality of the theatre within the context of a logocentric metaphysics of presence. Rousseau finds that theatre negates the experience of "full presence" through the self-annihilation of the actor. Rousseau proposes a theatre without re-presentation. He proposes a festival with nothing to show, in which no one is used to re-present another's voice, in which the spectators and actors entertain each other and themselves, preserving their sense of self and rejecting the world of theatrical artifice.

Derrida takes issue with Rousseau's rejection of re-presentation, which he sees as blinded by a yearning for "full presence." He writes,

But what is a stage which presents nothing to the sight? It is the place where the spectator, presenting himself as spectacle, will no longer be either seer or voyeur, will efface within himself the difference between the actor and the spectator, the represented and the representer, the object seen and the seeing subject. With that difference, an entire series of oppositions will deconstitute themselves one by one. Presence will be full, not as an object which is *present* to be seen, to give itself to intuition as an empirical unit or as a *eidos* holding itself *in front of or up against*; it will be full as the intimacy of a self-presence, as the consciousness or the sentiment of self-proximity, of self-sameness.³⁷

This analysis of a public festival that is not re-presentation, and in which performers and spectators alike experience a sense of self-presence, prompts Derrida to a contrary interpretation of representation, not as theatrical enclosure, but as "sacrifice," "expense," and "play." In contrast to the safe and confined festival that Rousseau proposes, Derrida puts forth an idea of a theatre that is "wrenched away from itself by the games and detours of representation, diverted from itself and torn by difference, multiplies the outside in itself." He proposes a theatre of "play," of "the substitution of contents, the exchange of presences and absences, chance and absolute risk."³⁸

The difference that Derrida is exposing in this critique, between representation and re-presentation, is further explained in his essay on Artaud, "The Theatre of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation." Artaud, Like Rousseau, found representation to be the enemy of pure presence. Derrida posits that a closed interpretation or re-presentation implies reference to an origin that is being summoned again. Whether that origin lies in a script or in linguistic or theoretical constructs, it implies a falseness and the negation of presence by the re-presentation of something else. Without a metaphysical belief in center or origin, representation becomes a cycle of repetition. Like the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, this concept of representation is a circle that is closed, but within which the possibilities of play exist.

In the circular pattern of the cycle he explicates, Derrida closes his essay on Artaud with words that can be seen to reflect the active deconstruction of a postmodern actor. Derrida proposes,

Because it has always already begun, representation therefore has no end. But one can conceive of the closure of that which is without end. Closure is the circular limit within which the repetition of difference infinitely repeats itself. That is to say, closure is its

playing space. This movement is the movement of the world as play. . . . This play of life is artistic. To think the closure of representation is thus to think the the cruel powers of death and play which permit presence to be born to itself, and pleasurably to consume itself through the representation in which it eludes itself in its deferral.³⁹

Derrida elucidates the ways in which the actor, as a deconstructive artist, can remain creative in a postmodern theatre. In the context of a representation that elicits the play of a cycle of birth and death, the absence of reference, or of character and plot, offers a freedom from signification that expands the actor's expressive potential through active interpretation. When the absence or deconstruction of character/actor/self becomes a pleasurable, artistic process of deferral and affirmation, it helps define ways for actors to work in the postmodern theatre.

The refusal of Billie Whitelaw and David Warrilow to apply closed interpretations to the works of Beckett allows them to act as channels for his poetic equivocation through such a process of active deferral and play. Their work illustrates the potential of a discourse of deconstruction to acting praxis within the postmodern poetics of theatre.

Berea College

Notes

1. Robert W. Corrigan, *Theatre Journal*, 36, No. 2 (1984) 157-163.

2. Framji Minwalla, "Postmodernism, or the Revenge of the Onanists," *Theatre*, XXIII, No. 1 (Winter, 1992) 7. Minwalla's essay is replete with contradictory logic. He faults postmodernism for not being clearly defined, but acknowledges that modernism and romanticism suffer from the same lack of clarity. He makes statements such as, "No longer can we look at texts, we're told—though many scholars and politicians still do (witness the recent Gulf Fiasco and its requisite rhetoric)—through the myopic eyes of white men"(13), illustrating the point he attempts to refute.

3. Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theatre* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985) 101. Full quote: "It is impossible to encompass anything as diverse as the twentieth-century revolution in experimental theater under a single principle; my case rests, however, not on the exclusivity of the principle but on its value as a perspective on a profound shift in *the function* of theater art. This shift can best be defined in terms of the liberation of the sign: a new attitude, on the part of dramatists and directors, toward the nature and use of the materials that constitute the molecular structure of theater."

4. Mark C. Taylor, "Descartes, Nietzsche and the Search for the Unsayable," *The New York Times Book Review*, 1 Feb. 1987, col. 2, p. 32.

5. Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973) 130.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978) 292.
7. 292.
8. 279.
9. Joseph Chaikin, *The Presence of the Actor: Notes on the Open theater, Disguises, Acting and Repression* (New York: Atheneum, 1974) 6.
10. Philip Auslander, "Toward a Concept of the Political in Postmodern Theatre," *Theatre Journal*, 39, No.1 (March, 1987) 24.
11. Philip Auslander, *Art and Cinema* (NS) 1, (1986) 4.
12. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* 280.
13. Elinor Fuchs, "Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Re-thinking Theatre After Derrida," *PAJ*, 19, No.2 (1985) 164.
14. Fuchs 165
15. S.E. Gontarski, *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985) 3.
16. 4.
17. Enoch Brater, *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theatre* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987).
18. Alan Schneider, *Entrances: An American Director's Journey* (New York: Viking Press, 1986) 293.
19. Brater 17
20. Gontarski 173. Italics my own.
21. Ruby Cohn, *Just Play: Beckett's Theater* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1980) 197-202.
22. 198.
23. Billie Whitelaw as quoted by Jonathan Kalb, *Beckett in Performance* (Cambridge, U. K.: Cambridge UP, 1989) 238.
24. Interview by Linda Ben-Zvi, ed. in *Women in Beckett* (Chicago, Ill.: U of Illinois P, 1990) 4.
25. William Worthen, *The Idea of the Actor: Drama and the Ethics of Performance* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton UP, 1984) 207-208. Emphasis mine.
26. Kalb 224.
27. Laurie Lassiter, "David Warrilow: Creating Symbol and Cypher," *The Drama Review*, 29, No. 4 (Winter 1985) 11.
28. Mel Gussow, *New York Times*, Dec. 19, 1979, Sec. C, 32-34.
29. Laurie Lassiter 8.
30. Schneider 252.
31. Kalb, 223. Emphasis mine.
32. 229.
33. Barbara, S. Becker and Charles R. Lyons, "Directing/Acting Beckett," *Comparative Drama*, 19, No. 4 (Winter 1985-86) 293-304.
34. The term "closure" is used by Derrida and poststructural critics to indicate a closed definition or a closed interpretation of meaning. As Gerald Rabkin writes in his excellent article on deconstruction and the theatre, "Deconstruction is an activity of reading which interrogates the texts produced by writing, but which never sets up as a self-enclosed system based on a scientific model. The logocentric will to know imposes on texts structures which delimit and arrest play, which privilege transcendental signifiers and the idea of a center. But if the *free play* of signifiers is permitted, metaphysical presence is disrupted, the center is de-centered and the stability of structure

is dissolved. . . . Deconstruction holds 'closure' the great enemy." "The Play of Misreading: Text/Theatre/Deconstruction," *Performing Arts Journal*, 7, No. 1 (1983) 49-50. Italics my own.

35. Philip Auslander, *Art and Cinema* 4.

36. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1978) 304. Derrida refers here to Rousseau's *Lettre à M. d'Alembert* (1758).

37. 306.

38. 307.

39. 232-50.

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