

Werner Huber

Transformations of Beckett: the case of Athol Fugard

Abstract

The author attempts in various ways to account for the similarities between Fugard and Beckett. He points out a certain biographical linkage, and goes on to discuss and evaluate the more direct influences of Beckett on Fugard. The existentialist link is noted and the influence of other writers on Fugard pointed out as a balancing force. Three Beckettian motifs in Fugard's work emerge: the nexus motif, the motif of coming to terms with one's past, and the play or game model. Despite parallels and similarities, however, considerable differences appear when conceptual and ideological values are analysed. There is a dialectic between universalism and regionalism. The conclusion is that Fugard displays a quality of courageous pessimism more akin to Camus than Beckett.

Athol Fugard began his career as a dramatist with a play entitled *Klaas and the Devil*. It was, in Fugard's words, "an attempt, a bad one to set Synge's *Riders to the Sea* in a South African fishing village" (Vandenbroucke, 1985:12–13). It was produced at an amateur drama festival in 1956, but Fugard never allowed it to be published. So while in this respect Fugard's connections with Irish literature have remained inconsequential, his links with another Irishman became more important for his personal inspiration and the evaluation of his work by his critics.

Very soon after Fugard rose to fame, critics made no mistake in drawing parallels between his plays and those of Samuel Beckett. This was done partly to increase Fugard's reputation by seemingly putting him on a par with Beckett and partly to dissociate Fugard's plays from their immediate social

context and to play down their political relevance – as black critics were quick to point out to their white colleagues (Seidensspinner, 1986:205).¹ This dilemma of world literature vs. regional literature has dogged Fugard's reception and makes the Beckett connection seem all the more important.

First of all, we have to establish the obvious, i.e. biographical, points of contact between these two writers. Beckett and Fugard met by accident in May 1976 when both were in London to direct their own plays. There is the anecdote that when a common acquaintance, the stage designer Jocelyn Herbert, asked Beckett about the latest developments on the Paris theatre scene, he is said to have replied: "There hasn't been much that has excited me, but there is a very interesting play with a long title about statements and immoral acts" (Gussow, 1982:89).² While Beckett's knowledge of Fugard's work then seems to be restricted to *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act* (1972), Fugard's contacts with Beckett's work naturally are manifold and numerous. In the autumn of 1962, Fugard directed a black cast in a Johannesburg production of *Waiting for Godot* (Gray, 1982:6).³ In June 1967 he directed himself in *Krapp's Last Tape*,⁴ and in April 1976, Fugard's play *Boesman and Lena* had its French première directed by none other than Roger Blin, who, above all, is known as the director of the historic first production of *Waiting for Godot*.⁵ In 1981, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, two black actors who had been collaborating and devising plays together with Fugard since the 1960s, played the roles of Vladimir and Estragon at London's Old Vic⁶ and New Haven's Long Wharf Theatre.

Fugard's *Notebooks* (Benson, 1983), a collection of excerpts from his diaries, contains his most forthright statements on Beckett and the question of his influence. In May 1962, Fugard notes that he abandoned work on a novel "à la Beckett" (Benson, 1983:51). His central credo regarding Beckett can be found in the entry for "December 1962":

Read Beckett's *Malone Dies* over Christmas. Hard to describe what this book, like his *Godot*, *Krapp* and *Endgame*, did to me. Moved? Horrified? Depressed? Elated? Yes, and excited. I wanted to start writing again the moment I put it down. Beckett's greatness doesn't intimidate me. I don't know how it works – but he makes me want to work. Everything of his that I have read has done this – I suppose it's because I really understand, emotionally, and this cannot but give me power and energy and faith. Talking to Sheila (i.e. Fugard's wife) about Beckett's humour, I said, "Smile, and then

-
1. See also Mshengu (1982:160–179). Despite its awkward and misleading title, M. Green's essay (1987:5–17) is a useful and penetrating survey of Fugard criticism with respect to the ideological problems involved. For a summary assessment of Beckett's influence on Tom Stoppard, Athol Fugard, Wole Soyinka, David Mamet and Sam Shepard, see Whitaker (1986:208–229).
 2. See also Vandenbroucke (1985:200).
 3. See also Benson (1983:62–63) and Vandenbroucke (1985:96).
 4. See Gray (1982:8) and Gussow (1982:89).
 5. See Gray (1982:11) and Benson (1978:93).
 6. See the photographs in *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 7 (Spring 1982):119–125 and cover photographs.

wipe the blood off your mouth.” Beckett has for me succeeded in “making man naked again”. How to be clearer in what I mean? When it rains – the rain falls on the skin of Beckett’s characters. (Benson, 1983:67)

Here Fugard mentions the three Beckett plays, the early ones, which have influenced him most. This passage also reveals certain idiosyncratic tendencies in Fugard’s view of Beckett. What Fugard sees in Beckett’s work is – in the wider context of post-war Existentialism – first and foremost a reduction of all problems to the borderline situation of being human (“making man naked again”). Elsewhere in *Notebooks* Fugard delivers an interpretation of *Waiting for Godot* which is couched in the existentialist jargon of the 1950s and 60s.

Sartre: Anguish is the fear of not making the time and place of the *appointment with self*. I realize that the popular image of Beckett’s characters is hindering our appreciation of other aspects of Beckett’s writing – his existentialism. Vladimir and Estragon are Man in a state of Anguish, and Godot – their concern with the *right time* – is Man desperately trying to meet that appointment with Self. (Benson, 1983:102)

Fugard lays bare the existentialist layer in Beckett’s work. His appreciation of Beckett does not rest on qualities like “despairing futility” but on positive values like pity and solidarity with his fellow human beings: “Love and compassion. But of what? Man’s absurd and bruised carnality” (Benson, 1983:68). He defends Beckett against those critics who see despair and the loss of meaning as his major themes. To establish an analogy with another existentialist writer one could say that Fugard follows Camus in his turnabout from the absurd to a more optimistic position *beyond nihilism*.⁷ All this detached existentialist philosophising, however, does not blind Fugard to the less general, less universal dimension of meaning contained in Beckett’s work. Thus, for example, he recognises the relevance of Beckett’s first play for his black fellow-actors in their specific political situation:

When we did *Waiting for Godot*, that image of disoriented man, dislocated man, of absurd man, pointlessness and meaninglessness, the Africans took the play and made it their own statement. (Hodgins, 1967:28)⁸

Beckett’s plays provided black actors and audiences alike with an *objective correlative* of their very real social and political problems – “the endless wait for emancipation” as one critic called it (Gussow, 1981:5).⁹ This slanted actualisation of the play’s meaning should also be noted here, although it is clear that it runs counter to Beckett’s declared intentions.

In order to put the impression created by this outline of Beckett’s influence on Fugard into proper perspective, other writers, whose influence on his work Fugard has acknowledged, should at least be mentioned briefly. They are

7. See the final chapter of Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (1953).

8. See also Benson (1983:62–63) and Coplan (1985:215).

9. Gussow is referring to the Long Wharf production.

Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, William Faulkner, Bertolt Brecht – and, perhaps not surprisingly in the light of the aforesaid, Albert Camus (Benson, 1977/78:83). Next to Beckett Camus must be considered the most powerful source of inspiration. In Fugard's own words:

Camus belongs to a very special category in terms of influence on me, shared by only one other person. And that's Samuel Beckett. They're both men who've shaped my craft and sharpened my thinking. (Raine, 1980:10)¹⁰

When one tries to demonstrate Beckett's influence on Fugard more directly than by judging from atmospheric impressions and general affinities alone, one notices that there are three motifs from Beckett's early plays *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape* which recur again and again in Fugard and which also serve as structural elements in his plots. First, there is what I would call the *nexus* motif. This is a formula describing the close complementary relationship between two characters, which is considered necessary – even vital – on the one hand as well as inhibiting and threatening on the other. It is the full equivalent of Martial's epigram "*nec tecum possum vivere nec sine te*" (Martialis, 1950:XII.xlvi:xlvii),¹¹ and aptly describes Beckett's pairs Vladimir-Estragon, Pozzo-Lucky, and Hamm-Clov, who find themselves unable to separate and go their own ways, although they quite often wish nothing better than to be able to do so. This motif or theme determines the plot and structure of most of Fugard's plays, which generally show two characters or at least two central characters in such a relationship (Weales, 1978:5).¹² Examples readily come to mind: one thinks of the relationship patterns in *Blood Knot* (1965) (Morris-Zach), *Boesman and Lena* (1969) (the eponymous characters), *The Island* (1972) (John-Winston), *'Master Harold' . . . and the Boys* (1982) (Hally-Sam, Sam-Willy), and *The Road to Mecca* (1984) (Miss Helen-Elsa). Asked about the significance of this recurring motif, Fugard – not surprisingly – again mentioned Beckett:

When you have just one voice or, at the most, two voices, you have got a chance of an exploration in depth. I have learnt more about writing plays from Bach's unaccompanied violin sonatas and his unaccompanied cello suites than from anything I've read by a writer outside of Samuel Beckett. (Coveney, 1973:37)

Another Beckettian motif which is a favourite with Fugard I would like to describe as *coming to terms with one's past*. It is the idea of being caught up in Time, "the calamity of yesterday," to use Beckett's phrase (Beckett, 1970:2–3).¹³ Fugard's characters are most often chained to their past lives,

10. "Reading Camus is like finding, and for this time, a man speaking my own language" (Fugard, *In*: Benson, 1983:94). See also Vandenbroucke (1985:198–200) and Dickey (1987:1058-A).

11. See also Esslin (1968:66).

12. See also Walder (1984:55), and more specifically, Jeyifo (1985:98–104).

13. Cf. in this context the following passage from Beckett's *Proust* essay: "(. . .) Yesterday is not a milestone that has been passed, but a daystone on the beaten track of the years, and irremediably part of us, within us, heavy and dangerous. We are not merely more weary

they try to emancipate themselves from their personal history and to come to terms with what they often consider their wasted lives. The model for all this is obviously Krapp, who is simultaneously fascinated with and disgusted by his earlier versions of self, which appear reified on stage in the form of various spools of tape. In most Fugard plays, there is a sudden rupture of habit in the protagonists' lives when they are confronted with their past and challenged to find a new identity. Hester and Johnny in *Hello and Goodbye* (1965) "unpack their lives" when they rummage through the family memorabilia in search of the money that Hester thinks their late father ought to have left to them. Sizwe Bansi is dead, i.e. he is forced to give up his name and identity when he takes over the name and, more importantly, the passbook of the dead Robert Zwelimbizima (in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, 1972). In Fugard's latest play *A Place with the Pigs* (1987), Pavel, a former soldier living incognito in a pigsty, is almost literally trapped in the consequence of his desertion from the army ten years before.

The play- or game-model, is the third major motif reminiscent of Beckett. Vladimir and Estragon try to pass the time by going through various set pieces, e.g. their music-hall routines. Hamm and Clov in a way stage a play within the play, thereby drawing attention to the problematic assumptions of theatre itself. There are a significant number of scenes in Fugard's dramas in which the characters play at exchanging dialogue in stichomythic brevity or, like children, they imagine, recreate and relive certain scenes and experiences from real life or past experience. These make-believe scenes often acquire a therapeutic function for the characters involved or they suggest links with the world outside of the text – and that means, in most cases, the reality of politics and life under apartheid. In *Blood Knot* such role-playing constitutes the play's climax. Morris and Zach get "carried away (. . .) by the game" (Fugard, 1987:122).

They act out a confrontation between black boy and white baas, just stopping short of violence. In *The Island* the two prisoners rehearse their version of Sophocles' *Antigone*.¹⁴ Here the *play-model* of the Greek tragedy and its intertextual references impose an additional set of highly political meaning structures. In *'Master Harold' . . . and the Boys* the game is "ballroom dancing", and in the course of the play, Hally and Sam develop this into a metaphor for a social utopia free of collisions.¹⁵

Within the confines of this paper, only a typology of the major Beckettian

because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday" (1970:2–3).

14. Cf. Errol Durbach (1984:252–265): "One might say of *The Island* that it is the result of Fugard's creative fusion of Sophocles and Beckett – an amalgam of the 1965 *Antigone* and his production of *Waiting for Godot* two years earlier".
15. Cf. G. Olivier (1982:9–14): "The play is characterized, 'internally', by a number of play- or game-models which stand internally in the same relationship to the world of seriousness, of suffering, as the play (seen as a whole) stands to our everyday, social lives".

motifs recurring in Fugard's plays was feasible. Apart from the parallels mentioned above, one could very well single out further instances of Beckett's influence or allusions to his work in Fugard's plays. Thus, the "waste land setting" in *Boesman and Lena* carries strong Beckettian overtones (Rutherford, 1982:151–152).¹⁶ The parallels between Beckett's *Play* and Fugard's *Statements* are more than obvious as regards the techniques of spotlight and camera flashes. It might also be rewarding to study in detail the physical details of the light/dark opposition and the attendant imagery in *Krapp's Last Tape* and *The Road to Mecca*.

Despite the parallels and similarities in structure, theme and motif, considerable differences between Beckett and Fugard become apparent when one analyses the conceptual and ideological values with which Fugard endows certain Beckettian elements as noted in this paper. It is a feature common to all Fugard plays that they always carry a social and political dimension, even if this becomes manifest only in marginal aspects such as, for example, a certain type of setting. One could say that Fugard uses specific and topical questions regarding his environment in order to explore larger and more general problems of universal relevance. Or to put it the other way round: always, behind Fugard's Beckett-inspired universalism (the existential concerns of Man), appears his "regionalism" (Seidenspinner, 1986:219–225), his moral concern and *engagement* for the "specifics" of the South African situation. As to how one would have to assess this typically "liberal" stance is another matter.¹⁷ The dialectic of universalism vs. regionalism, however, has a bearing on the evaluation of Beckett's influence on Fugard. Notwithstanding the numerous Beckett echoes in his work the net result of this comparison appears to be that Fugard turns a blind eye on Beckett's nihilism or what he considers a starkly pessimistic world-view. He even seems to transcend despair by advocating a philosophy of endurance which in spirit is closer to Camus. "The possibility of a dignity in the face of nothing" (Raine, 1980:10)¹⁸ – this aptly describes the kind of attitude taken by most of Fugard's characters at the end of his plays. In the final analysis, it is this philosophy of "courageous pessimism" which turns the negation of despair into a kind of hope and contributes the qualities of liberalism and humanism to the world of Fugard's plays.

Bibliography

- Beckett, S. 1970. *The Collected works of Samuel Beckett*. New York: Grove Press.
Benson, Mary. 1977–1978. Keeping an Appointment with the Future: The Theatre of Athol Fugard. *Theatre Quarterly*, 7(28):83, Winter.
Benson, Mary. 1978. Blin on Beckett. *Theatre*, 10(1):93, Fall.

-
16. For another list of similarities, cf. Vandenbroucke (1985:200–201) et passim.
17. See Green's essay (1987:5–17).
18. See also Benson (1983:94), where Fugard quotes from Camus's *Carnets*: "Absurdity is King, but love frees us from it".

- Benson, Mary, (ed.) 1983. *Athol Fugard; Notebooks 1960–1977*. London: Faber.
- Camus, A. 1953. *The Rebel*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Coplan, D. 1985. *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Coveney, M. 1973. Challenging the Silence. *Plays and Players*, 21(2):37, November.
- Dickey, R. 1987. *The Artist as Rebel: The Development of Athol Fugard's Dramaturgy and the Influence of Albert Camus*. (Dissertation – Indiana University.)
- Durbach, E. 1984. Sophocles in South Africa: Athol Fugard's *The Island*, *Comparative Drama*, 18:252–264.
- Esslin, M. (ed.) 1968. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Fugard, A. 1987. *Selected Plays*. Oxford: OUP.
- Gray, S. (ed.) 1982. *Athol Fugard*. Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill.
- Green, M. 1987. The Politics of Loving: Athol Fugard and the Metropolis. *World Literature Written in English*, 27(1):5–17.
- Gussow, M. 1981. Beckett at 75: An Appraisal. *New York Times*:5, April 19.
- Gussow, M. 1982. Profiles: Witness: Athol Fugard. *New Yorker*:89, December 20.
- Hodgins, R. 1967. Interview with Athol Fugard. *News/check*:28, July 21.
- Jeyifo, B. 1985. *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama*. London: New Beacon Books.
- Ker, W.C.A. (ed.) 1950. *Martial Epigrams*. Vol. 2. London: William Heinemann. (The Loeb Classical Library.)
- Martialis, M.V. 1950. *Epigrammata*, 12.47. In: Ker, W.C.A. (ed.) *Martial Epigrams*. Vol. 2. London: William Heinemann. (The Loeb Classical Library.)
- Mshengu. 1982. Political Theatre in South Africa and the Work of Athol Fugard. *Theatre Research International*, 7(3):160–179. Autumn.
- Olivier, G. 1982. Notes on Fugard's *Master Harold* at the Yale Rep. *Standpunte*, 162:9–14, December.
- Raine, C. 1980. An Interview with Athol Fugard. *Quarto*, 9:10, August.
- Rutherford, Anna. 1982. *Time, Space and Identity in Athol Fugard's "The Blood Knot"*. (In: Gray, S. (ed.) *Athol Fugard*. Johannesburg: McGraw-Hill.)
- Seidenspinner, Margarete. 1986. *Exploring the Labyrinth: Athol Fugard's Approach to South African Drama*. Essen: Verlag die blaue Eule.
- Vandenbroucke, R. 1985. Truths the Hand can Touch: The Theatre of Athol Fugard. *Theatre Communications*: 12–13.
- Walder, D. 1984. *Athol Fugard*. London: Macmillan.
- Weales, G. 1978. The Embodied Images of Athol Fugard. *Hollins Critic*, 15(1):5, February.
- Whitaker, T.R. 1986. Wham, Bam, Thank You Sam: The Presence of Beckett. (In: Brater, E. (ed.) *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*. New York and Oxford: OUP. p.208–229).

University of Paderborn, West Germany.