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## POSTMODERN STAGINGS OF *WAITING FOR GODOT*

Mariko Hori Tanaka

Postmodernism is difficult to define and has therefore evoked much heated controversy. As Hans Bertens puts it: "Postmodernism means and has meant different things from humble literary-critical origins in the 1950s to a level of global conceptualization in the 1980s" (Bertens 10). Paul A. Bove comments that, "there is, I think, a difference between the early postmodern critics' efforts and more recent scholars expansion of the term" (Bove, 9).

It has often been discussed whether Samuel Beckett is a modern or postmodern writer, but I will not go into that question. I would rather like to focus on several recent productions of his *Waiting for Godot*, and show how they reflect postmodernism in the way they are staged. Since the term postmodernism is vague, ambiguous, and often problematic, I think it necessary to make clear how I am going to use it in my approach to the theatre of Beckett.

Cornel West in his analysis of postmodern American philosophy defines postmodernism as a denial of antirealism, demythologizing the myth of the Given, and de-transcendentalizing the Subject (Bove 265-84). Deborah R. Geis summarizes six aspects of postmodernism, one of which is that "the postmodern subject — that is, the split, multiple, or contradictory 'I' — is a decentered one, and so the notion of 'character' is no longer holistic" (Geis, 31-35). Both West and Geis treat the issue of questioning the subject in the modern sense as being very important.

Beckett himself seems to be more and more interested in the split/multiple/fragmented subject in his late playlets, for instance by splitting a self into two alter egos as in *Ohio Impromptu*, by creating four characters only different in their names but in fact being the split characters of Voice in *What Where*, or by having four identical dancers move around geometrically as in *Quad*. Beckett does not visually split or fragment characters in his early plays, starting with *Waiting for Godot*. Of course, as with other Beckett characters, the characters in that play do not have a clearly defined self and they question who and what they are to each other. They are sometimes, as is mentioned, "Adam", the symbol of the whole human being, but sometimes they are nobody with no certainty about who they are, where they are, and why they are there. They are not sure of themselves. But in *Waiting for Godot* there always exists a tension and an anxiety about their situation, which pulls us back to the modern sense of what is Man. So even if

there is a threat of the self melting away, there is also an energy to laugh it away. However, when we realize that theatre is a performing art created not only by playwrights but also by directors, performers, and other artists involved in its staging, theatre must necessarily reflect current theoretical and political ideas. So it is only natural that today's theatre reflects the perspective from which that world is seen and that is decidedly a postmodernist one. Especially after having seen and read Beckett's late plays where he visually splits or fragments or multiplies the subject, there is no reason for theatre practitioners to stick to the rigid representation of the conventional characters. Directors nowadays tend to add their new perspectives when working on a production. Some even change the structure of the original.

By categorizing three levels of staging, I will discuss several postmodernist stagings of *Waiting for Godot*, showing how the characters are basically enacted as the 'other' or the split/multiple/fragmented self, which I regard as a chief feature of postmodernism. And I will analyze how such strong impulses toward the postmodern make new interpretations of that play possible or, often enough, destroy the world of Beckett by departing from the kind of performance Beckett indicated himself.

First, there are adaptations of Beckett, using more characters than the original. In 1979 Andre Engel's adaptation of *Waiting for Godot*, in which its two main characters were split and fragmented into ten characters, was produced in Strasbourg. According to Anne C. Murch, four of them bore the names of Gogo, Didi, Lucky, and Pozzo, while the others had no name except a simple description such as "the barman" and "the bride". The characteristics embodied in Estragon and Vladimir were distributed over three pairs: two tramp-like men living in a car, two grim heterosexual pairs, and the bride raped by her bridegroom. In addition, the setting was changed from "a country road" to a suburban landscape with the neon lights from shops and bars, so that the characters inhabit present-day urban cities (Murch, 189-93).

A year later, Tamiya Kuriyama directed a similar adaptation of *Godot* in Tokyo. He also proliferated the characters. The play starts with Vladimir and Estragon entering the stage on bicycles and talking with each other in different dialects. Then, other pairs appear on stage one by one. The setting of Kuriyama's version was also the contemporary urban city, in which he imagined the condition of Tokyo inhabitants who came originally from different districts to work in the city and live their mediocre lives with no particular purposes.

Another French production of *Waiting for Godot* directed by Philippe Adrien in Paris, 1994, was set in Paris itself, although it did

not proliferate the characters. Rosette E. Lamont describes it as “the post-World War II, post-Holocaust play [being] replaced by a post-modern spectacle. It has a contemporary, urban rhythm and sound” (Lamont 19). In 1992, Joel Jouanneau had already directed *Godot*, set in a local industrialized French town. Vladimir and Estragon’s sense of emptiness and solitude seems comparable to the present-day condition of urban dwellers’ mind. Or as Kuriyama says, “every person living in the city is trying to find Vladimir and Estragon in the crowd who inhabit in the city.” He is no longer an individual but one of many, or rather one of the whole, which has turned him into a machine — or a commodity — rather than a human being. Therefore, the proliferation of characters reveal both Engel and Kuriyama’s postmodernist perspectives.

Both Engel and Kuriyama used the text which was made up of extracts from the dialogue of the original version. So the text was indeed ‘deconstructed’ and very different from the original, for the extracts of the dialogue did not necessarily follow the order of the original. The proliferation of the characters goes in opposite direction against Beckett, whose theatre is minimalistic, in which the maximum meaning comes from the minimalist setting — and perhaps from the minimalist characterization. Therefore these productions are not faithful to the original but their originality lies in how the directing works. They may not be Beckett’s *Godot* but altered ‘new’ works.

Secondly, I will discuss productions of *Waiting for Godot* using the original script but with cross-gender or cross-cultural characters. Here, the dialogue spoken on stage is faithful to Beckett. Other elements such as settings and characters are also faithful to the original. But the visual and auditorial impact is totally different from the original because of the cross-gender or cross-cultural impact; the relationship between Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky will be transformed into a more ideological one with new power relations created among the four characters.

A typical cross-gender and cross-cultural performance was presented recently in Japan by the well-known director Yukio Ninagawa. He directed *Waiting for Godot* with an all-female cast in the autumn of 1994. Before discussing his way of directing it, let me explain some cultural characteristics of Japan’s traditional theatre, which certainly influenced Ninagawa’s work. According to a Japanese drama critic, Tamotsu Watanabe, the Japanese traditionally viewed a human being as a unison of multiple characters. For example, in the Noh play called *Kakitsubata*, the main character which we generally call Shite, who is supposed to be a village maiden, dances in her dead lover’s kimono. She then gradually changes into a fairy of the flower named

“kakitubata”, and finally she gives an impression of a courtesan. This shows not that she transforms into five characters but that she has five characters in her.

Even in the famous Kabuki repertoire, “Sukeroku”, the protagonist, Sukeroku, a commoner in the Edo period transforms into Soganogoro, a famous samurai a few centuries before Edo, in the climactic scene. It does not mean that Sukeroku recalls the spirit, but he has two different characters in him, the common vulgar character and the graceful refined character (Watanabe). So in both Kakitsubata’s and Sukeroku’s cases, there is no single unchangeable identity. In other words, there is no rigid unchangeable subject in the western modernist sense.

In Kabuki and Noh, male actors take female roles. Therefore it often happens that an actor plays the role of a female who consists of several characters within herself. Actors of female roles play not only multiple characters but also marginalized roles of the society. With actresses playing Vladimir and Estragon, as in the case of Ninagawa’s *Godot*, the marginalization and multiplicity of their fate are strongly visualized, though the contextual masculinity in Beckett’s original may conflict with their female features.

In Ninagawa’s version, actresses did not play male roles as they are in the original, but he even changed male roles into female ones! Vladimir and Estragon were replaced by two travelling harlots who existed in the Japanese Middle Ages, wearing tattered kimonos. They were harlots but at the same time mediums of God who not only foretold the clients’ future but played the roles of mediums who spread the literary culture by travelling around Japan. So like Vladimir and Estragon, they were intelligent homeless tramps. They fit the philosophical but marginalized protagonists of *Waiting for Godot*, though their existence as commodities was emphasized. But they were not exploited by Pozzo and Lucky, who invaded into their spheres, for they appeared as circus clowns. Pozzo was a sumo referee and Lucky played a sumo wrestler, looking like a showman and his monkey. Besides, the actress playing the role of Pozzo was a master of Japanese dance. So they really entertained Vladimir and Estragon — and the audience as well — without any threatening air. Ninagawa put more emphasis on showmanship, so he entertained his audience by using various acting styles. Though he focused too much on amusing the audience, his cross-gender casting suggests reconsidering the fundamental question of human existence in the play.

In a play like *Waiting for Godot*, where the core of the play lies in universal existential problems and any character can be anyone — a

human being, why not use actresses is the question many directors posed even while Beckett was alive, for (as is well-known) he was very rigid when it came to gender. For example, when Beckett heard that a Dutch theatre group wanted to perform *Godot* with an all-female cast, he was so offended that he not only refused them permission to produce it but also said he would not allow any Dutch group to produce his plays while he was alive — a decision he revoked only shortly before his death.

But in this postmodern age, cross-dressing performance can be useful to express the ambiguity of the gender construct, or 'performativity' of the gender, to use Judith Butler's term. It is also effective for actresses to play male characters, for it makes the audience realize "how much that play is about male psychology" (Oppenheim, 138). For the audience cannot help seeing female bodies exploited by 'male' language there. Ninagawa's actresses' costume and gesture had female characteristics while the content of their dialogue was still 'male', so that the gap between the appearance and the inner psychology made the play incomprehensible, though some might call it postmodern eclecticism in a negative sense.

Something similar happened in Lisa Forrell's *Waiting for Godot*, produced in London in 1994, which was performed by cross-cultural actors: Vladimir played by a Jordanian, Estragon by a Turkish Armenian, Pozzo by a Briton, and Lucky by an American. The production attracted much attention before it opened, for Forrell replaced the European setting with the Middle East. You would have to imagine the British and the American domineer the Jordanian and the Turkish as well as the history of the British having ruled America in the past and of the Americans having defeated Britain, and think it fits the four characters' relationship described in the play. But the production failed, for Forrell could not delve into the inner struggles of the four protagonists; instead she explored the relation between the ruler and the ruled only through costumes and props. The audience even could not differentiate a Jordanian from an Armenian.

Such cross-cultural performance, however, is not meaningless. It can add the possibility of opening up new perspectives if they could be shown properly, as was the case in the performance by the Haifa Municipal Theatre in Israel. In this production, Estragon and Vladimir were played by Palestinians in Arabic, while Pozzo and Lucky were played by Jews in Hebrew but Lucky's speech was in Arabic. It described the tragedy of Palestinians who were deprived of their land, the friction between Palestinians and Jews, and finally the possibility of their helping each other (Ronen, 239-249). *Waiting for Godot* is indeed

a play about the ruler and the ruled, which is one of the main features Beckett liked to describe in his works. The cross-gender and the cross-cultural performances can emphasize or exaggerate that point, sometimes in a postmodern parodic way.

Thirdly, let me discuss briefly the productions which are overtly faithful but reflect postmodernism by adding some features to the way of acting. The way those productions express postmodern features comes closest to Beckett's own with a few changes, though even this approach may seem deplorable to some purists. Philippe Adrian's *Waiting for Godot* had a contemporary urban atmosphere with its characters' rhythmical language, as I mentioned before. The urban quality may make the inner struggles of the characters understandable in industrialized nations. Michael Rudman's 1987 successful *Godot* in London was also set in a local British town with a broad paved road instead of a country road, and Pozzo spoke arrogantly in a local landowner-like demeanour.

But a production which clearly showed the postmodern quality that the self loses its rigid identity was, for me, a tiny production of *Waiting for Godot* by the Ad Hoc theatre company in London, in 1995. It conveyed the lyrical rhythm of the play by showing estrangement between language and body. They often adopted mechanical and rhythmical movements, one of which was the movement in Beckett's mime play, *Quad*. Even their dialogue was spoken almost mechanically but with a natural flow as if the language they were speaking came out of their mouths automatically. They were speaking almost as if they had become 'the other': Vladimir spoke, avoiding the eyes of other characters and even of the audience. He stared vacantly into the air as if he were haunted by some unseen power, and Estragon spoke stifflingly in a rather quiet voice without crying and shouting even when he was in despair. Their elocution, in spite of their apathetic manner, sounded lyrical, as lyrical as we find it in Beckett's plays, though it is forgotten in many of the recent productions of *Godot*. So the impression I received was indeed what Silvio Gaggi defines as a postmodern 'performance' when speaking of the productions of Richard Forman: "the voice is used, but coherent dialogue is avoided; language tends to be poetic and evocative" (Gaggi, 83). It is also true that the language of the written text itself is postmodernist in the sense that it rejects the grand narratives and celebrates language games (Nealon 520-28). Thus the Ad Hoc production revived the original poetic language in the postmodernist manner.

We cannot know if the label 'postmodern quality' is an appropriate one to explain many of the recent and future performances of *Waiting*

for *Godot*, because it is so common but not thought about carefully enough. It even indicates an inexplicable, ambiguous quality permeated in this complicated multi-faceted world. Still it helps us to explain the condition of our present world and I believe that the term is useful, at least at this late stage of the twentieth century, to express the perspectives I have discussed here.

It is true that excessive use of current thoughtless and eclectic postmodern interpretations of Beckett will reduce the value of his original plays, as Robert Scanlan warns in his essay (Scanlan, 148-49), but the postmodern perspectives of our human existence which I have referred to cannot be ignored in this age of fin de siècle. Without such a vision, *Waiting for Godot* will not appeal to contemporary audiences. But I do have to admit that some of the productions which I mentioned are no longer Beckett's but originals by their directors, who developed themes they found in *Godot*. Should we call all such directions outrageous? In some cases, they may be innovative in bringing Beckett to a modern audience. As long as there exist directors who take up the difficult challenge of collaborating with Beckett's instructions, Beckett will survive and prosper in the next century, and productions appealing as well as faithful to Beckett will result from these challenges.

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