

Censorship From the Grave

The Beckett estate kills a London production of Footfalls, starring Fiona Shaw.

BY GERARD RAYMOND

Samuel Beckett is regarded as one of the revolutionary writers of this century, but how will he rate in the next? If the fate of Deborah Warner's remarkable production of Beckett's *Footfalls* starring Fiona Shaw is any indication, the innovative playwright's work may not find any place at all in the theater of the future.

In the twenty-minute *Footfalls*, a middle-aged woman conducts an interior monologue, as well as a conversation with her ailing mother, while pacing up and down along a narrow strip of stage. Is the mother still alive? Is the daughter a ghost? We don't know. But with sharp poetic shreds of dialogue, Beckett conveys the daughter's loneliness and alienation as she treads the same path over and over in life or in death.

Last month, director Deborah Warner incurred the wrath of the Samuel Beckett Estate and several other prominent Beckett partisans because in her production at the Garrick Theater in London's West End she did not follow the late playwright's specific stage directions. Her most grievous transgression, according to the detractors, was that Fiona Shaw, who played the daughter, used two playing areas in the theater instead of Beckett's narrowly defined strip.

After *Footfalls* ended its week-long run in London, the Beckett estate cancelled the rights to the scheduled European tour (the production was partly financed by the Maison de la Culture Bobigny in Paris). Beckett's literary agent, Leah Schmidt, reportedly declared that Warner would never be given permission to direct Beckett again; however, that extreme position was later denied by Edward Beckett, the playwright's nephew and executor.

Insistence on total fidelity to Beckett's precise stage directions, which many believe are as important as the text, is without doubt the prerogative of the Beck-

ett estate. Beckett died in 1989; should his plays now be frozen in time? A sad fate indeed for the man who rewrote the rules for the theater forty years ago with *Waiting for Godot*. Shouldn't these plays, rather, be allowed to live in an age when our ideas of the theater are changing?

For example, placing an actor in white light in a black box set, though innovative twenty years ago, is a cliché today. Instead of excoriating Warner for desecrating sacred texts, we ought to commend her for bravely trying to find a new context for Beckett's alienated characters. As she told *The Guardian* in London, we should not be treating these plays as museum pieces. "Plays are fluid things, not objects. They can exist only by being reinterpreted for each generation."

In a telephone interview with *Theater-Week*, Fiona Shaw pointed out that the Garrick is located in the center of London, surrounded by the history of the city; a portion of its stage is built on an old graveyard. "It's a world which is built partly on the world outside, but it is absolutely not part of that world," she said, offering the opinion that the Garrick "replies very sophisticatedly to the text [of *Footfalls*]."

Shaw explained that the idea to change the playing area to suit the physical characteristics of the Garrick theater occurred while they were working on the play. There was a sense in the writing that the last speech of the play was freer than the previous one, she said. "It may mean that [the character] walks into a door and that door doesn't lead to anywhere, but it allows the play to go a bit on a journey."

It was this very change which gave the production its vitality and unique theatrical quality. The experience started the moment you entered the Garrick. Most of the plush theater was blocked out (only 250 of the 650 seats were sold per performance); the house was illuminated with working

lights, and wooden planks lay across the rows that the audience was to occupy. If you were looking around, taking in the suddenly unfamiliar surroundings, you might have missed Fiona Shaw as she shuffled across the stage towards a platform on the balcony of the auditorium for the commencement of the play proper. To watch the actress tread her weary path on that narrow ledge, you had to stand with your back to the stage. About ten minutes later, she returned to the stage and delivered the narrative portion of her monologue which Beckett refers to as a "sequel," all the while continuing her endless pacing.

Beckett purists were also incensed that Shaw wore a red dress in the play, when the playwright calls for a grey wrap. But this too, Shaw explains, was not a cavalier decision but a carefully thought out response to the space in which they were working. Beckett placed his grey-clad actress in a black box set; designer Hildegarde Bechtler dressed Shaw in red against a red theater. "It's the cancellation of one color against the other, a translation of the same essence," said Shaw.

Warner's production drew a wide range of notices from the London critics: Michael Coveney in the *Observer* gave it an unqualified rave, hailing the production as "superb, clarifying and poetic," while Michael Billington said in *The Guardian* that it was "a bit like seeing someone doodling on a Rembrandt." Billington's charge of vandalism seemed to inform a letter which Edward Beckett sent to the same paper, accusing Warner of showing disrespect to the great playwright. What, I wonder, would have been the Beckett estate's reaction had the critics been unanimous in their approval?

Billington claimed in his review that Warner's production would disappoint



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anyone who remembers the "eerie grandeur" of the original 1976 Royal Court version which starred Billie Whitelaw. He also insisted that it would "probably puzzle anyone new to the play." But for someone totally unfamiliar with the play like myself, Warner's *Footfalls* in the empty Garrick Theater had its own ghostly quality, and Shaw's performance brought out the poetry and despair, not to mention the sly humor, of Beckett's writing.

That a mere twenty-minutes of theater should become a *cause célèbre* may be due to factors other than protection of a playwright's work. The English theater establishment is notoriously uncomfortable with too much success. Could some of the vehemence in the adverse reactions to *Footfalls* be attributed to the singular success Warner and Shaw have enjoyed in the past? They were highly praised for their past three collaborations—*Electra*, *The Good Person of Sichuan*, and *Hedda Gabler*—and Shaw's recent performance in *Machinal* won a Best Actress Laurence Olivier award this year. This highly uncommercial venture of putting a Beckett play on in the West End sold out on the strength of their names on the marquee. Then again, there is also a fiercely protective older generation to contend with. Beckett's personal friend, the superb actress Billie Whitelaw, for whom *Footfalls* was written, claimed recently in *The New York Times* that she felt "as if Samuel Beckett were burned at the stake; I felt numb, physically ill." Whitelaw is now in her early 60s; Warner and Shaw are both in their early 30s.

"I do think Beckett is a very robust writer and that robustness will survive this [production] for good or ill," Shaw told me. "I hope we have put a spoke in the wheels of those imitative productions that were not really helping Beckett be absorbed into the future of the theater. We have a generation below us who are on the verge of turning their back on classical theater," she said. "You have got to apply the imaginations of our time to these plays, not the imaginations of other times."

This fall the intrepid duo is scheduled to make a film of *Measure for Measure*. As we have discovered on innumerable occasions, Shakespeare is our contemporary; thanks to the myopia of his executors, Beckett may have to remain part of our past.

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