



LISA DWAN: BECKETT TRILOGY

Friday, April 8, 2016

The Broad Stage, Santa Monica

WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE THE SHOW

- Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) was an Irish avant-garde writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. Most famous for his play *Waiting for Godot*, he is widely considered one of the most important writers of the twentieth century.
- Lisa Dwan's Beckett Trilogy is composed of three of Beckett's later works: "Not I," "Footfalls," and "Rockaby."
- The performance is 55 minutes of almost complete darkness, with several three-minute pauses that are in total blackout. All lights will be switched off, including emergency exit lights. In the event of an emergency, lights will be immediately switched back on.

LISA DWAN

Lisa Dwan (b. 1977) is an actor from rural Ireland. "Despite no formal acting training, she has burst upon the London theatre scene as a Beckett prodigy," writes the *New York Times*.

Dwan trained in ballet before turning her attention to acting. After a long-running role in the television series *Mystic Knights of Tir Na Nog*, a recurring role on the Irish soap opera *Fair City*, and a few film roles, she moved to London in hopes of pursuing a serious acting career in the theatre.

While working a day job at a London literary publicity agency in 2005, Dwan happened upon the script for Samuel Beckett's "Not I." Immediately struck by it ("I saw a transcript of how my mind works," she told the *New York Times*), she auditioned for a production of "Not I" at London's Battersea Arts Center. She got the part, and critics and audiences were blown away by her performance. For the next several years, Dwan held day jobs unrelated to theatre while performing Beckett every chance she got. She even created her own opportunities by forming her own production company in 2007. By 2012, she was performing "Not I" at the Royal Court Theatre in London. When Walter Asmus, a theatre director who had worked with Beckett, saw the show, he suggested adding "Footfalls" and "Rockaby" to the program. Dwan co-produced the resulting trilogy, which was soon touring Great Britain and then the world.

"Not I" is a notoriously difficult piece for an actor to perform. Many seasoned actors have attempted it and given up. Dwan told the *New York Times*, "the text is almost unlearnable, the physical stress is unbearable, the mental stress even worse. I meditate three times a day, I run, I am seeing a chiropractor, I have a hernia from pushing the sound out, my digestive system is affected. It has really taken its toll, but the rewards of speaking that gorgeous text are very great."

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SAMUEL BECKETT

Samuel Beckett (1906–1989) was an Irish avant-garde writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. He is widely considered one of the most important writers of the twentieth century. While he wrote in various genres, including criticism, short stories, poetry, and novels, he is best known for his plays, especially *Waiting for Godot* (1952). Born in Dublin, he spent many years of his adult life in Paris, including during World War II, when he participated in the underground resistance to the Nazi occupation of France.

Beckett wrote in both French and English, and his works are full of literary allusions that reflect his deep and wide-ranging education. He was profoundly influenced by Dante, Descartes, the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher Arnold Geulincx, and James Joyce, of whom he was a friend and student.

Beckett was concerned with the fundamental problems of human existence. His works attempt to touch the underlying anguish of the human condition: our ultimate uncertainty as to the true nature of the self, and the fact of being in the world without knowing why. The pervasive angst of Beckett's works is mixed with humor that stems from a sense of the absurd in the human predicament. *Waiting for Godot* is called "a tragicomedy." Beckett has been associated with the literary and artistic movements of modernism, the Theatre of the Absurd, and minimalism.

Lisa Dwan's Beckett Trilogy comprises three of the playwright's later works: "Not I" (1972), "Footfalls" (1976), and "Rockaby" (1981). As in much of Beckett's work, a philosophical interest in stripping reality to its basic elements is mirrored by a formal interest in distilling texts to their essentials.

THE BROAD STAGE

The Broad Stage at the Santa Monica College Performing Arts Center hosts innovative theatre, music, and dance performances. The design of the venue, by Santa Monica architect Renzo Zecchetto, is inspired by both the traditional Italian "horseshoe" theatre and a desire to employ contemporary technology in productions. The venue opened in 2008 under the leadership of founding director Dale Franzen, a former opera singer, and artistic advisory chair Dustin Hoffman.

The 499-seat theatre has one of the largest proscenium stages in the area and has established itself as an important venue for performing arts on L.A.'s West Side. The Broad Stage's education and outreach program reaches 16,000 students and other community members annually through more than 30 free and low-cost events.

THEMES TO THINK ABOUT

- Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* has been famously described as "a play in which nothing happens." Would you say that "nothing happens" in the works performed by Lisa Dwan tonight? If something happens—what is that something?
- How do Beckett and Dwan use rhythm? Think about the pacing and speed of the different texts. How does rhythm interact with language to create meaning?
- Consider the relationships between the writer of the text, the performer of that text, the director of that performer, and the designer of the stage lighting. How does collaboration shape a theatrical production? How might this production have been different with different artists involved?
- When Lisa Dwan read "Not I," she said, "I saw a transcript of how my mind works." Do you think Beckett has articulated a universal experience of the human condition? Do you think Dwan's immediate identification with the text has anything to do with her and Beckett's shared Irish heritage? Do you recognize the way your own mind works in "Not I"? Why or why not?