

# *Waiting in the Pampas: The Enduring Popularity of Beckett's Plays in Argentina*

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**Abstract:** *This paper's objective is to address the popularity of Samuel Beckett's dramatic oeuvre in Argentina. While *Waiting for Godot* and other plays have found homes in many assorted cultures and countries, Argentina is particularly suited to several different readings of the text. Given the frequency of urban and rural productions of the plays, including Buenos Aires's *Festival Beckett*, the paper argues that these works have resonance with this particular region. Of key interest is the relationship between avant-garde theatre and the Argentine dramatic subgenre *el grotesco criollo*. Rising to prominence during the Dirty War and military junta era, the subgenre is become a way to resist government censorship. By placing acts of interrogation and torture on the stage, Argentine playwrights like Griselda Gambaro expressed that which could not be said officially. This drive to show the unshowable and fixation on hierarchies of power prepare the theatre-going public for the mid-1980's when Beckett's plays are no longer banned. Furthermore, outside of Buenos Aires, plays like *Waiting for Godot* are known to be staged in the western Pampas--a largely rural and isolated region. The nature of power relationships here lends itself easily to interpreting the work in a post-colonial light. It may be that the popularity of Beckett's work stems from the same pressures that served as the impetus for Beckett's attack on the word surface. If Beckett is writing, as Eagleton suggests, in response to the horrors of WWII, then perhaps Argentine theatre maintains examples of convergent evolution in literature from the Dirty War period.*

**Keywords:** *Beckett; Waiting for Godot.*

In 2006 Buenos Aires's Beckett Theater was host to what would become the annual *Festival Beckett*. Primarily under the control of Miguel Guerberof, the decision was made not to contextualize or politicise the festival's performances. This choice, deviating from the local norm, was made to preserve the texts from an oversimplification (Rimoldi 117-118). That Beckett's work so easily translates into the realm of national and social politics is not unique to Argentina, but it is part of a long history of his work in the

country. The objective of this essay is to illustrate the causes for Beckett's theatrical work's propensity for political stagings in Argentina by examining the cultural and historical factors surrounding his oeuvre and charting his course parallel to the native Argentine playwright Griselda Gambaro.

In the Latin-American world, Argentina is noted for a number of Beckettian firsts. Likely due to Buenos Aires's close ties to the European avant-garde, the first available Spanish translations of *Waiting for Godot* (1953) were created by the Argentine Pablo Palant (Rimoldi 116). In addition to this, Argentina would see the first ever productions of Beckett's work in South America. Performances, even while banned by the Peronist government, are recorded in off-Corrientes theatres from Buenos Aires to Mendoza (Brater 148). Yet even without these direct ties, Argentina, as Guerberof is perfectly aware, is uniquely susceptible to commandeering Beckett's work for discussion of its turbulent political climate and troubled past.

Undoubtedly, the exceeding portability of Beckett's oeuvre is a primary factor in his success in Argentina; performances need only a minimal handful of props and less than a handful of actors. Additionally, the lack of clearly identifiable locations and situations within the plays allow them to be easily appropriated. Geographically, Argentina possesses much in terms of Beckettian landscapes; *Godot's* broken terrain and lone tree could be one of a thousand places in the Pampas or Patagonia.

Artistically, however, Argentine theater was pre-conditioned to accept the absurdities of Beckett's plays. Native forms that participate in a self-reflexive laugh, similar to that present in Beckett's work, and align closely in tone to absurdist theater have been enjoyed by audiences in the country throughout the mid-20th century. In particular the Argentine form of *el grotesco criollo*, created by Armando Discépolo, reached a height of popularity in the 1960's and 1970's (Pottlitzer 103). Featuring exaggerated bodies and dark, violent comedy, the apogee of this style coincided with the dissemination Beckett's oeuvre into Spanish-speaking theater. Furthermore, all of these events occurred during a time of intense political and social conflict throughout Argentina. This confluence of factors would see Beckett's plays performed alongside *grotesco criollo* plays, perhaps leading to an unconscious association between the two in the minds of Argentine audiences.

When thinking about productions of Beckett's plays in Argentina, we must contextualize the pieces with their Argentine contemporaries, *grotesco criollo* plays created by Griselda Gambaro. Although her work is admittedly born from a different style, one distinct from absurdist theatre, Griselda Gambaro's art shares many themes with Samuel Beckett's oeuvre. From *The Camp* (1967) to *Information for Foreigners* (1972), Gambaro's plays are characterized by master-servant relationships and feature a violence, both subtle and overt, mirroring Argentina's turbulent political atmosphere and the ever-present threat of official disappearance. The resulting style is greatly reminiscent of Beckett's work and of absurdist theatre in general. However, rather than writing such

similarities off as being a mere coincidence, it is far more illuminating to view the forms as a case of convergent evolution.

In this approach, it must be assumed that in two separate situations similar pressures and restrictions were applied to the artform and artist. These restrictions, in turn, serve as the impetus for a change or mutation within the artform yielding the similar results. The end product of such conditions would be two distinct forms that are analogous yet with neither form being derivative.

Locating the pressures that shaped these two authors is a simple matter of history. Samuel Beckett, so often viewed as a post-Second World War author, is an artist whose work is menaced by compassionless authoritarian systems, reminiscent of the Nazi occupation of France through which he lived. The war-torn countryside, the image of the displaced person, and the realities of concentration camps can all be seen as an inspiration for his plays. By reading Beckett's work in this light we gain perspective on his absurd exaggerations of life and the dark humor that runs through his work.

If we choose to interpret Beckett catalogue in the light of World War II, then Griselda Gambaro demands to be read in the light of Argentine conflict. By her own insistence, Gambaro attempts to put the realities of every-day life on the stage. According to Marguerite Feitlowitz, Gambaro's noted translator, Gambaro recognizes the same theatrical quality in the military junta government's rhetoric and actions that Beckett observed in the Nazi's party's command of language (Gambaro 161-162). However, rather than "denying language, in the same way war denied life," Gambaro chooses to stage life itself as a dark comedy rife with gallows humor (Gribben 216). The sheer disorienting quality of daily life in Argentina provides all the absurdist material Gambaro could desire.

There is a noticeable difference in the two forms, however. Beckett's obsession to strip away from the text, to reveal the "word surface" and to "feel a whisper of that final music or that silence which underlies All," limits his work from being directly referential to the Second World War (Beckett, "Letter to Axel Kaun"). The elements and effects of the war are there, but no real commentary is allowed to coalesce. Perhaps this is a result of Beckett's participation in the French Resistance. A hold-over of secrecy and silence, or maybe even a sense of finality, that he has done his part for the war, as put forward by Gribben. For Beckett the war is over, and, though the world has been irreversibly changed, he is writing within a moment that is decidedly *post*-conflict.

In contrast, a great deal of Gambaro's plays are written *during* the conflicts and crises in Argentina. As such, her work has shifted to informing and bringing attention to the horrors being perpetrated in her homeland. Additionally, there are no clear and defining lines demarcating stability and war. In her play *The Camp*, Gambaro presages the Nazi-esque Peronist government's war on its own people--the title playing off of the colloquial Argentine term for the countryside and Pampas, *el campo*, and the concentration camps that would come to dot the landscape (Gambaro 163).<sup>1</sup> It would be the same Peronist government that would ban Samuel Beckett's work from production within Argentina.

Throughout her work, we see Gambaro assume a dual role as both journalist and playwright. In a sense, her overtly political plays are embryonically Beckettian, possessing the building blocks and blueprints that would lead to Beckett's absurdist theatre, but stopping in favour of calling attention to the specifics of life underneath the military juntas. Her work, in short, is closer to Beckett during the occupation than Beckett after the occupation. Additionally, her eye-opening, confrontational plays cast Gambaro in the light of artistic resistance--an incredibly perilous position. Her government censure and exile would be two more qualities she would share with Beckett.

Griselda Gambaro's official censure is understandable given her scathing critique of the government; however a ban on a non-native author's work, whose mother tongue was not Spanish, begs the question: why? What quality of Beckett's work was deemed a threat to the right-wing government at the time? *Waiting for Godot*, though largely stripped of political signifiers, carries too easily a theme of colonialism, too easily can be appropriated by those whom the government is oppressing. Unfortunately for Beckett, while he may have grudgingly acknowledged the politicization of his plays, the native *grotesco criollo*, the form closest to absurdist theater that would be familiar to the audience, embraces politicization wholeheartedly. In the words of Gambaro: "Our theatre is much more connected to a social element, and our plays deal directly with political or social content. All of our theatre is more or less political, and we are all political writers in one way or another. There is always implicit or explicit political content in our work, though it is not a goal" (Pottlitzer 103-104). Although *Waiting for Godot* would have an officially approved run at the San Martin theatre during the Dirty War years of 1976-1983--as did plays by Beckett's countrymen, Wilde and Shaw--it is vital to remember that Beckett's work in Argentina is intimately tied to official censure and politicization (Graham-Jones 598).

The oppression of the stage in both Beckett's and Gambaro's works plays a major role thematically and physically. Both authors use the stage as a limited space, which, over the course of the play can become more restrictive. In *Happy Days* (1961), which was recently produced with an Argentine socialite twist in Buenos Aires, the mound in which Winnie is trapped grows, slowly consuming her (Cerrato 1-2). Her insistence at the end of the play, exclaiming, "Oh this is a happy day! This will have been another happy day!" shows her denial and utter refusal to accept the reality of the situation (Beckett, *Selected Works* 303). In Beckett's play, we observe this state *in media res*, with no prior knowledge of how Winnie came to be in her mound, no explanation for her attitude.

In Gambaro's play *The Walls* (1963), we see a character in a similar situation. In the play, a character only named as the Young Man is being held for questioning by government forces after being mistaken for a fictional character (Gambaro 65). Initially, the play is set in a fairly opulent room described as "very comfortable, practically luxurious" (Gambaro 15). The bedroom is complete with a painting of a languishing young man and a set of curtains that hide no windows but instead serve to disguise the room's imprisoning nature. By the second act, the room has begun to shrink, becoming

“appreciably smaller. The curtains and the painting have disappeared” (Gambaro 38). Aware of the space enclosing upon him, the young man’s frustration with the officials and the occasional off-stage screams heighten the tension. In the second scene of the second act the plush bedroom has become unrecognizable. The room is spartan, “the only pieces of furniture are a cot and a chair, which take up practically the whole space” (Gambaro 52).

As the reality of his predicament sinks in, the stage encloses itself on the Young Man, the boundaries of the theater itself limiting his movement and menacing him. Denied of news of the outside world and desperate for a bit of hope, the Young Man manages to eke some news out of the Usher.

“The news is the following: At midnight the walls will fall in on you. (happily) The same as if you hadn’t known. Without exception, the news is death. Death is like a secret, it makes you see what you don’t know” (Gambaro 65).

Horrified by the thought of his impending death, the Young Man chastises the Usher for telling him before eventually rejecting the notion entirely. His awareness of the room’s shrinking is at odds with the world that he knows, soliciting in the same scene “The room got smaller, but that can happen... It’s not so horrible!” and “We’re not in a country full of madmen. The room didn’t get smaller” (Gambaro 63). Clinging to a delusion, he comes to the conclusion he will be free soon and waits with “his eyes unbelievably and stupidly open” until the curtain falls (Gambaro 65).

By the end of the play, the Young Man has in essence become Winnie, blind to his own predicament and believing it will all work out. Despite the Usher’s assurances that the Young Man will indeed die at midnight, and his claims that they have already began the same treatment on another young man, our protagonist refuses the world around him. It is a slow progression into the same state as Beckett’s character, but one to which we may bear witness.

If the restrictions found in Beckett’s work are reflections censorship of the self and imagination, we may interpret the mound which devours Winnie as a representation of self-censorship (Gribbens 217, 227). Likewise, Gambaro’s restrictive staging can be seen as being born out of an aversion to *autocensura*, Argentine theatre’s dirty word (Graham-Jones 595). The effects of the limitation placed upon language are enacted by the players, with the Young Man failing to recognize his own predicaments and growing to trust his captors. It is a move that mirrors the self-censorship and complicit, knowing acceptance of the oppressive juntas.

The key difference between the two characters, and perhaps the two authors, is *when* we begin to watch them. Samuel Beckett is writing after the traumatic events in Europe and is not connected to active conflict. The stillness and waiting that is so characteristic of his oeuvre is, like *Endgame*, all after-the-fact. Conditions, specifics, even purpose are all unknowable; the only certainty is that which is on-stage at any given moment. With the Dirty War and other crises quietly raging in Argentina, Gambaro’s work, by contrast, revels in the specificity of Argentina and of the conflict.

Undeniably, Gambaro's most difficult play to stage is also her most referential to Argentina. *Information for Foreigners* is a piece so intrinsically bound to the crises in Argentina that Gambaro herself refused to have produced anywhere in the world for fear of reprisals (Pottlitzer 104). The ambitious staging requires the use of an entire warehouse, a multitude of guides, and actors planted within the audience, challenging the standard theater setting. The "play" consists of tour guides leading the audience through the different rooms of the warehouse, with scenes scripted to play *in media res* when the audience arrives. The distorted atmosphere and confusion--to which even the guide is not immune--serves to force the audience to acknowledge the hellish environment they have entered. As the actors planted in the audience are violently abducted and assaulted, the audience members become unsure of their own role in the play.

The unstable ground that the audience walks is clearly identified in the opening passages. As the audience is assembled around the guides they are divided into distinct tour groups. Gambaro intends for the maximum amount of disorientation and instructs that the given staging only represents one possible route through the warehouse, one possible sequence of the scenes (Gambaro 69). Once placed in their groups, they are informed of the absurd rules of the warehouse and warned "no one under eighteen will be admitted. Or under thirty-five or over thirty-six." The guide continues, "The play speaks to our way of life: Argentine, Western, and Christian. We are in 1971" (Gambaro 71).

The "plot" of the play, if one must be insisted on, centers on the obedience to authority, confusion between fact and official statement, and the horror of forced disappearance.<sup>2</sup> To drive home the authenticity of the absurd play around them, the audience is confronted with newspaper headlines of the events they have just witnessed. Life in Argentina and the strange burlesque of the authoritarian government, the pantomime of truth staged by the military junta, are the subject of the play. Rather than speak critically, she allows the events to speak for themselves.

If Beckett's vague use of language is an attack on the word surface to penetrate to the silence and music behind All, then Gambaro's work is an attack on All utilizing language as her weapon. Gambaro's concerns are not within the order of sign and signified, her goal is to stage the referent, the thing itself. Her method is akin to Beckett's "mocking attitude to words, through words" except applied to the theater's mimetic aspect (Beckett, "Letter to Axel Kaun"). She assaults the notion of staging a play about the *Desaparacidos* by forcefully stripping away the theater, by transplanting the audience to the scene of the horrors. Then she begins her play-within-a-play, with actors turned murderers turned poorly-trained actors. Theater, its passivity, and its weaponization are mocked as fraudulent while organized mass homicide is perpetrated around the audience.

Samuel Beckett's avant-garde struggle for the unknowable is further mirrored by Gambaro's attempts to stage that which, officially, does not exist. Her plays work specifically to contradict official statement, violently exposing the truth of the *Desaparacidos*. Both artists are concerned with staging that which is unshowable, either by the vagaries of the word surface or by official decree. Beckett's mocking attack on the authority of word runs parallel to Gambaro's war on the authoritarian word.

The formal similarities between *el grotesco criollo* and absurdist theatre explain why Samuel Beckett's work has found a special place in Argentine theatre. Historically contemporary, audiences would have found the exaggerated forms and circumstances similar, perhaps indistinguishable. Regionalized stagings of Beckett's plays, in light of *grotesco criollo*'s overt politicization, allow for discussion of censored topics without being directly referential to the conflict, while Gambaro's work mirrors Beckett's own focus on the unknowable. The two forms' convergent paths proceed towards the authority of word, be it semiotic or official. However, for all of their similarities, the forms constitute distinct, separate evolutions: one emerging from the aftermath of the Second World War, the other torn from accounts of Argentina's military dictatorships.

## Notes

- \* This paper was originally presented at ABEL's Ninth Symposium for Irish Studies in South America under the title "Pozzo in the Pampas: Beckett in Argentina."
- 1 Evidence suggests a possible 340 "detention" camps (Gambaro 163).
  - 2 Estimates place the number of disappeared persons between 1976 and 1983 alone at around 30,000 (Pottlitzer 104).

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