

Beckett in the States: Notes on the Reception (1950s-1960s)

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Abstract: *This article is divided in two parts: the first one briefly introduces and discusses reviews of the premiere of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in the United States in 1956, focusing on articles by Walter Kerr, Brooks Atkinson and Kenneth Rexroth for *The New Republic*, *The New York Times* and *The Nation*, respectively. The second one mentions the 1960 New York double bill of Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* and Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* at the Provincetown Playhouse and the 1962 off off Broadway *Cherry Lane Theater* series of performances organized by Barr and Wilder as two crucially important events for the inception of Beckett's work as a point of reference for a whole generation of young dramatists in the U.S.*

Waiting for Godot was first produced in the United States in Miami, in 1955. The American director Alan Schneider had been hired to direct the premiere, and traveled to Paris to meet Beckett, and discuss preproduction questions.

Beckett answered Schneider's queries laconically, but Schneider was to dedicate most of his career to Beckett's theater henceforth. For the premiere, the cast was formed by experienced popular clowns, Bert Lahr and Tom Ewell. In spite of this, and in spite of Schneider's fidelity to the playwright, the production was not commercially successful, and Beckett assumed the responsibility for the fiasco.¹

Besides *Waiting for Godot*, Schneider premiered other plays by Beckett in the United States later. He and Beckett exchanged five hundred letters over a period of twenty years (1955-1984), which came to an end only with Schneider's death, run down while crossing a street to mail a letter to the playwright.²

In 1956 the play opened in New York. Writing for the "New Republic", Eric Bentley, editor and former professor of literature, observed that, besides the critic Walter Kerr's "intellectual anti-intellectualism", two other less objectionable attitudes defined themselves in newspaper reviews of the production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in the United States: the ones of "non intellectual pro-intellectualism", and of "non-intellectual anti-intellectualism". In Bentley's opinion, the production benefited as much from the former as it suffered from the latter. (Federman iii)

The response of American critics and of the U.S. press to the first productions of Beckett's plays is extremely representative of America's reaction not only to the Irish playwright's works but also to the radical changes observed in theater in the second half of the XX century.

What Bentley classified as "intellectual anti-intellectualism" in Walter Kerr's positions about "Waiting for Godot" can be illustrated through Kerr's opinion about criticism in general. Writing for the "New York Tribune" on the occasion the play opened, he expressed the idea that criticism required "*constant communion with the man of non-distinction*", whereas "*insight of genius*" was unnecessary. (Ibid. 104) While concerned with the obfuscation of American experience of Beckett's play, Kerr also observed that the problem presented in the author's work was the one of "*nausea as a playwright's conscious attitude to life*". (loc. cit.)

Kerr's matter-of-fact view of theater as the realm of amusement clearly indicated that he believed a deeper understanding of the play was expected to be remote and quite unlikely from the part of American audiences in general:

Though it is permissible to be nauseated by existence, and even to say so, it seems doubtful whether one should expect to be paid for saying so, at any rate by a crowd of people in search of an amusing evening. (loc. cit.)

Kerr did not think of theater as prone to philosophical reflection, but rather to the search of entertainment on a commercially based initiative. He also believed the tendency he branded as "American optimism" was strong enough to make "American nausea" a little more remote or "underground". (op. cit.) The implied notion of a typically American disposition, which is clearly an ideological stereotype, served as background to these considerations on the play. This in itself serves as an illustration of what Bentley termed as the critic's "*intellectual anti-intellectualism*". Kerr's point is based on a parallel between this presumed American nature and the implicit idea of what could be called European nihilism or skepticism.:

American optimism drives American nausea a little more deeply underground: that is the difference between America and Europe. (op. cit. 105)

Considering humor as "*victory over nausea*", as in Nietzsche's definition, Kerr added that it would be hard "*to stage the victory*" without suggesting "*the identity and character of the foe*". (loc. cit.) This specific observation is directly re-

lated with Kerr's resistance in fully accepting what he called the "*undramatic*" structure of the play: In this respect, his article is definitely a document of the prevalence of drama as the supreme theater form from the point of view of critics in general:

Like many modern plays, *Waiting for Godot* is undramatic but highly theatrical. Essential to drama, surely, is not merely situation but situation in movement,

even in beautifully shaped movement. A curve is the most natural symbol for a dramatic action, while, as Aristotle said, beginning, middle, and end are three of its necessary features. Deliberately anti-dramatic, Beckett's play has a shape of a non-dramatic sort; two strips of action are laid side by side like railway tracks. (loc. cit.)

It is Kerr's final assessment of the play, however, that gives the clearest evidence of his resistance against whatever could possibly break away or diverge from the standards of drama:

Beckett's finest achievement is to have made the chief relationships, which are many, so concrete that abstract interpretations are wholly relegated to the theater lobby. (loc. cit.)

Eleven years later, in 1967, Kerr revised his own "New Republic" review, and rephrased his previous reading of the play:

My 'New Republic' review of eleven years ago records my first impressions of 'Godot.' 'No doubt, ' I wrote, 'there are meanings that will disengage themselves in time, as one lives with' such a work. And, in fact, with time I ceased to believe that the play was 'undramatic' and only 'theatrical, and I set down my later belief-that 'Godot' is truly dramatic-in my book *The Life of the Drama* (New York: Atheneum, 1964, pp. 99-101 and 348-351). [.....] My early reading of Beckett missed out an essential element both dramatic and moral. I might even blame the error, in part, on Beckett himself, in that his English title does not translate the much more apt French one: 'En attendant Godot, 'which means 'while waiting for Godot.' The subject is not that of pure waiting. It is: what happens with certain human beings while waiting. (op. cit. 9)

There is actually no reconsideration of his previous analysis, as the excerpt above illustrates: Kerr shows no change of his prior opinion on the "undramatic" nature of the play. On the contrary: he expresses a diehard insistence on what he claimed to be the dramatic nature disguised by Beckett's supposedly faulty translation of the original French title into English. What really mattered in the play, for Kerr, was not the waiting, but the sequence of facts that took place while the characters waited.

The critic's attachment to the form of drama is not the result of Kerr's merely individual obsession, but rather an example of the strongly institutionalized use American critics made of the dramatic form as an alleged pattern for artistic excellence in playwrighting.

Another important name that expressed his views on Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" was "The New York Times" powerful Brooks Atkinson. Feared and respected for the resonance of his opinions, Atkinson authored a review, published on April 20, 1956, that could be categorized as belonging to the tendency of "non-intellectual anti-

intellectualism”, in Eric Bentley’s terms. Even expressing a generally positive reception of the play, Atkinson’s tone was remarkably evasive:

*“Don’t expect this column to explain Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, which was acted at the John Golden last evening. It is a mystery wrapped in an enigma. But you can expect witness to the strange power this drama has to convey the impression of some melancholy truths about the hopeless destiny of the human race.”*³

The fact that Atkinson calls Beckett’s play a “drama” corroborates the point above about the institutionalizing of the dramatic form. Atkinson’s vague terms referring to the “hopeless destiny of the human race” draw on stereotype. His tone even suggests a certain exasperation, expressed in his formulaic identification of the literary sources:

Since *Waiting for Godot* has no simple meaning, one seizes on Mr. Beckett’s experience of two worlds to account for his style and point of view. The point of view suggests Sartre – bleak, dark, disgusted. The style suggests Joyce—pungent and fabulous. Put the two together and you have some notion of Mr. Beckett’s acrid cartoon of the story of mankind. (loc. cit.)

Atkinson’s basic idea is that theater audiences are drawn not by the search for amusement, but by the search for a meaning. In his attempt to produce clarification, he precipitates the interpretation through the use of a rather hasty summary of the play:

Literally, the play consists of four raffish characters, an innocent boy who twice arrives with a message from Godot, a naked tree, a mound or two of earth and a sky. Two of the characters are waiting for Godot, who never arrives. Two of them consist of a flamboyant lord of the earth and a broken slave whimpering and staggering at the end of a rope. (loc. cit.)

As Kerr, Atkinson also regarded drama as the supreme form in theater, and meaning as the chief element for the discussion. In more than one part of the review he credited the interest and effectiveness of the production to the work of actors and director, which served, in his opinion, as a form of compensation for the fact the play was “puzzling” and “uneventful”:

Although the drama is puzzling, the director and the actors play it as though they understand every line of it.

[.....]

Although *Waiting for Godot* is an uneventful, maundering, loquacious drama, Mr. Lahr is an actor in the pantomime tradition who has a thousand ways to move and a hundred ways to grimace in order to make the story interesting and theatrical, and touching, too. His long experience as a bawling mountebank has

equipped Mr. Lahr to represent eloquently the tragic comedy of one of the lost souls of the earth. (loc. cit.)

Brooks Atkinson's confidence in the power exercised in his own critical militancy can be detected in the closing of the review, where he paternalistically pronounces himself summarizing his point of view on Beckett's play:

Although *Waiting for Godot* is a "puzzlement," as the King of Siam would express it, Mr. Beckett is no charlatan. He has strong feelings about the degradation of mankind, and he has given vent to them copiously. "Waiting for Godot" is all feeling. Perhaps that is why it is puzzling and convincing at the same time. Theatre goers can rail at it, but they cannot ignore it. For Mr. Beckett is a valid writer. (loc. cit.)

Drastically different are the tone and spirit of the review published by the American poet, translator and critical essayist Kenneth Rexroth in "The Nation" in 1957. Two central aspects singled out Rexroth from the majority of other critics at that moment: the first one is the fact that he had already watched the Roger Blin's original production at the Théâtre Babylone in Paris several years before; and the second is that, corroborating the opinion credited to the American playwright Tennessee Williams, Rexroth believed *Waiting for Godot* was the greatest play since Pirandello's "Six characters in search of an author".

Regarded as the chief figure of the San Francisco literary Renaissance, Rexroth expressed a critical view of the European canon in literature, and was one of the few to point out Beckett's significance for the indictment of the commercially-oriented civilization under capitalism:

Beckett is so significant, or so great, because he has said the final word to date in the long indictment of industrial and commercial civilization which began with Blake, Sade, Hölderlin, Baudelaire, and has continued to our day with Lawrence, Céline, Miller, and whose most forthright recent voices have been Artaud and Genet.⁴

Another important aspect that distinguished Rexroth from other critics was his awareness of historical processes in general, and more specifically of the role of culture in the capitalist era:

Now this is not only the mainstream of what the squares call Western European culture – by which they mean the culture of the capitalist era – it is really all the stream there is. Anything else, however gaudy in its day, has proved to be beneath the contempt of history. This is a singular phenomenon. There has been no other civilization in history whose culture-bearers never had a good word to say for it. Sam Beckett – an Irishman who has lived in France and written in French

(his books are translated for publication in English) most of his adult life – raises the issue of what is wrong with us with particular violence because his indictment is not only the most thoroughgoing but also the sanest. (loc. cit.)

For Rexroth one of the most remarkable things about the reception of Beckett in America was the large amount of favorable notice he had received., not only in big urban centers, but in smaller ones as well.

As concerns the play, Rexroth is quite straightforward:

Waiting for Godot, produced in New York in 1956, is that rare play, the distillation of dramatic essence which we have been talking about for the whole twentieth century, and about which we have done, alas, so little. Its peers are the Japanese Noh drama and the American burlesque comedy team. It is not just a play of situation – a situation which, in the Japanese Noh drama, reveals its own essence like a crystal. It just is a situation. The crystal isn't there. Two tramps, two utterly dispossessed, alienated, and disaffiliated beings, are waiting for somebody who is never going to come and who might be God. Not because they have any faith in his coming, although one does, a little, but because waiting requires less effort than anything else. They are not seeking meaning. The meaning is in the waiting. (loc. cit.)

Rexroth's high sounding enthusiasm with the play culminates at the end, when he insists on the idea that "*all critics who object to Beckett reduce themselves eventually to this level, the level of Zhdanov, Variety, and the quarterly reappearing lead editorial in Time's book section.*" (loc. cit.)

In 1960 a double bill at the Provincetown Playhouse, in New York, of Samuel Beckett's "*Krapp's Last Tape*" and Edward Albee's "*The Zoo Story*" attracted the interest to the former playwright and established the latter as an important new voice in American drama.

Giving his views on the event, Albee wrote an article for "The New York Times" entitled "*Which theater is the absurd one?*" observing that the playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd had definitely altered the American playwrights' response to the theatre:

"[In the 50s we were influenced by]... the production in New York City of the plays of the European avant garde – Beckett, Genet, Ionesco and (perhaps not exactly avant garde but important and almost unknown) Pirandello and Brecht. An entire generation of young American playwrights saw worlds of creative possibility open to them... [in the] theaters and cafes of off-Broadway and off-off-Broadway in New York City."⁵

In 1962 two New York producers, Barr and Wilder, organized a series of performances in a small theater of the Greenwich Village, also in New York, at the Cherry Lane Theater. The series included seminal works by Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Arrabal, Kenneth Koch, Jack Richardson and Edward Albee.

Beckett's *Endgame*, presented in the Provincetown Playhouse in New York in the same year, prepared the path for younger theater men who were eager to express experiences and conditions that the former styles and practices were unlikely to represent.

Many years later, in an interview, Albee said that all playwrights of his generation were noticeably influenced by Beckett. "We are all Beckett's children", he said. (Bruce 2003) The so-called Absurdist influence, as well as Martin Esslin's book "Theater of the Absurd", contributed to stimulate young prospective playwrights in the use of non realistic and sometimes surrealistic techniques.

In the off off Broadway circuit, in the early 60's, small alternative spaces and their corresponding groups – Caffe Cino, Judson Poets' Theater, La Mama and Theatre Genesis – were all impregnated with a certain beckettian atmosphere.

In an interview published in 2003, Edward Albee said that he wouldn't be willing to live in a city where there wasn't a production of Samuel Beckett running. (op. cit. 131) In fact, Albee's fascination with Beckett's work is impressive, as Bruce Mann observes:

Albee's love of Samuel Beckett shows in innumerable ways. At times, his main character sounds like Winnie, the garrulous woman buried in a mound in Beckett's *Happy Days*. *Krapp's Last Tape* can also be detected; both plays use the situation of a lonely, older figure sifting through memories. As she asks whether her son will come today, Albee's elderly mother reminds us of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. (op. cit. 6)

Beckett is widely acknowledged as having been a key influence on American dramatists of the 1960s and 1970s. In the off off Broadway productions of the 1960s, each genre had its own progenitor, and Beckett's theater was a point of reference. Edward Albee's "*The American Dream*", for example, evokes the garrulous fluency of the main character of Beckett's "*Happy Days*", Winnie.

Beckett's influence can also be felt among the experimentalists who emerged in the sixties and whose works premiered off off Broadway. Most of their works show elements that remind us of Beckett (as well as of Genet, Ionesco and Artaud) both in terms of the playwrighting techniques and of the performing and directing details as well.

The 1960 New York double bill of Beckett's "*Krapp's Last Tape*" and Edward Albee's "*The Zoo Story*" at the Provincetown Playhouse and the 1962 off off Broadway Cherry Lane Theater series of performances organized by Barr and Wilder were crucially important for the inception of Beckett's work as a point of reference for the generations of young dramatists of the 1960's and 1970's in the United States.

Notes

- 1 See *The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*. Edited by Maurice Harmon. Cambridge: Mass: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999.

- 2 See Brustein, Robert. "I can't go on, Alan. I'll go on". N.Y. times, January 31, 1999. in <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=980DEED91E30F932A05752C0A96F958260&sec=&pagewanted=print>. Accessed on May 01, 2006.
- 3 See http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/08/03/reviews/beckett-godot.html?_r=1&oref=slogin accessed on May 11, 2006
- 4 Rexroth, Kenneth. Samuel Beckett and the Importance... . <http://www.bopsecrets.org/rexroth/essays/beckett.htm> Accessed on May 01, 2005.
- 5 The Small Stages That Challenged Our Concept Of Legitimacy In Theater. In <http://tla.library.unt.edu/dickbuckarticle.htm>

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