

THEATRE REVIEWS

Review of *Waiting for Godot*, The Druid Theatre Company; Mick Lally Theatre, Galway, 20 July 2016 / The Abbey Theatre, Dublin, 26 April 2017; Director: Gary Hynes. Cast: Estragon, Aaron Monaghan; Vladimir, Marty Rea; Pozzo, Rory Nolan; Lucky, Garrett Lombard; A Boy, C. Simpson / H. Redmond.

Druid Theatre Company's current production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* premiered at Galway's Mick Lally Theatre in July 2016 and has subsequently been touring the country. It is being widely hailed in the Irish press as the best new production of the play to be seen in Ireland in twenty-five years—that is to say, the best one since Dublin's Gate Theatre premiered its seminal production for their 1991 Beckett Festival. This grand claim is probably true. Marty Rea is brilliant in the role of Vladimir, and Aaron Monaghan's very physical style of acting may have divided critics in the past but it certainly suits the character of Estragon—often regarded as the more 'earthy' of the duo at the heart of this play. Francis O'Connor's set is stunning, featuring a mechanical, silver-ball moon, a wonderfully withered tree, and an illuminated picture frame around the proscenium arch and apron (confirming that the play is a consciously constructed work of art and not set in the 'real' world). Finally, and perhaps



Figure 1. Garrett Lombard as Lucky, Marty Rea as Vladimir and Aaron Monaghan as Estragon. Photo by Matthew Thompson, courtesy of Druid Theatre Company

most importantly, the script put together by dramaturge Thomas Conway for this production is a sensitively-constructed hybrid text, which cleverly combines the ‘standard’ version of the play with revisions from the Schiller-Theater, Brooklyn Academy of Music, and San Quentin Drama Workshop productions overseen (to varying degrees) by Beckett. I was pleased to see that Conway retained the two long cuts which Beckett made before Lucky’s dance and at the moment when Gogo and Didi finally get a blind Pozzo to his feet. I was even more pleased to see that Conway retained some of the best lines from the revised versions, such as when Pozzo notes that he must have left his pocket watch not just ‘back at the manor’ but ‘on the Steinway’. Such an unnecessary, added detail strengthens the impression that the belching Pozzo might be lying about his true class status or at least his implied origins. Rory Nolan, who plays Pozzo in this Druid production, delivered the Steinway line dubiously, as though he was worried that he might be finally making one (false) boast too many.

So many of these strong aspects of the production are, of course, ascribable to brave and interesting choices made by Druid's brilliant, Tony Award-winning director Garry Hynes. Especially impressive was her decision to have the characters exhibit intense emotion at key moments (especially during the interchanges between Vladimir and the boy). Encouraging the characters to plumb their emotions made an interesting change from the usual habit of playing Beckettian males as though they are worryingly (albeit comically) cut off from their true feelings. As regards the movement of the actors around the stage space, the blocking was always clever and always visually arresting.

While Hynes is to be given due credit for all of the aforementioned strengths of this production, I must confess to having qualms about some of the other choices which she made or which she allowed the actors to make. What follows may be relatively minor quibbles, but they did contribute to a vague feeling of dissatisfaction both times that I watched this production (once during its opening run in Galway in July 2016 and once during its remounting at Dublin's Abbey Theatre in April 2017).

Pozzo and Lucky wore pancake makeup which suggested *commedia dell'arte* zanni characters. Rory Nolan certainly played Pozzo in a broad, comedic, clown-like manner, but I was left at a loss as to what this nod to *commedia dell'arte* ultimately signified. Nolan adopted an accent not unlike a self-satisfied member of the bourgeois Irish Countrywoman's Association; by contrast, in grander moments, he assumed a plummy Anglo-Irish accent. While this shapeshifting accent was interesting—in that it heightened our confusion over where to 'place' Pozzo in terms of his true class position—I am not sure that the accents adopted by the main male duo succeeded to the same degree. For the most part, Gogo and Didi spoke in soft west of Ireland accents, although traces of Rea's Belfast accent and Monaghan's Cavan accent did peek through from time to time. This in and of itself was not a problem; however, the Hiberno-English dialect employed by Beckett in the English-language version of *Godot* is definitely based around Dublin speech. As such, for key lines, stresses were laid in places that seemed wrong and arguably distorted or obscured Beckett's intended meaning. For example, each time I saw this production, Monaghan as Estragon said, 'I can't go on like this', to which Rea as Vladimir responded, 'That's what you

think.' A Dubliner would have said – in a grim, darkly humorous way – 'That's what *you* think.' Then again, it is possible that my preference for Dublin cadences arises from the fact that I am so used to the aforementioned 1991 Gate production, which starred Barry McGovern, Johnny Murphy, Alan Stanford, and Stephen Brennan; it was very 'Dublin' and was revived frequently up until 2008.

In terms of the delivering of lines, another issue was the fact that the actors sometimes used verbal comic timing associated with contemporary movies and television. This meant that audiences often seemed to laugh at these lines automatically without regard for what was actually being said. It should be noted, however, that this reliance on contemporary comic verbal rhythms was much less a feature of the revival at the Abbey than it was during the opening run in Galway; as such, Hynes and the actors must be given credit for going to some lengths to weed this out of the performance.

Garret Lombard as Lucky may not have had to watch the tendency to rely on stereotypical comic timing during exchanges with other characters; however, his deliverance of Lucky's speech was not without its problems. While he delivered the speech in a powerfully visceral way, his enunciation was relatively poor. In most Irish productions, when Lucky fixates on 'the skull in Connemara', audiences often find it extremely moving, since they are reminded of the Famine and the traditional poverty of the West. It is impossible to be moved, however, if you are not even sure that the character is saying the word 'Connemara'. Similarly, Lucky's reference to 'camogie' usually gets a good laugh from Irish audiences, but the name of this Irish field sport was lost in Lombard's hurried and occasional indistinct rendering of the speech.

There is one final note to make regarding the problematic delivering of lines, and it relates to the greatest dramaturgical risk taken in this production. At the end of both acts, when the mechanical moon came out, the characters began to speak in a slow and dreamy way, as though they are under the moon's spell and subject to 'lunacy'. This was a very clever idea, but, unfortunately, it had two negative effects. First, it made the play's tempo drag just when audiences get restless over 'nothing happening' for so long. Second, such slow and dreamy delivery does not suit some

of the comedic exchanges and slapstick included in these parts of the script (for example, the moment when Gogo's trousers fall down). Slapstick is always more effective when it is performed in a relatively quick and seemingly casual, throwaway manner. In slow motion, every movement seemed too deliberate and every quick-fire exchange too laboured.

Godot is arguably the most flexible of Beckett's scripts; that is, it leaves the most room for taking liberties. It may seem that I am being overly fastidious in my critiques of what is undoubtedly a truly fine production. However, amidst all of the glowing reviews that this production is receiving, I simply wanted to question the value of some of 'liberties' being taken by Druid. In the end, while some of these risky choices were problematic (especially the 'lunar' sections and the cryptic allusions to *commedia dell'arte*), others were highly successful (especially Conway's hybrid version of the script and the emotion packed into all four central performances). Plans are afoot to tour this production internationally, and it is definitely worth seeing, regardless of my caveats.

David Clare

DOI: 10.3366/jobs.2017.0209

Review of Beckett's *Neither*, Shen Wei Dance Arts; BAM Howard Gilman Opera House, Brooklyn, New York, 5–8 October 2016; Music by Morton Feldman and libretto by Samuel Beckett

It was only a matter of time before the short, enigmatic Samuel Beckett text that begins 'To and fro in shadow from inner to outer shadow' was turned into pure dance. The 10-line libretto, *Neither*, written for composer Morton Feldman in 1976, references light, shadows, doors, sound, self and other moving through an ill-defined space. One could say the text dances across the page. Since Feldman's score – for soprano and orchestra – debuted at the Rome Opera in 1977, its numerous incarnations have featured, for the most part, live performances in a concert hall setting, but for a few wild forays into theatre, such as Romeo Castellucci's 75-minute extravaganza in Bochum, Germany, which was tricked out with a murder, a gangster, a dead cat and a real locomotive (Swed, 2014). Heretofore, perhaps the closest to dance *Neither* has come was in