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All That Fall (review)

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Chabert's performance placed the story of Krapp within the traditions of French comedy. The actor played much of the text out to the audience in a deliciously broad performance that made the individual spectator the play's most important ironist. As the skin of the peeled banana became the motif around which the ironic communication between performer and viewer was organized, Chabert offered a version of Krapp both unexpected and located within a deep theatrical tradition. Far from searching for novelty in the realm of pure conceptual innovation, both of these performances surprised and delighted by offering new perspectives on a Beckett whose influence on the theatre seems far from expired.

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ALL THAT FALL. By Samuel Beckett. Directed by John Sowle. Kaliyuga Arts at the Cherry Lane Theatre, New York City. 3 June 2006.

Samuel Beckett's plays are rarely set outdoors, for the dark and bare interior better suits the twilight ruminations of Beckett's protagonists. When nature is depicted on his stages, it is often in decline: scorched grass; a single, nearly bare tree. But *All That Fall*, a radio play composed in 1956 and first broadcast by the BBC in 1957, opens with an aural burst of nature. A bucolic chorus of sheep, bird, cow, and rooster provides the first in a series of lively accompaniments to Maddy Rooney's journey along a country road in Ireland toward the local railway station to meet her husband Dan on what may be his one-hundredth birthday.

Rather than reflecting the play's rural setting, however, the Kaliyuga Arts production recreated the kind of 1950s-era radio studio where *All That Fall* originally performed. Hosted at the historic Cherry Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village to celebrate the playwright's centennial year, Kaliyuga staged the show in an intimate sixty-seat studio space. Boxy silver microphones flanked a massive floor-model radio from the period stacked with books by and about the author. Chairs lined rear and stage-left curtains to provide seating for the large cast, who waited onstage to speak their parts. In keeping with the period setting, the company wore 1950s clothing dominated by sepia browns and bright creams, the men with retro-pattern neckties and suspenders and the women in flowing silk dresses. Dublin-born Helen Calthorpe, as Mrs. Rooney, wore a maroon velvet suit with a long skirt and a ruffled blouse and stood apart from the rest of the cast in front



Helen Calthorpe (Maddy Rooney), Erik Kever Ryle, Daniel Hall Kuhn, Dan Seda, and Kate Hamill (Animal Chorus), and Jack Dyville (Foley Operator) in *All That Fall*. Photo: John Sowle.

of the stage-left microphone. The costume choices contrasted the company's recreation of a mid-century sound stage with the script's evocation of the Irish countryside, thus emphasizing an interplay between the visual and the verbal that resonated throughout the production.

Indeed, the radio-play staging allowed the audience to witness and enjoy the sight of sounds being made, and the cast expertly executed the script's plentiful acoustic requirements throughout the performance. In the stage-right area, sound designer Sara Bader trod a small parcel of gravel to simulate obese Mrs. Rooney's heavy, plodding feet. Bader and the other Foley operator, Jack Dyville, used a collection of instruments to generate the mechanical noises that punctuate and indicate the action: cart, locomotive, bell, horn. Most delightfully, the actors reached beyond the boundaries of language to create the very convincing animal chorus of the opening moments. And when Maddy spoke of the ringdoves she hears in the woods around her, cast member Guenevere Donohue tiptoed forward to one of the two microphones and produced a perfect coo with her round, red mouth. This gesture induced an audio pleasure that called to mind Krapp's relish of the word "spool" in *Krapp's Last Tape* while visually echoing Mouth in *Not I*. The barnyard and forest sounds also served to remind us that human speech exists on a continuum with other voices in nature.

With all the actors visibly enjoying the show, the Kaliyuga Arts production had charm and energy in keeping with the celebratory nature of this production, but the staging choices defied the common critical consensus that Mrs. Rooney and company should be experienced as disembodied sounds. In the

original BBC broadcast, the play's radio transmission downplayed its naturalistic elements, allowing for the possibility that the action may be taking place in Mrs. Rooney's head. In the Kaliyuga Arts production, despite the technical artificialities and the marked contrast between the 1950s set pieces and the play's setting in an early twentieth-century rural Ireland, as we saw Maddy greet each of her companions along her journey, we could not dismiss them as imaginative figments of a monologic musing. They became for us the colorful characters of the village Boghill. The production choices limited the ambiguity of the radio transmission and thus reduced the vagueness often associated with Beckett.

Yet, Beckettian echoes resounded from expected and unexpected production elements. Beckett's comic talents remained present, and as Calthorpe's Maddy chronicled tales of death, illness, departure, and the absence of love, the determination to continue and even to snatch brief moments of pleasure aligned this character with other Beckett creations in plays from this period.

Indeed, ghosts of other Beckett plays seemed to hover about this production. The actors read from their scripts and dropped the pages as they finished to avoid rustling, thus invoking a persistent image of discarded words floating silently to the floor. With the lion's share of the dialogue, Mrs. Rooney slowly formed a mound of paper around herself, calling to mind another wordy Beckett protagonist, Winnie from *Happy Days*. While Kaliyuga Arts has only recently relocated to New York City from Los Angeles, the Cherry Lane Theatre hosted the American premiere of *Endgame* in 1958 and the world premiere of *Happy Days* in 1961. Rand Mitchell, who lent a tall and dapper figure to his role as Mr. Rooney—alternately distant, angry, and affectionate with his wife—played Listener in the original cast of *Ohio Impromptu* opposite David Warrilow. Unfortunately, Mitchell's lack of an Irish brogue here made him an unconvincing partner to Calthorpe's Maddy.

The production ended, appropriately for Beckett, not in the coherence of an audience coming together in applause, but in the awkward and anticlimactic conclusion of a radio show. Matt Walker, in the role of announcer, signaled the end of the broadcast, and the red "On the Air" light was extinguished. The actors relaxed into themselves again, and Calthorpe gathered up the sheets of paper that surrounded her while the others wandered off into the backstage area in twos and threes. The Irish village dissolved without fanfare, and the memories of Beckett's origins once again existed only on the dog-eared pages of the scattered script.

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WOMAN AND SCARECROW. By Marina Carr. Directed by Ramin Gray. Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, London. 15 July 2006.

In *Woman and Scarecrow*, the main character of Woman, played by Fiona Shaw with a complete lack of sentimentalism, battles out the last moments of her life. She dies as she lived—with spite, bitterness, and passion. Ramin Gray directs the piece quietly, containing the grief and suffering in a stark bedroom where death literally strains to enter. Against the room's black carpet and walls, the white deathbed hovers like a ghost. On the edge of the stage an unassuming white wardrobe rumbles and threatens to explode as it houses the vicious, hungry, beaked "thing" that Scarecrow alternately bargains and fights with to stave off Woman's demise. Bríd Brennan plays the mysterious Scarecrow with poise and sharp intuitive grace. Part familiar, part confessor, part soul, Scarecrow punctures all Woman's delusions, revealing her harshest truths and sharing her deepest passions and suffering.

Gray's direction allows us to hear the mundane and mysterious registers that playwright Marina Carr generates: the suffering of a dying woman, the epic confusions of a small life longing for grandeur, the eternal unknown of the "beyond," and the organic unknown of a body's capacity in living its death. On one level, we have a simple story of the ordinary life of a frustrated housewife and mother of eight children, her bitter battles with her remorseful, pitiful, unfaithful husband, Him, and the vicious and viciously funny interactions with Auntie Ah (played with great verve by Stella McCusker), who raised Woman after her mother's death. Auntie Ah's name suggests a sigh of weariness or admonishment or even a banshee cry, as she is a woman obsessed with laying out the dead after satisfying her curiosity to see how they died. On another level though, Scarecrow intercedes on the register between life and death, materializing the enigma of life's only surety: dying.

In this latest offering from one of Ireland's leading playwrights, Carr has moved away from the Midlands and the particular Irish settings of her earlier successes such as *The Mai*, *The Bog of Cats*, *Portia Coughlan*, and *On Raftery's Hill*. Here she conjures a humorous yet brooding atmosphere required for a play that delves deeply into the last moments of a dying psyche. *Woman and Scarecrow* isn't set anywhere, only suggesting an Irish context: a "west" where Woman came from and would like to return to die; a clique of unruly relatives waiting outside the death room, who have already commenced the wake; a priest waiting to take confession; a dialogue suggesting an Irish idiom; Auntie Ah and her fervent, unforgiving, almost genetic Catholic verve; and a feckless husband, captured deftly by Peter