

Remembering Beckett's Absence : Mourning the Vanishing Godot

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THIS Easter marked Samuel Beckett's centennial anniversary birthday, one that coincides with Mozart's 250th. Born near Dublin in 1906. Beckett gained his worldwide authorship when almost half a century later in Paris, he published five critically acclaimed *œuvres* within a span of three years: the novel *Molloy* and its sequel, *Malone meurt (Malone Dies)* in 1951; the play, *En attendant Godot (Waiting for Godot)* in 1952; and in 1953, *Watt* as well as *L'Innommable (The Unnamable)*, the concluding novel to the trilogy of *Molloy* and *Malone meurt*.

As anticipated, an avalanche of literary activities, exhibitions, theatrical productions and book sales ensues the occasion. However, the celebration --- notably in Paris, London, Dublin, New York and Japan --- reveals simulataneously the empty theatre that confronts us today : "a vanishing Godot" hidden behind the "invisible hand of capitalist economies." In the midst of such a buzz, Beckett's significance in dramatic literature renders easily the irrelevance of most ongoing theatre projects before and after, particularly those who thrive on commercial ends. Are they merely trivial ? Are they simply loquacious ? Or are they just masked attempts to mirror social realities by borrowing the grandiose of prestigious theatre venues and artists ?

Exposure to Beckett's theatre world remains relatively limited, particularly in Asia. Even in the French and American avant-garde theatre scenes, Beckett's works tend to intimidate rather than inspire. After all, it seems rather improbable that one gets to watch *Waiting for Godot* (a solid production, though) more than once or twice in a lifetime.

Beckett's non-Aristotelian drama and his logic in absurdum drew inspiration from his post-war life experiences, its bleakness of which alienates young audience today. The American crowd yearns for immediate thrill, packed adventures, romance, rapid and explicit mannerism, all of which prevail most commercial theatres in Asia today. Such a yearn is at complete odds with Beckett's emptiness and excruciation of time. Besides, the non-elitist Asian understanding of cartharsis is more of purification through pleasure than horror. Beckett's outlook, illuminated by elements of the grotesque and of tragic farce, thrives on a necessary pessimism and its flipside, untroubled skepticism. Undeniably, the degradation of humanity is a recurrent motif in his plays. How can such a philosophy then negotiate with the pride of our modern contemporary humankind, a civilisation that now races against HiFi and computer technologies in the arts ?

The coldness of French language, Beckett's adopted language that replaces English, further complicates the effort to captivate a constant audience outside the intellectual and literary circle. The rigid syntaxes and demanding grammar in the

romance language checked on Beckett's emotions, only permitting him to explore the expressiveness of English within the differences of the two during the process of translation. For most Asian audiences who possess English as a second language, they are literally one step behind, almost and always. Poetics of sparse architecture onstage can allow them to appreciate the Zenness in Beckett's theatre, but there is not much compromise as far as language --- the trumps' vocabulary, for instance --- is concerned.

Waiting for Godot confronts us with the cruelty of this doubt : "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" Towards the final curtain of the performance, this notorious Godot is still unknown and yet to be known. The only solace that we are blessed with is that the brutality of a waiting experience still cannot deprive us of the wait itself. Perhaps Beckett's centennial anniversary is all about the essence of such optimism : that Godot's vanishing phenomenon is merely part of our metaphysical predicament of uncertainties, a wait for a happening, an action or another being. Our theatre today lacks Beckett, but it is the lack of him that our theatre must acknowledge, and *maybe*, still survive upon.