

Interview with Patrick Sutton and Brian Maguire

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Luiz Fernando Ramos

Abstract: *This interview took place on 15th September 2015, at the University of São Paulo, when the Director Patrick Sutton and the painter and actor Brian Maguire arrived from Rio de Janeiro where Beckett's play Waiting for Godot was performed.*

Keywords: *Patrick Sutton; Brian Maguire; Waiting for Godot.*

Fábio de Souza Andrade: On behalf of the WB Yeats Chair of Irish Studies, I'm glad to welcome Patrick Sutton and Brian Maguire to the University of São Paulo. We all regret that the play *Waiting for Godot*, directed by Patrick and performed in Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia won't be performed in São Paulo; but as he said, we hope it will next year. We know that Beckett always had a very tense relation to his Irish roots; to some extent, he always referred and refused Irish geography and Irish roots. So I'd like you to talk a bit about an Irish reading of Beckett today. Is there a particular approach to his work that an Irishman today would adopt?

Patrick Sutton: I think it's very interesting those phrases "to refer" and "to refuse", "to accept" and "to reject" at the same time. The landscape is in Samuel Beckett's DNA, you can never deny where you are born or your mother or your father, you can very rarely deny the place from which you've come. I was born about one kilometre from where Samuel Beckett was born. Now I didn't know that I was in the presence of greatness. But I'll tell you one thing that happened to me from a very, very early age. I had a distant relative who often told me about being in school at the same time as a man called "Boozie Sam" in Pretoria St, in the North of Ireland. I never realized, I never understood that this was the same man my uncle was talking to me about, this man, who kept illegal liquor under his bed at school was called "Boozie Sam". I never made the link or the connection between Beckett and this landscape, nor when my mother would take me for walks as early as I can remember and we'd go right, interestingly, right up to the hills where Brian now lives. I was born in that neighbourhood, Brian had

subsequently moved into 30 years ago. But I found myself walking in that landscape, just as a part of what I did. So there's a man called Eoin O'Brien who's written a wonderful book called *The Beckett Country* which is a terrific work with a lot of photographs that enable you to get into the text. In answer to your question, I feel I have an understanding of this play not because I am an extraordinary academic analyst, but because I feel there is something in this play that is personal to me, that is private to me and that I own a piece of the universality of it. It's interesting, the conversation that Brian and I had when we discovered it; we've done this play in 2014 in this theatre in Dublin that I might talk to you about later on. But when you were going on tour, the first person I went to was Brian, Brian is extraordinary in his humanity, and his understanding of the world, so there was nowhere else I was going to go, but to knock on Brian's door and say, "What about this idea of painting that landscape for this tour?" And the conversation was very short, was very sweet and in a napkin from a restaurant, we drew out what we were going to do, and that's what we have here. But the understanding of place, of landscape, of colour, of texture to provide a context for the play was absolutely no rejection of the place but very much an insistence. I mean, if you saw the play, there is something about that backdrop, we can show you some slides in a minute, but there is something about that backdrop that resonates to me because it's my place. But strangely enough, like we played last week in Rio and, strangely enough, there is a resonance there that was phenomenal in terms of the audience's response and reactions. So when I'm directing that play I have a really simple approach to directing a play, really simple: the words are here and the actors are here and my job is to try and find some landscape of movement, of characterization, in which those actors are able to embody those words and take ownership of those words. And a play makes itself, the rules are there, the text is there, the pauses, the silences are there. If you can get actors to stop thinking, stop thinking and start moving and walking... If you see this production, at the end of a run, for example, in the theatre in Rio there is a pattern on the floor, very much in a circular nature, but it's got a very strong sense of simplicity. I made a note here, the first thing I did when I started to direct this is, "Folks, all we're doing in this play is we are just waiting for Godot. Are we in the right place to wait for Godot? Is this the place?" which is exactly all that happens in the play, "Is it, is that the tree that we saw? The boots are there... Pozzo and Lucky did that? Yes they did..." All that play is doing is trying to identify if this is the right place to wait for Godot, and if it is the right place we will wait on. And then my job, as a director, is to ensure that that level of simplicity, which is very simplistic, is owned by the actor, who then starts filling his own vessel with characters, with information, with relationships, with dialogue, with dynamic. And extraordinarily... it's been a joy. I've never seen actors work as hard, but it's been an absolute joy trying to create the simplicity of this piece. And maybe that's what it comes down to, people seem to somehow understand the place, not just because of Brian's picture but because of that, the world that the actors are inhabiting.

Brian Maguire: But then, I have something to say about this play. The first thing: the attraction, and this idea of “accept and refuse” is very interesting, because a country is a complex, it’s complex, you accept some of it and refuse some of it. I love it, I want to get out of it as much as I can. Interesting about Beckett for me is that Beckett performed this piece in a prison in North America and trained the actors, see they camped within the prison, and the relationship developed which continued throughout his life with those men. In Ireland when a criminal gets buried there is nobody from the middle class in the funeral. The pubs are shut. There is a real division. Nobody thinks about the jails outside of those who work in it. So, you know, I’m just so happy to be with Beckett because he thought about prisoners. And that is why you reject Ireland because it doesn’t do so. Anyway, that’s a bit complex and I’m sure you can get the message. The other thing is about waiting; waiting for Godot. I mean, the older you get the more you realize how little control you have over your life. In fact, you have absolutely none. All decisions in your life are made by other people. The only thing you can control is your attitude, and if you can work on that too, and “wait, I should have been happy”, but... That sense of waiting is actually a fairly reasonable accurate description of what life is about. So... yes... it’s not about doing nothing. Because, unlike almost the whole literary cannon of Ireland, who in the 39-45 war just abandoned Europe, he remained in Europe and he joined the resistance, and he just barely got out with his life at one stage. The idea of waiting, but also the idea of action which is futile, but necessary, you know; these are the lights I have; it is why I come to this thing, and why I jumped at this proposal from this man beside me... tramps. I just remembered as a small child ... a knock on the door and a tramp at the door, and I brought him in, and my mother gave him bread, jam, and tea and he left. But I don’t ever remember anyone else knocking to the door and me bringing them in. Ever. As a small child.

PS: There is a moment in this play which I will talk about, where the boy runs away in the second act, and there is a gesture I train actors to do; that is what I do, I direct plays and I train actors. And I think the more I know and understand the craft of acting the more I know and understand the imperative of a gesture to be honest and to be integral to how you’re performing. It was late, last Summer, when we were doing this play and I needed to, there was somebody that was missing and, obviously I just went back and I said to myself, maybe there’s something in the gesture language that these people speak that was missing, obviously, it fell out of it, it was obvious. The boy runs away frightened at the end of the second act, runs away, in Rio. He ran all the way down the back of the theatre, down the wall, but the actor Charlie Hughes... I’ve never done this before and I realised that there was something that was missing because those of you who know the play, the boy comes in twice, in the first act he comes in... and... there is a conversation, “Who are you? What are you doing here? Do you know Mr. Godot? / “I do” / “Well, any news from him?” / “Yeah, yeah. Come back tomorrow and everything will be fine.” So the boy finishes the first act going, “Yeah, maybe,

maybe it will be fine tomorrow.” And there’s that lovely sense of hope. The second act is a different thing. You know, *Happy Days* starts with her up to her waist. The second act she’s up to her neck, and the third act which was, obviously, never written. But the point of making it is that there was a moment, a gestural moment, where the actor who’s playing Vladimir says to the boy, “You’re not gonna come back tomorrow and say you don’t know who we are and you don’t recognize us.” And the boy runs off. And Charlie, the actor, reaches as if he is looking for his mother. And in that moment, the audience are going “oh my God”. There is a tragedy, there is a heartbreak about that. And I think that gestural solution, often when you’re directing a play, it’s never gonna be up here, it’s always gonna be in here, and sometimes the here is located from the gesture that might be made. I’m really tough when it comes to directing a play, because the natural gestures that are found, need to be found for a good reason, I know it’s about gestures that I’m making them like an actor. But that’s a new moment in this play, and I’m extremely proud of it, because it takes my breath away. And in the same way, as the most significant passage in the play, I’d love you to read it in Portuguese: “Was I sleeping while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now?”

For those of you who don’t necessarily know the play intimately, this is for me at the heart and soul of what is going on in this play. I haven’t acted for a long time, and I’m not about to stand up now. But Vladimir is standing there, the boy hasn’t come in the second time and he is... things are bleak, more bleak than you can imagine. Estragon has fallen asleep here again, Estragon keeps falling asleep. Estragon can’t stay awake. Estragon has fallen asleep and there is nowhere for the actor Vladimir to turn. Now, in this current production, you see this figure, bleak figure against this extraordinary landscape with the tree. This is the moment, that characters are standing on stage and there is nothing left; the biggest question is “Was I sleeping while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now?” We’re sitting there now wondering, wow. “Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be? He’ll know nothing. He’ll tell me of the blows he received and I’ll give him a carrot. (pause) Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. But habit is a great deadener. At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (Pause.) I can’t go on! (Pause.)” And then, in the production of the moment, Charlie, the actor who’s playing Vladimir, he says “I can’t go on”, and then he does this. If you were looking at him in slow motion it would be like this, “I can’t go on”, which is the biggest admission of despair, I can’t go on. He says, “I can’t go on”, and in slow motion he does this (Pause). And you can see it in his eyes, because the next line is (whispering), “What have I said?” In other words, “Have I just admitted that it’s all over?”

FSA: “Será que dormi, enquanto os outros sofriam? Será que durmo agora? Amanhã quando pensar que estou acordando, que direi dessa jornada? Que esperei Godot com Estragon, meu amigo, neste lugar, até o cair da noite? Que Pozzo passou por aqui, com seu guia, e falou conosco? Sem dúvida. Mas quanta verdade haverá nisso tudo? Ele não saberá de nada. Falará dos golpes que sofreu e lhe darei uma cenoura. Do útero para o túmulo e um parto difícil. Lá do fundo da terra, o coveiro ajuda, lento, com o fórceps. Dá o tempo justo de envelhecer. O ar fica repleto dos nossos gritos. Mas o hábito é uma grande surdina. Pra mim também, alguém olha dizendo: ‘Ele dorme’, ou sábio direi, ‘Está dormindo. Não posso continuar.’ ‘Que foi que eu disse?’ . . .”

Luiz Fernando Ramos: Patrick, Fábio has already put a very important question, but I’ll insist on it a bit more, because I think that *Godot* is a canonical play now. Almost 60 years after the opening, it’s always a challenge for the directors, and the producers. I think it’s a play like *Hamlet*; you will ever have new readings of Shakespeare’s play. Likewise, you’ll never finish *Godot*; *Godot* will always be open for new readings. If you have to define in a short sentence, which is the new thing your production shows?

PS: All I have done is I’ve taken as much away, as much over interpretation, over analysis; what is there is very raw. And it is in that rawness that the resonance happens for an audience. I mean, I remember, when I worked as an actor, I was not, I was pretty average, right, but I thought I was great until I went to do a play in Boston, a production of this play *Waiting for Godot*, directed by somebody who hadn’t a clue. And they wanted to make an analogy with the stars and the moons and the alignment of the planets (laughs). And she wanted to do the play in the audience, and would put the audience on the stage (laughs). And I got bitten by, but didn’t get bitten by, but a rat jumped over my leg in Boston, and I had to go to hospital. And that was nearly the best thing that happened to that production (laughs). At that production there was too much going on, and in my production we try to take it away. The other night one of the actors started mouthing a line “wait we’ll see, wait we’ll see, we’ll see”. And I say, “That line is not in that play, so don’t do it. Keep it bare, spare, very, very stripped back.” And I think that’s my answer.

FSA: I know that Brian has a very important work done in Brazil that was in the Biall of 1999. Could you say something about your work at the *favela* of Vila Prudente?

BM: There was a Dubliner priest, named Padre Clarke, who had worked in providing sewage in the Vila Prudente and had then moved on. At that time children were being used to tax on the cars at the traffic lights in Vila Prudente. He figured that what was needed was to protect childhood in the Vila Prudente. So he started a house culture, he got an arts student, a graphs graduate from here in São Paulo, a video person, a person dealing with theatre, and a psychologist; that was his team. There were about

40 children who, only one of them went to school. I just went along, wondering what I could do to help; what was the role I could find in this small place. I started drawing the children, and it was the right thing to do. They were very pleased, their mothers were very pleased, and the drawings were ok. At the same time, I saw Osmar Araújo who got me into Carandiru Prison, where I worked with men who were incarcerated there and I did the same project, just drawing. The drawings then, were given to the children. There were two sets done, one I kept, the other was brought to their homes, and I remember the straightening of the nail. I don't know. Do you remember, in your house were nails straightened? In my house nails were straightened because we didn't have those little packets in those days of nails. And in every house in the *favela* there was one nail which was straightened, hammered in the wall and the picture hung up with photographs. I was intrigued by the culture of the *favela*, because this was a culture where you didn't go to like it; you actually built it yourself. That intrigued me and I respected it, and then we showed those photographs in the Bienal, we were completely rejected by the art world here. But don't doubt. I even gave one of them to a magazine in Ireland to do a review. Jesus, they absolutely hammered me. We were now rejected by the popular press who had a question mark from their own attitude to the *favela*, which was negative.

PS: Can we now take a look at some of the *Godot* pictures?

That's the tree. It's a painted tree. You get to see that landscape, the colour... That's Vladimir. We are having a problem with Vladimir this week because his costume is literally falling apart, and then the conversation last night was whether we should take them to the laundrette or not, to clean them, and the answer was: "take them to a laundrette, and they will not come out, at all." So, that's Vladimir on the left, indeed, and Estragon on the right.

That's just Vladimir, it's a big face on him... This is Pozzo who is really a strong construction... I made a conscious decision, sometimes Pozzo is dressed well, particularly well. I went to the other extreme, in terms of breaking him down. So they are all, I mean there is a moment where "I've lost my watch", and Pozzo says, tiny pause, "I must have left it at the manner". My two actors, Vladimir and Estragon, look at each other and go... "Oh yeah? You have a manner?" And that's a nice little moment, nice little moment. But this guy is trained at the Jacques le Coque Tour in Paris, and he teaches for me in the acting school in Dublin, and a more physical performance you won't see. Sometimes it is.... I was watching him on video the other day and ... it's terrifying how detailed and precise he is. That will be the Jacques le Coque training out at Paris.

And there he is with all his acting. And there is Brian's tree, and there is Brian's backdrop, and there is poor old Lucky. And there is other perspective on it, which is nice... How that band's neck is not broken I do not know.

And this is the beginning of his 700 word monologue without punctuation.... And how do you get him to shut up? You know you take off his hat and he collapses. And it was

lovely in Rio the other night, because it's quite big and quite physical, and he's building this thing and he's leaning on the front of the stage... and he's... well... he's dripping sweat, and the line is, "His hat", Pozzo says, "His hat". So as soon as you take off his hat, his ability to communicate and speak is gone.

That's one of my favourite images, and Brian was talking with us, to debate... and... that cruciform, that crucifixion scene, where he's broken and Pozzo is trying to put it all together again. It's interesting because Pozzo puts the suitcase in his right hand and that suitcase drops, and again he does the same on the other side. This is just before they move away again.

"Adieu! Adieu!" And the two boys, yeah, off they go. No, no, no, it's fine. That's what they are saying, "Adieu Adieu!". That's what they're saying.

Audience: I'd like to know if *Waiting for Godot* is your favourite work. And if it is, why?

PS: I went to drama school. I was at a all-male boarding Catholic school, and the day before I left school, the headmaster of the school, Mark Patrick Heatherman, gave me three books: one, *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter; two, *Creating a Role* by Stanislavski; and three, *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett. I went to drama school in England. It was the 1970's, and I was really terrified and nervous and really shy. It was only when I learned to breathe, that I was able to start to find myself. I was in so much trouble after three months in that drama school, that I didn't know where to turn. I turned to one man and he said, "I think we might be able to organise a scholarship for you. Can you, please, present an audition, a monologue?" And I said... and I said... I'll present that monologue "Was I sleeping while the others suffered?" I didn't know what it was about, I had no notion, but I sat in my room, and I learned it, and I presented it, and I... earned enough money to put myself through whole four years of drama school. And suddenly in that, I discovered something about myself, and about my ability and my confidence and a switch was turned on and... so... it was a play that became a very, very close and very private and a very special play. What is my favourite play? *Waiting for Godot* is my favourite play. If it wasn't my favourite play, maybe King Lear.

Audience: I'm guessing you performed *Waiting for Godot*, here in Rio, in English. Was it difficult for you to perform in a language that is not your own?

PS: No, because when we got the invitation to come over here from Consul General Sharon Lennon and Ambassador Brian Glynn with the support of Culture Ireland in Dublin, the very first thing they said was, "We're gonna pay for subtitles to be done properly in Portuguese." It was freaking me out because I'd never done this before. So, we got this company to do this, he installs his equipment. He forgot to close the glass, and I'm saying, please, it's like a typing pool. He was able to integrate the words with

the action, the action with the words, and it was so important. Now would I like to do *Waiting for Godot* in Rio without subtitles? No, I really wouldn't. But I saw people looking at that play in a way that I've never seen people looking at the play because, they're having to negotiate the words, the character, the character and the emotion, and what's said. And I've never seen that before. I've seen *Hamlet* done in Romanian, like that. And so I thought it was just a good example of things being done right. Because we've never toured before. Smock Alley Theatre was built in 1662, and it was only really recreated three years ago. And within three years we're doing an international tour. But we couldn't have done it without the work of Foreign Affairs, without the Embassy, without Culture Ireland, without the Consular General's Office. We couldn't have done it, because we've never done it before. It's interesting, there are people who gave us support above and beyond. There are moments I imagine people saying, "Not, *Waiting for Godot* again!" Anyway, good. That's a great question. I was nervous about the subtitles, I really, really was. But when I saw people interacting and engaging with them... it was important!

Audience: What is the impact of doing the text in English and seeing the production of the same text in French?

PS: I only saw one production in England many, many, many years ago, and I... frankly, I didn't know what I was doing. I speak a bit of French and I was able to follow it. Interestingly enough, I remember going home and looking up my text, and there was a resonance... Ronan, the guy who plays Pozzo in this production, he has a simultaneous translation. He has it in French on one page, and in English on another page. He trained in France with Jacques Le Coque. There were lovely, lovely moments in rehearsal where he was reciting pieces in French and then doing them in English. And there was a lightness to that. I know the play intimately in English but I don't know it intimately in French. I have a beautiful edition of *Krapp's Last Tape*, which is in German and in English and in French; it's a prize possession. I adore that play. And when I sometimes have a moment I will read that final scene, the punts on the lake, "I asked her..." "Picking gooseberries, she said. I asked her how she came by the scratch and she under us all moved, moved us gently, up and down, and from side to side. Past midnight. Never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited." Reading that in English, and in German, and in Dutch, and in French in this book I have is lovely. It makes me feel real clever.