
Endgame, between Performance and Interpretation. Mise en Scène and Theatre Criticism in Catalonia

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English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

This study conducts an analysis, influenced by the aesthetic of reception of six mises en scène of *Endgame* produced in Catalonia from 1979 to 2022. The study of each of one, in addition, is accompanied by the interpretation of the evolution of the corresponding theatre criticism. To do so, we follow Marco de Marinis' theory on the model spectator and the implicit spectator, and also the distinction between textual semiotics and theatre semiotics that we apply to the case of criticism, which we also study to find out if it follows any methodology specific to reception studies: phenomenology, hermeneutic or semiotic philosophy (textual or theatre). In the end, we conclude that, although the semiotic theatre trend is the most palpable, it is not used to provide a meaning, but to record audience reception. In terms of the mises en scène, we see that the evolution begins with the performance of a ceremonial Beckett which, at the beginning of the 21st century, seeks new Beckettian aesthetics and, in the last production, there is a return to Theodor W. Adorno's reading of the text.

Keywords: theatre criticism, Marco de Marinis, Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, model spectator, implicit spectator, Theodor W. Adorno

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Performing a theatre play strains the relationship between the reading of the text and its performance. In this respect, Marco de Marinis proposes an adaptation of literary reception studies to the case of theatre in order to address this issue. By distinguishing between the literary text and the performance text — the former is the text written by the playwright, while the latter is the result of performing the literary text on a stage — he respectively attributes the figures of the implicit spectator and the model spectator to each type of text (De Marinis, 1988: 43-53; trans. 1998). In the case of literary reception, it would be the equivalent of the implied reader and the actual reader. Our objective here is to follow the path of six mises en scène of *Endgame* produced in Catalonia bearing in mind the distinction between literary text and performance text. The analysis of this path will determine what evolution there has been in terms of the mise en scène and the reception of criticism.

The productions chosen are: two by La Gàbia, the first in 1979 and the second 1990; Alfredo Alcón's production in 1995; Rosa Novell's in 2005; Krystian Lupa's in 2011 and, lastly, Sergi Belbel's, which premiered in 2021. It should be kept in mind that these are not all the productions put on in Catalonia and that when making the selection, all non-professional productions were excluded.

The first readings of Samuel Beckett — like those of Martin Esslin when he talks about the theatre of the absurd or Theodor Adorno with “Trying to Understand *Endgame*” — did not coincide with what De Marinis later proposes for the study of theatre, taken from or modified by the ideas of Gadamer and Ingarden, precisely because neither Esslin nor Adorno take the spectator into account. For them, Beckett was literature and the object of study was mainly the literary text. Considering that this is not a study of reception, we wonder if theatre criticism can follow any methodology related to these studies. We return to three main methodologies: phenomenology, in relation to Ingarden's studies; hermeneutic philosophy, initiated by Hans-Georg Gadamer; and semiotics.

The starting point of phenomenology would be the argument that perception, and reception, are unique and non-transferable; thus, perceiving has to do with subjectivity itself. Thus, theatre criticism would fail the principle of objectivity, but the fact that it does not seek a single meaning of the text or an origin would be important.

Hermeneutic philosophy also has subjective understanding at its epicentre; Gadamer develops some foundations for the theory of hermeneutic experience in his book *Truth and Method* (Gadamer, 1975: 331-461; trans. 1999). It has in common with phenomenology the assumption that interpretation, or understanding, has to do with the receiver and that, therefore, the writer is no longer a producer of meaning.

Semiotics is, by definition, closer to what we might think of as theatre criticism. Mainly, because it tries to translate a message in the same way that criticism seeks to often provide a reading guide to the performance text aimed at the model spectator. In this way, it will offer the interpretation of some signs or intertextual elements that it may think might be necessary for complete reception – and production – of meaning by the spectator. Marco de Marinis also tells us about textual or theatre semiotics:

At first, the semiotic-textual approach to the production was preferentially placed in a structuralist field, yielding analyses totally immanent to the performance text, and which assumed it as a “statement” concluded in itself, as a product finished, autonomous, and isolated from the outside. Secondly, following in the wake of a process already started in other sectors of semiotic research, the coordinates of a pragmatic approach have begun to emerge that studies the performance text, on the one hand, in relation to the cultural context, and to the performance context, on the other (De Marinis 1988: 45; trans. 1998).

In short, this means approaching Beckett from both interpretation and performance, whose equivalent in Spanish – *interpretación* – has this double meaning:

[...] It should be remembered that the word *interpretación* has – in everyday life and speech – at least two meanings, according to the Royal Spanish Academy, so that in its dictionary it is first defined as: “Explain or declare the meaning of something, and mainly that of a text.” [...] However, it is also used in another way, when it is said that a dance, a role, a score, a piece of music or even – a text is being performed. *Interpretación*, therefore, as *performance* (Hidalgo, 2011: 384-385).

Given that throughout the analysis of literary criticism the concept of rhythm is reiterated, we should recall the definition proposed by Afonso Becerra to understand what we mean: “[...] o ritmo é o grao de tensión ou capacidade de suscitar atracción, interese e focalización na recepción, nunha dimensión máis ou menos cognitivoemocional, polos diferentes tipos de accións partiturizadas ou codificadas nunha dramaturxia destinada a un espectáculo teatral [...]” (Becerra, 2016: 449).

Therefore, it is important to keep in mind the question of rhythm and to study it because it is one of the specific elements of the performing arts and it has often been forgotten when Beckett has been studied as literature (Hidalgo, 2011: 384-394).

La Gàbia, 1979

Núria Santamaria places this production by La Gàbia just when the company was in a process of professionalisation. Thus, *Endgame* represents the group's consolidation and its positioning within the Barcelona theatre scene (Santamaria, 2020: 75-76).

As we can see in Figure 1, the set design developed under the direction of Joan Anguera presents the empty interior described by Beckett built from a material that does not offer real consistency. Unstable, painted walls seem closer to a set design treated as a pictorial rather than an architectural element. A return to what Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig wanted to leave behind in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

In fact, evoking a pictorial world, the characters move away from our reality: Hamm dressed in rags, the characters' faces painted, Clov in tights and dishevelled clothes, reminiscent of what would have been a jester's garb, and Nagg and Nell, in Figure 2, also with painted faces and living in metal ashbins.

We can also see other elements, such as the position of the windows, the curtains, and the back-to-front picture behind Hamm's parents in Figure 2, that accurately follow the stage arrangement that Beckett imagined — with the difference that the picture should be on the right, next to the door, and not on the left.

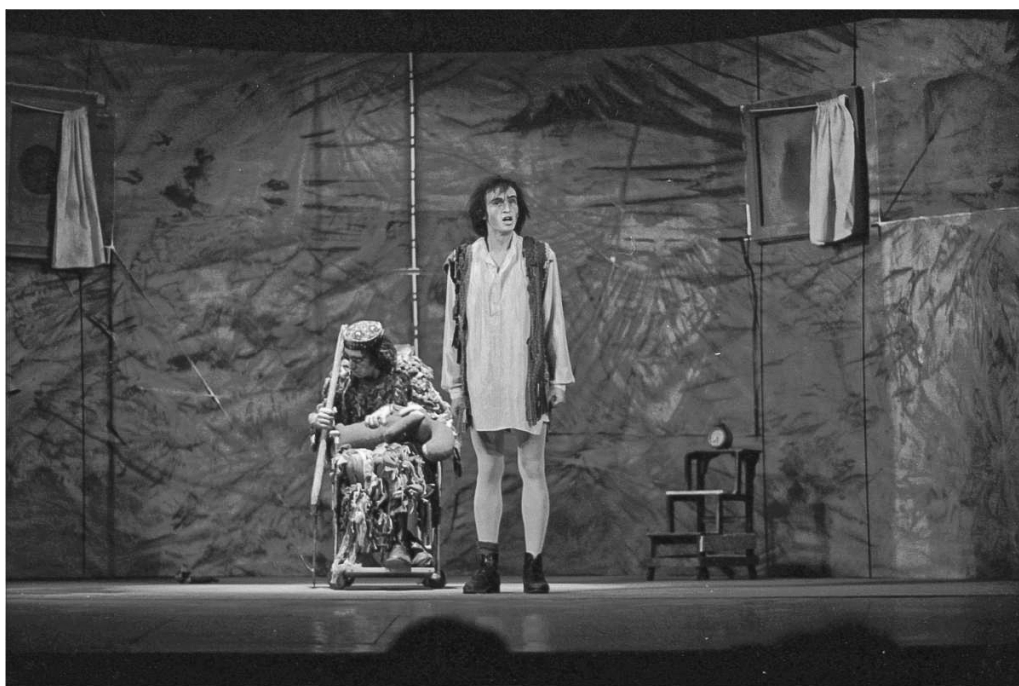


Figure 1. Hamm (Joan Anguera) upstage and Clov (Ramon Vila) downstage. © Pau Barceló. MAE. Institut del Teatre



Figure 2. On stage, left to right: Nell (Vicky Sanz), Nagg (Joan Isern) and Hamm (Joan Anguera).
© Pau Barceló. MAE. Institut del Teatre

The theatre programme for this show includes a text written by the company that offers a minimal interpretation of the performance. This text, addressed to one of Beckett's first audiences in Catalonia, says that both *The Book of Job* and *King Lear* are Beckett's precursors. This can be seen in Figure 3.

Borrowing Gérard Genette's words (1982), these texts, in any case, are *palimpsests* of *Endgame*. It is clear that this is the interpretation on which La Gàbia worked in 1979, and what interests us is the pretension of offering us

in this programme an interpretative key. It is worth recalling that this was the first performance of the play in Catalan and that we were practically only beginning to discover Beckett.

The Reviews

On 2 June 1979, *La Vanguardia* published J. L. Corber's review entitled "*Fi de partida* o Beckett visto desde Vic". At first sight, the title focuses on the decentralisation of the approach; in other words, La Gàbia initially makes theatre from the periphery

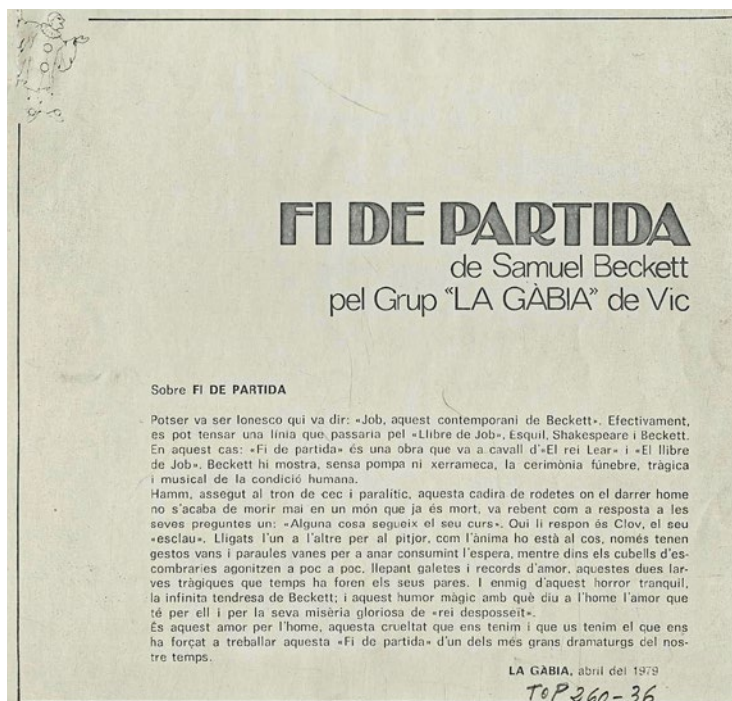


Figure 3. Theatre programme of the performance of *Endgame* dated 1 May 1979.
© Clixés Barceló. MAE. Institut del Teatre

rather than from the capital. This extremely brief text written by Corbert stresses the fact that, when mentioning the performance, it notes that actors have incorporated the characters properly without losing the ceremonial tone that, as he states, is essential to perform Beckett (Corbert, 1979: 52). Therefore, in this review there is the conviction that there is a determined way of approaching the play by the Irish playwright. Nevertheless, it also tells us that La Gàbia included humour. In other words, the play could be summarised by managing to find a balance between the humour and interpretative faithfulness required by Beckett (Corbert, 1979: 52).

However, in 1967, when Samuel Beckett staged the same text in Berlin, it was precisely to unlink it from this mystifying tradition and do it as he had imagined. In 1992 the stage notes he wrote during that production were published: *The theatrical notebooks of Samuel Beckett. Endgame*. It is thanks to this that we have a firsthand document that tells us that Beckett imagined an *Endgame* full of black humour and rhythm to demystify his text (Beckett, 1967: ed. 2019). The year when Corbert wrote his review these notebooks had not yet been published and, therefore, we can imagine that the ceremonial tone, the result of this demystification, was the most widespread when performing Beckett.

Thanks to the archived photographs we can determine that set, lighting and costume design, everything related to the performance, did not have as much significance for the review as the fact of commenting on how Beckett should be performed in order to be coherent with the playwright's idea. We can, therefore, say that this theatre review does not seek to decode the symbols – which would involve a semiotic approach – but has more similarities with a hermeneutics implying a preconceived, natural and truthful meaning of the text.

Apart from this review, the newspaper *Tele/eXprés* featured, on 17 May 1979, a text announcing the theatre season organised by La Caixa, which included the production by La Gàbia participated. In total four productions made up the season, and we are told that *Endgame* is an example of surrealist theatre that may be difficult for the audience (*Tele/eXprés*, 1979). Whether because the company was just professionalising, or premiering in the framework of a theatre season or because they were from Vic and, therefore, from the periphery, the truth is that we have few reviews of this production.

La Gàbia, 1990

The space that La Gàbia presented in 1990 is more figurative than in 1979. Now we are placed in an abandoned house with the tiles on the walls almost falling off and, as we can see in Figure 4, the ashbins where Nagg and Nell live half buried in the sand.

The costumes are also quite different in comparison to the 1979 production. In Figure 5 we can see that, although a distinction between classes is still highlighted, now a more modern vision is provided of this segregation. If Clov's clothes in the previous version recalled a court jester, now they are the garb of a working man. Hamm is dressed in the colour of royalty, with a



Figure 4. On stage, from left to right: Nell and Nagg (Ivà Vigatà and Landluís Soler). Upstage, Hamm (Joan Anguera). © Josep Ros Ribas. MAE. Institut del Teatre

red tunic that positions him directly as the king of the production as we can see in Figure 4.

As in the previous production, the initial stage direction of the literary text is also followed: there is the picture hanging on the right wall – which, now, rather than crooked, is back to front, as we can see in Figure 6 – and the greyish ambience (Beckett, 1957; trans. 2010: 19). The painted face that



Figure 5. On stage, Hamm (Joan Anguera) and Clov (Ramon Vila). © Josep Ros Ribas. MAE. Institut del Teatre



Figure 6. On stage, Hamm (Joan Anguera) and Clov (Ramon Vila). © Josep Ros Ribas. MAE. Institut del Teatre

Beckett mentions in the stage directions is respected for the characters of Nagg and Nell (Figure 4) but not for Hamm and Clov, whose faces should be painted red – it is worth noting that they were also not in 1979. Nevertheless, Beckett did not specify with which material they should paint their faces in white, and they use this imprecision to make up with what seems to be the porridge that the parents constantly ask for throughout the play.

The Reviews

In a press note published in *La Vanguardia* in 1990, Jordi Mesalles, director of the production, talks about Beckett as the final modern because he puts an end to the principles of modern drama started by Shakespeare (Mesalles, 1990: 5). Beyond corroborating or contradicting this statement, it is important to highlight that the director wishes to stress that, after Beckett, there will necessarily be something new, hitherto unseen. A new era of theatre begins with him, and this idea distances him necessarily from a genre that never sought such a foundational purpose: the theatre of the absurd. Throughout the different analyses we will gradually see that there are critics and directors who read Beckett as a playwright of the theatre of the absurd and others who do not.

Marcos Ordóñez reviews this version with a sarcastic text that highlights its humour. We also note two further elements: the actors' performance and the rhythm of the performance. On the performance, Ordóñez says that it became accessible because the monologues were straightforward. This is precisely why they connected more with the audience (Ordóñez, 1990). On the rhythm of the performance, the critic speaks directly of comedy and a well-founded aesthetic balance that links two premises: no longer seeking to modernise the text, and endeavouring to make it accessible through a fluid rhythm (Ordóñez, 1990). Thus, for him, easing the rhythm and making the monologues straightforward means making the text readable. In this case, according to Marcos Ordóñez' view, La Gàbia wanted to bring the play closer to the audience so that they could understand it, easily eliciting a meaning. Nevertheless, a fluid rhythm does not necessarily facilitate understanding.

El Periódico published another review by Gonzalo Pérez de Olaguer in which he stresses the irony and humour of the production. Moreover, he speaks of a coherence and a suggestive poetics, while praising the translation by Joan Cavallé (Pérez, 1990) – which in 1988 received the Josep M. de Sagarra Award for theatre translations. What he wishes to emphasise about this translated text is precisely the ordinariness of the language (Pérez, 1990). Therefore, between the humoristic touch already pointed out by the other reviews and the accessible translation, we can say that La Gàbia wish to bring the production close to the audience; this, in fact, was also reflected in Joaquim Vilà i Folch's review, who on one occasion said that Beckett was being made increasingly accessible, more alive and direct (Vilà i Folch, 1990). A similar remark was made by Joan-Anton Benach when he stresses Cavallé's translation while comparing it to Lluís Solà's, which La Gàbia had previously used, to finally situate the production halfway between pathos and the grotesque (Benach, 1990). And these two adjectives are not random: Max Hidalgo says that in rhythm there is the dilemma of defining Beckett as pathetic or as comical (Hidalgo, 2011: 387). Jordi Mesalles' direction, therefore, would fall between the two options.

Moreover, the review emphasises the *mise en scène* itself, constructed by the company rather than the playwright. In this respect, Beckett does not determine – according to the reception by the critics – the form or rhythm of the performance, which means not approaching the play as literature but, rather, as a performance text.

Alfredo Alcón, 1995

In 1995, Alfredo Alcón put on *Endgame* at the Teatre Lliure. He was both the director and the actor that played Hamm. It was a production by the Teatro de la Abadía in Madrid, which was later seen in Barcelona from 18 January to 26 February.

The characters' costumes chromatically recall those of the 1990 production by La Gàbia: in Figure 7 we see Hamm dressed in red, this time with a bathrobe, and Clov in black and white, dirty.



Figure 7. On stage, from left to right, Clov (Horacio Roca) and Hamm (Alfredo Alcón). © Josep Ros Ribas. MAE. Institut del Teatre



Figure 8. On stage, Clov (Horacio Roca) climbing the wooden ladder, and Hamm (Alfredo Alcón) sitting in his chair. © Josep Ros Ribas. MAE. Institut del Teatre

We can also see that Hamm's chair has no wheels or, at least, they are not visible. The space is quite small and dark. The overall impression of the space — with the wooden ladder, Hamm's chair, which is no more than a dining room chair with improvised changes, and the household items scattered everywhere — is that of a homely shelter. This can be seen in Figure 8.

Nagg and Nell are wearing white pyjamas (Figure 9). The ashbins, of rusted tin, recall those used in the two previous productions by La Gàbia, but they are different from the following mises en scène: from now on, each production would offer a new version of these bins. We can also see that there are some modifications in terms of the location of the bins: they are no longer on the proscenium but upstage: we see them in Figure 8.



Figure 9. On stage, Nagg (Oswaldo Bonet) and Nell (Màrgara Alonso). © Josep Ros Ribas. MAE. Institut del Teatre

The Reviews

The short run of this production on the Catalan stage means there are few but significant reviews. Joan-Anton Benach published his in *La Vanguardia*. He rejects the possibility that the play offers a meaning: it is not, he tells us, an allegory of anything (Benach, 1995: 48). Next, he compares it with the production by La Gàbia while saying that Alfredo Alcón's continues to have two key components of the preceding 1990 production: a brutal poetry and humour (Benach, 1995: 48). Therefore, we can conclude, according to this review, that Alcón's approach wished to find a fluid rhythm and, even, demystify Beckett to make him more every day.

Finally, we can highlight that Benach's review marks quite a clear change from the reviews we have analysed so far. In the first place, because there is direct allusion to Beckett's stage notebook — which had already been published. This means that for the first time the critic had access to Beckett's words and was able to see how the Irish playwright wanted to perform his play.

In the second place, because the issue of the reception is specified and this movement of conveying a message is clear: from sender to receiver. It is a review, therefore, written from a metacritical viewpoint. There is no semi-otic intention because, from the outset, it rejects the possibility of a meaning. In contrast, it is a review written from the aesthetic of reception. The main difference is that now the analysis of the *mise en scène* is subordinated to the dialogue between what Beckett wrote in his notebook, what Alfredo Alcón has interpreted and, above all, what the audience has received.

Rosa Novell, 2005

Rosa Novell's production stands out for a set design completely different from what had previously been seen. The aesthetic of the production, which creates a futuristic, even dystopian, universe, is different from the universe suggested by Beckett when speaking of set design. In other words, changing the space of the performance and the set design defined by the original text, as can be seen in Figure 10, brings the spectator closer to a new approach to the play. It is a *mise en scène* that seeks to give a new meaning to the literary text, while including Rosa Novell's performance as an actual reader of the text.

In order to analyse her *mise en scène* it is necessary to start with the audience seating design. This production, which premiered at the Teatre Grec and could later be seen at the Sala Muntaner, placed the audience on the stage, so that the action turned its back to the theatre stalls, as we can see in Figure 10. With this arrangement, Novell sought to find a new proximity. Thus, there is the intention of blurring everything metatheatrical by bringing the audience closer to the stage and even putting them on it, so as to reshape in this way the elements that stand out from the theatre as a building. The stalls have become the background scenery of the production; in its turn, the stage becomes a space shared between spectators and actors — who play on a second stage made up of a platform that forms part of the set design of the production. In this way, the space is much more intimate. Belén Ginart, in *El País*, reproduces, with a range of quotations, Novell's words about the show. Thus, we know that they sought a sense of intimacy with the audience, and, according to the director, the everyday actions made the action progress (Ginart, 2005: 27). Therefore, we can confirm that it is a *mise en scène* with a critical gaze on the rhythm and the reception by the spectators.



Figure 10. On stage, from left to right: Nagg (Xavier Capdet), Nell (Pilar Rebollar), Hamm (Jordi Bosch) and Clov (Jordi Boixaderas). © Josep Ros Ribas. MAE. Institut del Teatre

In terms of the set design, there is again another difference from the original literary text: there are no walls. Thus, the feeling of closure and no exit is not physical because there is nothing that delimits the space that the characters occupy. If the approach conveys some type of anguish or restlessness it may be due to the fact of feeling part of this space once the spectator is deprived of the comfort of a prudent distance from the action on stage.

Nagg and Nell, in their turn, do not live in conventional ashbins but rather in kinds of shapeless containers, and Clov and Hamm's clothes, which we see in Figure 11, are contemporary and casual. Nevertheless, in Figure 12 we see that Novell is faithful to the white painted faces of Hamm's parents and Clov's red face.

Novell presents a space that is not at all easy to identify, perhaps because it surpasses the idea of present and says: Beckett also tells us about our future; to give it a dystopian atmosphere; to stand out, simply, from previous productions and offer a version more in keeping with the new century that had just begun.

Figure 11. On stage, Hamm and Clov (Jordi Bosch and Jordi Boixaderas). © Josep Ros Ribas. MAE. Institut del Teatre



Figure 12. On stage, Nagg and Nell (Xavier Capdet and Pilar Rebollar). © Josep Ros Ribas. MAE. Institut del Teatre

Another change that this performance text involves is that it is conceived from a different interpretation of the playwright and the play. Novell confesses to Belén Ginart that Beckett's plays, for her, are not part of the theatre of the absurd (Novell, 2005: 27). This premise places the playwright in a different paradigm to the one he had been part of. Let's go back to Patrice Pavis's definition of the absurd:

ABSURD_ Absurd elements are felt to be unreasonable, nonsensical or lacking any logical connection with the rest of the text performance. According to Existentialist philosophy, the absurd is that which cannot be explained by reason and denies man any philosophical or political rationale for his actions (Pavis, 1980: 22).

To deny that Beckett is part of the theatre of the absurd is, therefore, to deny any reading made from an existential philosophy and also to deny the lack of logic and meaning. In other words, with this statement Novell confirms a desire to signify the literary text of *Endgame*. She recovers the double meaning of interpretation that we quoted from Max Hidalgo at the beginning: the interpretation as performance that Novell develops also shapes an interpretation as a new reading.

The Reviews

The reviews that have been written about this production tend to compare it with the previous one by La Gàbia in 1990. Marcos Ordóñez does this by listing some of the differences that, in his view, are most relevant. The main problem he sees is that the tensions and anxiety that existed under the direction of Jordi Mesalles have now disappeared and have given way to an excessive desire to turn the text into a comedy (Ordóñez, 2005: 14).

Santiago Fondevila also particularly mentions the laughter that the production elicits from the audience, attributing it to Cavallé's translation, which is very accessible (Fondevila, 2005: 27). It should be noted that the reviews of La Gàbia's production are not written from the perspective of reception or, in the words of De Marinis, of theatre semiotics, as we can say that Fondevila's review does. In 1990, the humorous tone was certainly emphasised, but not its result or effect on the audience; in addition, we must bear in mind that between one approach and another there is a fifteen-year gap and in 2005 Beckett's text was already established as a comedy. The steps that have been taken by the other earlier productions have meant that the pathos of the characters has now become the engine of a laughter that is no longer distressing. At least, that was the case with Novell's version.

Begoña Barrena offers another view in considering that the formal changes incorporated by Novell do not turn *Endgame* into a new Beckett, but rather create a strange imbalance; the proximity she seeks with the seating design is contradicted by the style of the set that forms a universe that seems to be taken from a tale and that necessarily distances the audience (Barrena, 2005: 34). Nevertheless, Santiago Fondevila appreciates the fact that she does manage to make a popular Beckett (Fondevila, 2005: 27).

Keeping in mind, on the one hand, the comparison with La Gàbia's production in 1990 and, on the other, the preconceptions about how Beckett should be performed, the reception by the critics is not part of a theatre semiotics: they analyse the performance text with previous readings that no longer correspond to the new reality offered by the new century. In addition, although the set innovations are described compared to the previous ones, there is no hermeneutic decoding, an interpretation of the signs, beyond what Novell already explains to Belén Ginart about the meaning of removing the walls, which is to involve the audience and invoke their own borders; in other words, create psychological walls (Ginart, 2005: 27).

Krystian Lupa, 2010

Lupa presented *Endgame* at the Teatre Lliure in 2010 with a production by the Teatro de la Abadía. After Novell, Lupa marked a new aesthetic in performing Beckett.

As shown in Figure 13, the performance space completely swallows up the visible marks of a theatre stage, making a structure that creates the effect of a metal box. What would be the downstage is part of the fictional space that the characters occupy, and this space is big, dirty and cold. It evokes an industrial building or abandoned warehouses that are out of tune with a lamp hanging from the ceiling that would be more suited to a homely interior.

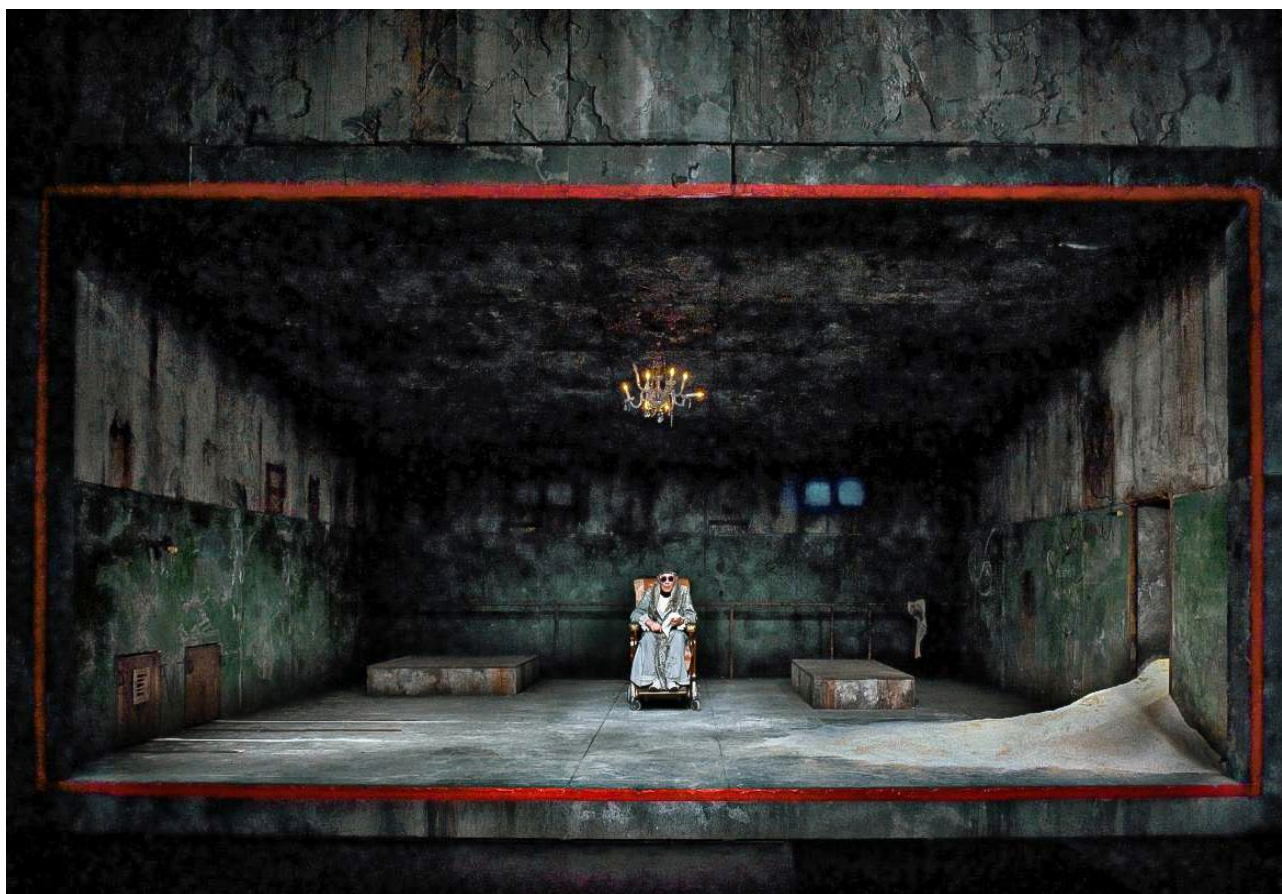


Figure 13. Centre stage, Hamm (José Luis Gómez). © Josep Ros Ribas. MAE. Institut del Teatre



Figure 14. On stage, Nagg (Ramón Pons) and Nell (Lola Cordón). © Josep Ros Ribas. MAE. Institut del Teatre

Lupa adds some symbolic elements that do not appear in the original text or in previous productions, such as the sand coming out of the kitchen door, as seen in Figure 13, or the space occupied by Hamm's parents — they are no longer ashbins but containers like those of a morgue. Nagg and Nell, in Figure 14, appear bare-chested, definitively leaving aside the pyjamas or clothes we have seen in previous versions.

Lupa treated all the details of the *mise en scène* as if they were talking elements, but not in accordance with what Beckett specified or marked, but with what he interpreted. For example, the sand, coming from this barren and dying exterior, has invaded the kitchen behind the door and is also beginning to enter the stage. It opens up a new path of exploration to bring the audience closer to the play and soothe the anxiety, as a spectator, of chasing a meaning and never catching it.

The Reviews

Marcos Ordóñez makes a distinction that can be crucial when understanding Krystian Lupa's approach to Beckett's play. He says that in performing Beckett there are two opposing dangers: turning the play into a circus or an *acto sacramental* (Ordóñez, 2010). Nevertheless, in terms of the slow pace he considers that, instead of engulfing the audience, it violently expels them. In addition, without ceasing to compare Lupa's conception with the previous ones, it gives this one more truth, pain and bitterness, as well as establishing a similarity between both Alfredo Alcón's and Lupa's Hamm: both behave like child despots (Ordóñez, 2010).

The review written by David Ladra analyses the performance text and focuses on the origin of the director: in the title of his text we are told about *Polish metaphysics* (Ladra, 2010). It is this particularity of Lupa that allows Ladra to ask himself the question of whether Beckett should continue to be performed in a canonical way or whether, instead, he should be renewed (Ladra, 2010). If we understand the progression of the different mises en scène, we notice that Novell was already aiming for a clear renewal. On the other hand, one should also ask what Ladra means by canonical; in many ways, La Gàbia's *Endgame* of 1979 had nothing to do with the 1990 production or Alfredo Alcón's in 1995. In any case, we can say that Lupa's production offers the spectator a new tension between the rhythm, which is out of tune with the latest productions seen in Catalonia, the characters and the aesthetic approach: a more raw and realistic vision can bring a new tragic recognition from the audience.

Sergi Belbel, 2021

Understanding the space of Samuel Beckett's text as neutral, as described by Theodor W. Adorno, is one of the key points in Belbel's approach. During an interview that he gave us on 7 May 2022, Belbel talks about Beckett as a contemporary thanks to the fact that space and time are deliberately imprecise and this is what makes him universal (Sergi Belbel, 2022: minute 17:05-20:44).

Endgame takes place in a zone of indifference between inner and outer, neutral between — on the one hand — the 'materials' without which subjectivity could not manifest itself or even exist, and — on the other — an animating impulse which blurs the materials, as if that impulse had breathed on the glass through which they are viewed (Adorno, 1982: 127-128).

Translating and Directing the Production

Sergi Belbel, theatre director and playwright, premiered *Endgame* in December 2021 at the Temporada Alta festival in Girona. After two performances on 3 and 4 December, the play visited different towns until spending the months of March and April 2022 in the Teatre Romea in Barcelona.

The cast of the show was as follows: Jordi Bosch and Jordi Boixaderas in the role of Hamm and Clov respectively, and Jordi Banacolocha and Margarida Minguillón as Nagg and Nell. Bosch and Boixaderas repeat their characters after they performed at the Festival Grec in 2005 under the direction of Rosa Novell. Apart from working with a different director, the translation was also different this time: the 2005 production used Joan Cavallé's and now Belbel also translated it because translations "age with time" (Sergi Belbel, 2022: minute 24:09-28:08) and that is why they must be renewed. The goal was to make an accessible text, which did not seem literaturised, even if this involved using barbarisms (Sergi Belbel, 2022: minute 28:09-29:05).

We cannot overlook the fact that an important difference between all the productions we analyse is that the text they convert from literary to performance is different. As Gérard Genette says, the translation is never a copy of the original text, part of the meaning of the text is linked to the language:

La forme de transposition la plus voyante, et à coup sûr la plus répandue, consiste à transposer un texte d'une langue à une autre: c'est évidemment la traduction, dont l'importance littéraire n'est guère contestable, soit parce qu'il faut bien traduire les chefs-d'œuvre, soit parce que certaines traductions sont elles-mêmes des chefs-d'œuvre (Genette, 1982: 330).

In the case at hand, therefore, Belbel plays four roles at the same time: first, actual reader of the literary text; second, translator and, therefore, generator of a largely nuanced meaning that departs from the original play; third, creator of the performance text — it is clear that this text is formed thanks to the entire artistic team — and, lastly and as he claims, the first actual spectator (Sergi Belbel, 2022: minute 31:58-33:34). He is an actual reader of the literary text because before translating it he retrieved the texts by the Irish author, both the original in French and Beckett's English translation. From these two primary texts, he began to work on the translation which — as we have pointed out — is actually a transposition and, inevitably, a generator of new meaning due to the change of language.

The *Mise en Scène*

Although Sergi Belbel follows Samuel Beckett's stage notes, he adds some changes that affect the set design. It is most evident moments before the start of the performance, just before we see the space described by the literary text: Belbel includes, as a new dramaturgical element, a torn red curtain that allows us to perceive a subtle play of lights, as Oriol Puig Taulé points out in his review (Puig Taulé, 2022). This preliminary added beginning shows the elements of a type of classical theatre that remind the spectator of where he is; it is precisely this metatheatrical fact of the play which, according to Belbel, is key in his version (Sergi Belbel, 2022: minute 44:45-46:15). This curtain suddenly speaks and becomes visible to us, present, and also allows us to imagine what is hidden behind it: lighting that is also alive. Therefore, the technical elements of a proscenium stage theatre that can often go unnoticed in other shows are now incorporated into the dramaturgy and become obvious.

If we compare Beckett's stage direction with the text translated by Joan Cavallé in 1988 and then used by La Gàbia in 1990 and also by Rosa Novell in 2005, we see some differences: in Beckett's text the back-to-front picture that was supposed to be next to the door has been directly removed as has the red face detail of the characters. In contrast, Cavallé, faithful to an earlier version by Beckett, still maintains these elements:

Bare interior.

Greyish light.

On the right and left walls, towards the back, two high windows with the curtains drawn.

Front right, a door. Hanging on the wall, near the door, a back-to-front painting.

Front left, touching each other, covered with an old sheet, two ashbins.

Centre, covered with an old sheet, sitting in a wheelchair, HAMM.

Motionless, next to the wheelchair, CLOV is staring at him. Very red face. (Cavallé, 2010:19)

In relation to Belbel's approach, we see that, once again, it is more faithful to Beckett's stage directions because it also removes the picture and the red face. However, there are some details that he overlooks, such as the window curtains:

Bare interior.

Grey light.

Left and right back, [...] two small windows, curtains drawn.

Front right a door. [...]

Front left, touching each other, covered with an old sheet, two ashbins.

Centre, in an armchair on castors, covered with an old sheet, Hamm.

Motionless, his eyes fixed on HAMM, CLOV [...] (Gontarski, 2019: 3).

The lighting also varies. Although Samuel Beckett did not want to vary the greyish light throughout the performance, Kiko Planas carries out lighting work in Belbel's production that is at times a game of warm reflections thanks to a yellowish hue.

Regarding the characters, another change that Beckett makes from his original version is to remove the red faces of Hamm and Clov, as we can see in Figure 15, as well as the white ones of Nagg and Nell, in Figure 16 (Beckett, 2019: 3). Beckett polished his literary text in order to achieve a somewhat



Figure 15. On stage, Clov (Jordi Boixaderas) and Hamm (Jordi Bosch). © David Ruano. Teatre Romea

more realistic performance text, partly to strip it of elements that might seem symbolic and therefore had to be interpreted or signified. In other words, he made a more neutral version.

The objects that appear throughout the performance only ensure neutrality: the ladder used by Clov is a normal metal ladder; the stuffed dog is a stuffed dog (Figure 15) and not a rabbit as in Novell's case; rubbish containers are also conventional (Figure 16), and so on. In short, what has a more neutral meaning is what we see in our day-to-day life; hence, in terms of Novell's and Lupa's approach, we have mentioned that the fact of offering such a radically different aesthetic, in the end, is intended to give the audience a more guided interpretation. They direct their gaze towards those objects that suddenly take centre stage and make the receiver think that he has to interpret something. In the case of *Belbel*, this is not so apparent.

It is worth relating this *mise en scène* to what Adorno develops when he positions himself as an actual reader of the text *Endgame*. He proposes an interpretation from the point of view of the philosophy of history. In this respect, he justifies Beckett's text, on the one hand, by contextualising it in a moment of European catastrophe after the Second World War and, on the other, he compares it with Sartrean existentialism by establishing the following distinction: Beckett does not show any conformism as existentialism does and this makes him apply the absurd to integrate poetics without any intention (Adorno, 1974: 127; trans. 2001).

In contrast, *Belbel*, in his desire to be faithful to the writer of the literary text, constructs the performance text erasing all historical references – everything from the space to the characters' costumes have a timelessness which, according to *Belbel*, is precisely the key to textual success; that is



Figure 16. On stage, Nagg (Jordi Banacolocha) and Nell (Margarida Minguiñón). © David Ruano. Teatre Romea

why he tells us that Hamm and Clov do not talk about places; only Hamm's parents who still have a memory of a past world have this ability. With dialogues that offer no temporal or spatial clues, Belbel takes the opportunity to enhance the atmosphere of closure: with the small windows, with a horizon blurred by mist, with the black walls that reinforce the feeling of anxiety (Sergi Belbel, 2022: minute 17:57-20:44).

The Reviews

A first reading of the theatre reviews reveals that there are two that agree on the fact that *Endgame* fits into the genre of comedy (Camps, 2022), (Puig Taulé, 2022). It is worth saying, however, that with the exception of Lupa's version and, in part, also the first version by La Gàbia, all the other versions seen have sought a tone very close to humour. Of course, as Belbel reminds us in the interview, we cannot talk about a conventional comedy: the play, distressing and tragic, finds comedy in both the rhythm and dark humour (Sergi Belbel, 2022: minute 46:17-49:13).

In any case, the reviews we have listed of this *Endgame* have noted the rhythm of the performance, but not to talk about it as only an element of the *mise en scène*, but as an essential part of reception: Belbel has put together an amicable, light and comical Beckett and this has brought the play to reach more people, to be more popular. Ramon Oliver, in his turn, speaks of "breathable atmosphere" (Oliver, 2022). Although we have already said that this is not the first production that understands the text as a comedy, it is the first time that critics have interpreted it as a process of demystification of the playwright and, moreover, praised it.

For the director, the core of the play is the moment when the characters laugh at the possibility of meaning something (Sergi Belbel, 2022: minute 12:40-13:23). Therefore, the distressing note that previous productions could have — that of La Gàbia from 1979 or Krystian Lupa, for example — has now become humour. Rosa Novell also opted for a performance text with humour: the difference with Belbel's approach is that, although Novell's reviews indicate that the audience's response was more unanimous in recognising the text as comic, the audience's reaction to Belbel's production is not so clear.

There is still some discrepancy when discussing Samuel Beckett and placing him in the relevant theatre context. Although Novell denied that he was a playwright of the theatre of the absurd, Josep Maria Viaplana does include him as such in his review published on *Recomana's* website (Viaplana, 2022). On this same website we also find an opposing review, written by Marc Sabater and entitled "Pot Samuel Beckett ser *mainstream* en una cartellera teatral?" (Sabater, 2022). If Viaplana believes he is not a mainstream playwright, Sabater ends up arguing that Beckett can be when, as Belbel does, Beckett's game is presented free of enigma. According to Sabater, there is no pretence of interpreting the text. His review, therefore, is explicitly focused on how the actual spectator can receive Belbel's version and, in this respect, it concerns theatre semiotics, that is to say, he is aware of the reception and mentions it.

However, we find several reviews that relate the text to what is happening in the world: the pandemic, the economic, health and climate crisis, or the war between Russia and Ukraine. This is the case of Oriol Puig Taulé (Puig Taulé, 2022), the review that Alba Carmona published in *Diari de Girona* — she compares the context of the Second World War and Hiroshima at the time of the publication of Beckett's original text with the pandemic situation happening when Belbel created his version (Carmona, 2021). Javier Pérez Senz also talks about it in *El País* to reinforce the idea of historical repetition (Pérez Senz, 2022). Bearing this in mind, these reviews have more to do with Adorno's reading from the philosophy of history. In other words, the meaning of the play — and the justification of its validity — is linked to the text's ability to tell us about our historical moment.

In these cases, we see that theatre criticism has not dissociated itself from a path that seeks to record all those symbols or icons that the critic considers relevant: that Hamm is the blind despot and that he lives sitting in a wheelchair, and that Clov would become the slave who does not dare to run away; Nagg and Nell, in turn, live inside some ashbins, and there are two small windows. It is, to some extent, a *semiotic-textual* approach (De Marinis, 1988: 45; trans. 1998), because they treat the performance text as a closed object of study, with a clear meaning. However, there is a difference with this approach, because criticism does establish a relationship with the current historical context: it does not treat the text as an isolated object.

In the same way, despite having linked Sabater's review with theatre semiotics, it is true that he does not mention the production process: “[...] the object of a theatre semiotics can no longer be the play, or the performance text, but will become, precisely, the theatrical relationship, that is to say, the productive-receptive process [...]” (De Marinis, 1988: 48; trans. 1998).

Conclusions

Leaving aside the particularity of each *mise en scène* and observing them from a panoramic view, we can say that all of them have similarities and differences depending on whether they were performed at the end of the 20th century or at the beginning of the 21st: those from 1979, 1990 and 1995 are more faithful to the original text of the playwright when it comes to respecting essential elements of the set design (they keep the windows with curtains, the picture on the wall, the ashbins, etc.); formal innovations, therefore, are minimal. This could be justified considering that Beckett had just been discovered in Catalonia and that there was still a certain mystification of his texts. On the other hand, what differentiates these three *misés en scène* the most is that the last two, La Gàbia in 1990 and Alfredo Alcón in 1995, opt for a fluid rhythm and a humorous tone that we do not find in the first version of La Gàbia, in 1979.

On the other hand, the two approaches from the beginning of the 21st century offer very different *misés en scène*; they seek to innovate with the set design based on a new Beckett aesthetic. Rosa Novell proposes a futuristic and dystopian scenario, also transforming the performing space, the

position of the audience and the stage. Lupa turns the performance space into a metal box where the action takes place. Both, therefore, play with the theatre itself and exploit the space to give a new perspective to dramaturgy. Sergi Belbel also takes an explicit look at the theatre space by adding the curtain within the dramaturgy.

During the analysis of the reviews we find an evolution that, in general, corresponds to that of the productions of the performance text: the review of *La Gàbia* in 1979 still entails a dense and mythologising reading of the play while the performance also has a ceremonial tone. However, when they revived it in 1990 and added a touch of humour, critics also praised the change.

A significant first step in the evolution of reviews is when they begin to talk about reception and the spectator. They do so for the first time with Alfredo Alcón's production. Afterwards, these critics' view was repeated in relation to the productions by Rosa Novell, Krystian Lupa and Sergi Belbel.

In terms of the rhythm of the performance, the show directed by Rosa Novell consolidates the reception of the text as a comedy. All the critics highlight it after the more tentative attempts of *La Gàbia* and Alfredo Alcón. Nevertheless, in 2011 Krystian Lupa breaks with this tendency: he provides a new treatment of the rhythm of the performance that divides the critics between those who praise it and those who do not.

The second significant step in theatre criticism appears following Sergi Belbel's approach. For the first time, the play is related to the current historical context. This gesture has been interpreted as a return to Adorno's starting point: when he analysed *Endgame* linking it to the horror after the Second World War. Beckett's desire to erase all temporal traces is for Belbel an opportunity to explore how from the margins the history of the characters strikes us with the same rawness. Paradoxically, stripping space of any temporal clue has been received by critics as a way of speaking to us about our present.

If we return to the question we initially asked about the methodology behind the reviews, we can also highlight some assertions. First, phenomenology has not been applied as a method when reviewing. Second, reviews that speak explicitly about the spectator may have to do with hermeneutics if the values they express are subjective. Third, as we intuited at the beginning of the study, the methodology that most influences criticism is semiotics. On the other hand, those reviews that value the relationship between the performance and the spectator have more to do with what De Marinis related to theatre semiotics (De Marinis, 1988: 48; trans. 1998). In addition, the most repeated resource during the reviews is the identification of the elements, the symbols and their interpretation, a gesture that would straddle the line between semiotics and hermeneutics.

Nevertheless, recovering the concepts that we used from Max Hidalgo at the beginning of the study, we can conclude that the rhythm of the performance, which for him was its very form (Hidalgo, 2011: 384-394), is what critics have valued most over the years. This means that, although we speak of "interpretation" in terms of performance or interpretation (Hidalgo, 2011: 384-385) and that criticism belongs to this second definition, its

task, in practice, has not been aimed so much at giving a meaning but at explaining the form of the performance of the play. And it means that, despite having defended the existence of a latent semiotic or hermeneutic methodology within theatre criticism, its main objective is not to interpret the performance text.

Finally, we take up the idea that Sergi Belbel's role is multiple because it oscillates between that of a spectator and a producer of a performance text. We have seen that, in the process of translation, he can be a generator of meaning because, understanding what Genette says, translating never means making an exact copy in another language, but a part of the meaning remains intrinsic in each language (Genette, 1982: 330). Moreover, the production of meaning is expanded once the translated literary text is transformed into a performance text.



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