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## Still Life

Fiona Shaw talks 'Happy Days' and 'Harry Potter.'  
January 09, 2008

By Gerard Raymond

Fiona Shaw is best known around the globe as Harry Potter's meddling aunt, but it's her fearless stage work that stirs excitement on both sides of the Atlantic. Five years after Shaw gave us her horrifying Medea on Broadway, the Irish actor is back in New York, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in a revival of Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*. She plays the eternally optimistic Winnie, who is buried up to her waist, and later up to her neck, in earth. The production is directed by Deborah Warner, who, starting with a lacerating *Electra* in 1988, has guided Shaw through some outstanding

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performances, including the title role in *Richard II*, a solo recital of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and the Tony-nominated *Medea*. In 1994, Warner and Shaw mounted a revival of *Footfalls*, their first Beckett play together, but that production was stopped from touring by the Beckett estate due to deviations from the text and stage directions. Shaw spoke to Back Stage a few days before the opening of the New York engagement of *Happy Days*, which runs through Feb. 2.

**Back Stage:** After *Footfalls*, it seemed unlikely that you would ever get to do Beckett again. How did this production of *Happy Days* come about?

**Fiona Shaw:** Basically, it came up because I wanted to do something with Maggie Smith. I thought we should do *Waiting for Godot*. The Beckett estate said no but said we could do anything else we wanted, and they kind of suggested *Happy Days*. I was very against it, believing myself to be far too young and believing the play to be far too static. Then I came around to it. Once we started, I found it was definitely the most impossible text I had ever done.

**Back Stage:** So rehearsals weren't easy?

**Shaw:** We rehearsed all last winter and seemed to get nowhere with it. We opened for the first preview in London and the curtain went up and I thought, This is going to die in front of a thousand people. And then people began to laugh, almost immediately. And in their laughter I discovered there is another character in the play: It was the audience. I always felt that it's a game where the writer stops writing the story he's telling you and allows the audience to write a bit of it. I have often said that to students, but I had never believed it in my core. It's really true — the gaps that Beckett leaves are beautifully filled by the audiences themselves.



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**Shaw:** You begin to realize it's neither a comedy nor a tragedy. Often one half of a couple laughs all the way through it and the other weeps all through it. Some people panic when they see the woman buried. It's tremendously good playwriting. It's not the text of Winnie which is the only thing at play, but the sight of Winnie. And I think the exciting thing about this production is the landscape that Tom Pye has built and invented with Deborah. It's so thrilling. You're having a visual feast as well as a verbal feast.

**Back Stage:** What's it like being buried onstage all evening?

**Shaw:** I really wanted to feel the burial, so I rehearsed with enormous weight. Every morning I was buried in these sandbags. And then I would get up every hour or so and play badminton and then go back. It was extremely hard to learn the words and be in this uncomfortable position. The long sessions were very hard. Eventually your body resists; it wants to come out. But I'm very comfortable when I'm doing the play. I think you just shut yourself down; you're concentrating from the waist up.

**Back Stage:** Given that you initially didn't care to play Winnie, how did you make this character become someone you could live with for over a year during the international tour?

**Shaw:** I think Beckett wrote in the after-swell of the 1950s, so the pearl necklace and the hat — all these things that put a name to her as the suburban housewife — it's not necessarily mentally who she is. And that's been the freeing premise from which I played it. She has got to encompass the women who are my contemporaries in London. The pictures of Winnie that you see are often of a lady in her 50s, so I felt it was about that phase later in one's marriage. But actually it's not. It's about anyone. I think it was Edward Albee who said brilliantly that this is a very naturalistic play. You take away the preoccupations that make plays — like kitchens and meals and families — and you leave only the dialogue that is really going on between the husband and wife, and that's what you've got in this play.

We talked earlier about the audience writing the play. They can build the house themselves — possibly their own house — and also the gender of the partners. Beckett said about Willie [Winnie's husband], he gives her the minimum. And I know many men who give their wives the minimum, but I also know many women who give their husbands the minimum. The identification with Winnie is with anyone who finds that they're barely heard. Beckett, of course, is hitting on something very profound — that even when we're bold enough or brave enough to get rid of God in any big sense, and

you can get rid of days and nights and have just the bell for waking and the bell for sleep, you do want to be witnessed by somebody, even if it's the most inadequate person in the world.

**Back Stage:** Your professional partnership with Deborah Warner has lasted nearly two decades. What do you value most in her as a director?

**Shaw:** *Electra* was very important for my acting development. Up to that point I had just been doing comedies. I was allowed to see how far my imagination could push language and my physicality. I'm a very physical person, so to use all of yourself stretched in that way is a very dangerous, difficult thing to do, and you need somebody with a very good eye to hold it. That bred enormous trust. I trust that Deborah will not let the wildness of my creativity be misplaced.

**Back Stage:** What are you doing next after *Happy Days*?

**Shaw:** I'm about to direct a few things: *Riders to the Sea* at the English National Opera, *The Tempest* for radio. I'm working with the great mezzo-soprano Magdalena Kozena on an evening of cantatas. And then *Mother Courage*, directed by Deborah, next year at the National.

**Back Stage:** In the meantime, you've also acquired a whole other fan base with the *Harry Potter* movies. What's that been like?

**Shaw:** I am delighted to be a part of it. I'm not in number six, but I will be in number seven. It's a phenomenon wherever I go in the world. It's amazing how children know you everywhere. They don't draw a line between the world of imagination and the real world. It's got to the extent that my father sometimes has cars slowing down going past his house because the children say that in there is Harry's grandfather.

**Back Stage:** Do you have plans for any contemporary stage work?

**Shaw:** I'd love to be doing some vast piece of work that is brand new, but there are not that many great pieces to throw a year of your life at. I'm a very big fan of Marina Carr, a young Irish writer. I did a play of hers [*Woman and Scarecrow*] at the Royal Court and a reading of her *Phaedra Backwards* at Princeton. She really has got the kiss of Shakespeare in her writing. I also want to do some investigative work on subjects that excite me and try to find a way to get them written in a way that's big enough. This Beckett play feels much more contemporary than anything I get sent to read. I wish it was its first night ever. People would be dazzled by it. The highlight of this past year was doing *Happy Days* at the ancient theatre at Epidaurus in Greece. I found that unspeakably thrilling. We played out of doors, without a microphone, to 5,000 people. I couldn't believe that I was doing the same activity as my colleagues 2,500 years ago in the same spot.

We were cancelled the next night because of the fires which were raging over the hills, so we're going to go back to open the festival this year, and that will finish the tour of *Happy Days*.

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