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RESEARCH

Waiting for *Lear*: Re-creations of Shakespeare's Play Through Beckett at the Royal Shakespeare Company

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Stage productions of *King Lear* at the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) have played a key role in reinventing the play for each new generation. Every production finds unique ways of presenting *Lear*, each of which adds new layers of meanings that can potentially shape our understanding of the play. In the 1960s, romanticized and naturalistic approaches that had governed the staging of the play were displaced by a modern conception of *King Lear* as Shakespeare's *Endgame*. This article examines comparatively how dramatic forms emblematic of Samuel Beckett's theatre were assimilated into three distinct RSC productions of *King Lear*, directed by Peter Brook (1962), Adrian Noble (1982) and Gregory Doran (2016). Beckett's enduring influence on the play's afterlife foregrounds both the practices of appropriation and transformation of previous texts that shape contemporary Shakespearean performance, and the dialogic interplay of textual and non-textual elements through which Shakespeare's play has acquired meaning on the RSC stage. The appropriations of Beckettian patterns were shaped by the tensions between text and performance, and the battle between centripetal and centrifugal forces that intersect dialogically in the processes of meaning-making within Shakespearean performance.

Keywords: *King Lear*; Samuel Beckett; Shakespeare; Royal Shakespeare Company; Shakespearean Performance

Stage productions and film adaptations of *King Lear* have played a key role in re-signifying the play. Peter Brook's 1962 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) has become an important landmark in the play's theatrical "afterlife" in Britain after the Second World War. The most memorable feature of this *Lear* was its conspicuous grimness, considered highly subversive at the time as it broke away from romanticised approaches that still predominated in British productions of the play. The production's overwhelming bleakness is commonly associated with Brook's response to the absurdist theatre of Samuel Beckett, more particularly to the world of deterioration Beckett depicted in *Endgame*. Not only has the production's Beckettian significance shaped the way *King Lear* has been read, performed and adapted in the anglophone world across the decades; it has become a theatrical convention that is time and again re-appropriated at the RSC. Although this approach has lost its initial freshness,[1] Beckett's pervasive influence on modern productions of the play prompts us to reconsider how these two entirely distinct theatrical traditions were made to intersect through signifying practices that shape contemporary Shakespearean performance. This article re-examines the impact of Beckett's plays on post-Second War stagings of *King Lear*. In addition to Brook's production, I will look at other *Lear*s which, though equally indebted to Beckett, drew on the latter's theatre in creative and innovative ways: Adrian Noble's and Gregory Doran's productions, staged at the RSC in 1982 and 2016, respectively. The multi-discursive nature of the three stagings not only undermined the primacy of the Shakespeare text as the main source of meaning, but also offered different ways to meaningfully re-

[1] The interweaving of Shakespeare and Beckett is often mentioned in the scholarship on British productions of *King Lear*. See, for example: Halio (102–103); Barnet (256); Leggatt (46); Foakes ("King Lear" 153–154); and Lieblein (39–49).

signify *King Lear* through Beckett in productions staged over twenty years apart. The directors' inventive assimilation of visual, thematic and performative elements emblematic of Beckett's plays to render *King Lear* modern gained new significances within the wider theatrical contexts in which the productions were mounted. As I will discuss later, the Beckettian analogies took shape in relation to the institutional practices of the RSC and the audiences' shifting perception of Beckett's theatre. While the appropriation of recognisably Beckettian forms was instrumental in reinventing *King Lear*, the dialogic practices on which this connection was grounded also prompted drastic reconfigurations of key features of Beckett's plays.

The use of Beckett to modernise *King Lear* foregrounds the complex interplay of textual and extratextual sources often employed to render Shakespeare's plays meaningful onstage. This multi-layered nature of Shakespearean performance is sometimes overlooked in favour of a text-based view that locates the meaning of performance primarily in the text. The emphasis on the text is symptomatic of authenticity discourses that reverence it as a stable artefact. Undermining this notion, research on Early Modern drama has shown that Shakespeare's plays were initially generated through collaborative work, intertextual appropriation, and shaped by the contingencies of theatrical performance.[2] In the same vein, performance studies have drawn attention to the various elements which, alongside Shakespeare the text, are made to interact dialogically to construct meaning in the theatre. W. B. Worthen has painstakingly objected to the long-held view that Shakespearean performance is a derivative phenomenon, subservient to the authority of the Shakespeare text. For him, stage meanings "are not 'translatable' from the text, because meaning in the theatre arises from the application of productive practices *to* the text – behavior, scenic, design, lighting, movement, the full panoply of institutionalized theatre practice – that stand outside and beyond the text" (*Shakespeare and the Authority* 51–52).[3] In this sense, both the Shakespeare text and the theatrical apparatus employed in a stage performance play a part in the processes of meaning-making. Furthering this argument, Worthen advocates for a "postdramatic" movement which reconceptualises dramatic performance "away from a notion of performance as *communicating* an *interpretation* of the text toward a notion of *affordance*" (*Shakespeare Performance* 23). The "affordance" of the text refers to its appropriability, its purposefulness, determined by both its material properties and the demands we make of it when deploying it. Instead of exerting a magisterial influence over the performance, dramatic writing is seen as raw material and a tool: "As *material*, the text is worked on and worked into the performance, made into something no longer essentially verbal in its construction, an event; as a *tool*, the text provides a critical agency, one instrument among many for making the performance" (Worthen, "Shakespeare Performance" 87). Within this framework, the text plays neither a magisterial nor a ministerial role, and the performance, by the same token, is neither liberated from nor inscribed within the text (Worthen, "Shakespeare Performance" 88). Rather, meanings in the theatre are grounded on a fluid relationship between text and performance, and generated through the dialogic tension between writing and *mise en scène*.

Worthen's argument regarding the dialogic fluidity of performance lays the groundwork for my examination of how *King Lear* was made to re-signify on the RSC stage through the directors' appropriation of Beckett. The ongoing tensions between text and performance are amplified at the RSC, arguably the epicentre of Shakespearean performance in the English-speaking world. As will be shown below, the company's name and reputation rely heavily on Shakespeare's canonical status and the cultural capital accumulated in his work. The urge to honour Shakespeare has given rise to stage practices that position dramatic performance as the reproduction of meanings authorized by the text, as though the latter had a stable materiality and were a container of authentic meanings.

While performance is made to underscore the text's centripetal force, it is nevertheless intersected by the centrifugal force of the *mise en scène* and other discursive elements whose dialogic interaction constitutes the theatrical event. Rather than a monologic activity where meaning is mainly constructed through the unifying force of the Shakespeare text, Shakespearean performance is a dialogic phenomenon on which centralising and decentralising forces are brought to bear. These processes of centralisation and decentralisation reflect what Bakhtin has termed "heterloglossia", the co-existence of multiple discourses within the various spheres of linguistic activity: "Authorial speech, the speech of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters" (Bakhtin 263). To Bakhtin, concrete discourse is shaped by several forces with which it is interwoven, such as "shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgements and accents" (276). It follows that

[2] See Vickers (3–43) for more on Shakespeare's collaboration with some of his contemporary playwrights. Tiffany Stern's *Making Shakespeare: From Stage to Page* provides a thorough account of how "the versions of plays we have are only written testaments to moments in the life of an unstable text" (2). Chapter 4 looks at how performance in Shakespeare's time occasioned changes in the text.

[3] This argument is reiterated in *Shakespeare and the force of modern performance* (12).

the living discourse, "having taken the meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads...; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue" (Bakhtin 276). Bakhtin's notion – though primarily centred on the novel – sheds light on how the appropriations of Beckett to perform *King Lear* took shape and acquired significance within the dialogic heteroglossia of the productions. The assimilation of recognisably Beckettian forms into the Elizabethan texture of *King Lear* reiterated intertextual practices commonly employed to make Shakespeare meaningful to contemporary audiences in specific cultural contexts.

Beckett and Post-Second World War British Theatre

A brief survey of Beckett's emergence as a key figure of the Theatre of the Absurd in Britain will provide a broader understanding of the enduring impact of his drama on *King Lear*'s theatrical afterlife. World drama was never the same after the premiere of *Waiting for Godot* in the 1950s. The play drastically broke away from long-established conventions that still dominated Britain's mainstream theatre, such as Aristotelian notions of plot development and the use of naturalistic settings. Rather than telling a story with a beginning, middle and end, *Godot* is centred upon Estragon and Vladimir's wait for Mr Godot, who never turns up. They engage in a series of vaudevillian acts and metaphysical reflections to pass the time while awaiting their delayed appointment with the mysterious Godot. The play takes place on a bare country road near a withered tree, a vague set that cannot be easily pinned down to specific geographic locations or historical contexts. Beckett's refusal to provide clear answers to enduring questions about Godot's identity or the dramatic motivation for Didi and Gogo's endless wait puzzled theatregoers and critics who attended the play's British premiere in 1955.[4] Unable to fully understand the play, audiences and critics alike mistakenly judged it against works of traditional theatre whose conventions were entirely overturned in *Godot*.

The tide was turned after the influential critic Kenneth Tynan deemed the play a masterpiece of modern theatre. It soon gained an overwhelmingly wide appeal among contemporary readers and audiences.[5] *Godot* drastically shifted their perception of theatrical activity, and in turn widened their interpretative scope of what theatre can mean. Beckett's subsequent plays pushed his minimalist aesthetics to the limits with remarkable verbal experimentations and highly subversive artistic forms. Although his dramatic oeuvre is not seen as part of the European high modernism of the 1920s, it has inherited "the modernist writer's creed for 'making it new,' with each new work being presented as an innovation of both established conventions and the playwright's previous work" (Kennedy 47).

His next play, *Endgame*, is a case in point. While it carries traces of *Godot*'s compressed structure, it conveys a darker vision through a far more pared-down dramatic idiom. The open wasteland of *Godot* gives way to a claustrophobic room in which "the sense of decrepitude and entrapment are far more oppressive" (McDonald 43). Hamm, who can neither see nor walk, and Clov, who cannot sit, play a series of "ending" games which constantly frustrate our expectation for the tragic ending they appear to announce: "I'm warming up for my last soliloquy" (Beckett 130), declares Hamm towards the end of the play. The world of deterioration depicted in *Endgame* evokes the bleak aftermath of World War II, but the play refuses to conform to such critical interpretations. As Adorno has declared in his famous essay on *Endgame*, "Understanding it can mean nothing other than understanding its incomprehensibility" (120). If we have now come to terms with the play's resistance to provide explanations, British spectators attending the first performance of *Endgame* struggled to make sense of its acute grimness. Reviewer W.A. Darlington found fault with the "growing irritation" provoked by the characters' ludicrous exchanges, which continued "without bringing with them any development of character."[6] This urge for character and plot development was symptomatic of the audience's initial antagonism towards *Endgame*; once again, Beckett was evaluated from the perspective of Aristotelian theatre whose rules he was clearly rebelling against.

The publication of Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) played a key role in reconfiguring audiences' perception of Beckett and some of his contemporary playwrights. Esslin drew on Sartre and Camus to provide a definition of the "absurd" under which he grouped a wide range of entirely distinct plays by various playwrights. To him, the plays of the absurd share the same theme: "This sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition" (Esslin 23–24). Esslin adds that absurdist writers employed unique

[4] When asked about who Godot was, Beckett responded: "If I knew, I would have said so in the play" (qtd. in Worton 67).

[5] Tynan declared that the play forced him to "re-examine the rules which have hitherto governed the drama; and, having done so, to pronounce them not elastic enough" ("New Writing").

[6] Even Kenneth Tynan's response was lukewarm. He mocked the play's slow style in his review for *The Observer*: "Production milder, a lo-o-o-onger mi-i-i-ilder fug, than in French" ("Sam's last knock").

methods to express the "senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach" (Esslin 24), namely their rejection of traditional notions of plot development and character construction. Although Esslin's "absurdist" label fails to encompass more broadly the vast scope of the so-called absurd plays, the book has been instrumental in elevating those plays and making them more accessible to spectators whose struggle to understand the new drama prevented them from responding more enthusiastically to the plays' unconventional features.

Not only has *Godot* – Beckett's most famous play – become a theatre classic; it "has been absorbed into the theatre of our time" (Graver 86) and accrued an immense cultural capital. The play's spare imagery is an iconic symbol of modern theatre: a bare stage, a tree, and two characters waiting for Godot. Other iconic images such as the dustbins of *Endgame*, and the half-buried heroine of *Happy Days* have equally become synonymous with modern drama. Beckett's plays are infused with visual and performative components which, devoid of historical and socio-political references, cater to culturally diverse audiences in various sociocultural contexts. Gontarski notes that popular culture has played an enormous role in fostering the playwright's emergence into the global economy, where "he and his work are too often reduced to a few immediately recognisable emblems, clichés, or catch phrases, like trash cans, bowler hats, or the act of waiting itself" (xii). Like Shakespearean drama, Beckett's plays are highly appropriable materials whose "affordance" enables them to be reimagined in the theatre and beyond. Once assimilated into the tragic texture of *King Lear*, the emblematic marks of Beckett's theatre afforded new possibilities of re-signifying the Shakespearean play.

Waiting for Beckett: Shakespeare and Absurd Theatre at the RSC

Beckett's growing influence reached far beyond the absurdist circle. The early sixties saw the emergence of his drama as a valid resource to stage Shakespeare at the new-born Royal Shakespeare Company. Jan Kott's scholarship paved the way for ground-breaking theatre experiments involving dialogic intersections between Shakespeare's plays and modern theatre at the RSC. In his seminal essay "King Lear, or Endgame", Kott has suggested that Gloucester's suicide attempt "is merely a circus somersault on an empty stage" (Kott 118). As in *Act Without Words*, Kott notes, "Gloucester's and Edgar's situation is tragic, but it has been shown in pantomime, the classic expression of buffoonery" (118). The impact of Kott's essay on *King Lear*'s afterlife and, more broadly, on the development of the RSC's methods of staging Shakespeare cannot be overstated. The critic's readings of the plays impacted on a number of RSC productions that drew heavily on Beckett, Brecht and Artaud to modernise Shakespeare during the 1960s. His book inspired a series of important intertextual encounters that have shaped the company's work on Shakespeare since its foundation.

Kott's notion that every historical period finds in Shakespeare "what it is looking for and what it wants to see" (5) resonated with Peter Hall's desire to overthrow outdated methods of staging Shakespeare and explore new approaches to make the plays reflect the socio-political milieu of the early sixties. The stage practices initially fostered at the RSC were mainly centred upon verse speaking and a painstaking search for topicality in Shakespeare. Having directed *Godot*, Hall was fully aware of the play's immense impact on British theatre. To him, establishing theatrical connections between contemporary plays and Shakespeare was key to render his works modern. In a speech delivered in the early sixties, Hall discussed in detail how the RSC intended to update Shakespeare through modern theatre:

> If we are in touch with Beckett, Pinter, Albee…we are very much in touch with what theatre has to say now. And therefore, by inference, we are going to be more capable…of seeing what Shakespeare can say to now. That's not to say that Shakespeare knew Sam Beckett's personality or that *Lear* is a reflection of *Endgame*. But there are things in *Lear* which speak to now, which are part of the Beckett sensibility of now.[7]

Hall's view exposes some ambivalences surrounding the RSC's approach to Shakespeare at the time. The overt appropriation of modern drama clearly stresses the intertextual nature of performance, where meanings are constructed on stage through a dialogic interplay between textual and non-textual elements. On the other hand, the underlying assumption that *King Lear* encloses Beckettian meanings stresses the cen-

[7] This is my transcript of an audio recording of Hall's interview held in the British Library Sound Archive (Call number: 1CDR0015784 BD1-BD7 NSA). The exact date of the interview is not specified.

tripetal force Shakespeare's texts arguably exert in Shakespearean performance.[8] Hall had to negotiate both his impulse to make Shakespeare contemporary – by interweaving the plays with a wide range of non-Shakespearean sources that challenged the centrality of the text – and the urge to preserve the playwright's canonical status and celebrate the universality often claimed for his drama.

Audience expectations and responses played an important part in the struggle between text and performance that RSC directors had to negotiate. While the RCS's efforts to modernise Shakespeare prompted spectators to reconfigure their understanding of Shakespearean performance, the new methods were carefully developed in parallel with the text to reassure audiences that they were being offered the "real" Shakespeare. Invoking the text to authorise inventive re-creations of Shakespeare and the intertextual dialogism in which the significance of the performance is rooted perpetuates an understanding of the dramatic text as a stable material whose substance is simply re-enacted onstage. Alan Sinfield reminds us that in order to make Shakespeare speak to us, RSC directors employ textual cuts and stage business to "affect the significance of the words" that audiences do not understand (12). While these stage practices work to decentralize "Shakespeare", they are "mashed together so that only the expert can see what has been done, and the impression that we are 'really' seeing Shakespeare is preserved" (12). Making explicit the adaptive practices brought to bear on the text would expose the unstable features of the writing, which in turn might lead to a desacralisation of the Shakespeare text.

I will now examine ways in which the appropriations of Beckett to reimagine *King Lear* onstage were articulated within the wider framework of the RSC's theatrical practices and reflected the tensions between centripetal and centrifugal forces that were made to intersect dialogically within the heteroglossia of the performance.

Lear, our contemporary: Reinventing Shakespeare's play Through Beckett

Peter Book has pointed out that the Beckettian significance his *King Lear* acquired among critics was a "journalistic simplification" (Brook and Labeille 220). For him, the drama of Beckett was simply invoked as a shorthand to concretise certain images during the rehearsals, rather than as a main concept that shaped the entire performance (Brook and Labeille 221). His awareness of modern theatre imparts, however, a keen interest in exploring more deeply the potential connections between Shakespeare's plays and Beckettian drama. In *The Shifting Point*, he posits that the issue of *King Lear* "is so much loftier than any historical setting that the only thing one can equate it to is a modern play such as Beckett might write" (89). Along similar lines, he drew attention to the dramatic potentialities of using modern theatre to contemporise Shakespeare at the RSC in the early sixties:

> Our great opportunity and our challenge in Stratford and London is to endeavour to relate our work on Shakespeare and our work on modern plays to the search for a new style – dreadful word, I would prefer to say anti-style – which would enable dramatists to synthesize the self-contained achievements of the Theatre of the Absurd, the Epic Theatre and the Naturalistic Theatre. (Brook, "What about" 20).[9]

His conscious appropriation of patterns of modern theatre reveals how the modernization of Shakespeare was informed and shaped by a dialogic intersection of Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean sources. The intertextual dialogism of the productions was often overshadowed, however, by a rhetoric of textual fidelity that hindered RSC directors from experimenting more extensively with the revolutionary dramatic forms of the European avant-garde. Brook has noted that respecting the text "is a healthy double attitude, with respect on the one hand and disrespect on the other...If you go solely one or other way, you lose the possibility of capturing the truth" (*The Shifting* 95). This assumption that dramatic performance is meant to reiterate the truths embedded in the writing assigns the Shakespeare text a magisterial function that is, nev-

[8] During the company's early years, the predominance of a text-based understanding of performance was imparted by the directors' references to "Shakespeare" and the Shakespearean text to authorise their productions. In a 1963 interview, Hall remarked: "He [Shakespeare] has everything: he is domestic as well as tragic, lyrical *and* dirty; as tricky as a circus and as bawdy as a music hall... That is why you can now read Samuel Beckett in *Lear*, or the Cuban crisis in *Troilus*. (Hall, "Avoiding a Method 4). Brook reiterated this point in a 1967 essay: "To communicate any one of Shakespeare's plays to a present-day audience, the producer must be prepared to set every resource of modern theatre at the disposal of his text." ("Style in Shakespearean Production" 254).

[9] This point was reasserted in his "Manifesto for the sixties:" "We need to look to Shakespeare. Everything remarkable in Brecht, Beckett, Artaud is in Shakespeare" (*The Shifting Point* 54).

ertheless, undermined by the centrifugal forces operating within the heteroglot domain of Shakespearean performance.

Brook's *King Lear* overturned naturalistic and romanticised approaches that had until then been dominant in British productions of the play. His perception of *Lear* as a "coherent poem designed to study the power and emptiness of nothing" (Brook, *The Empty* 105) gave rise to an overwhelmingly bleak production that offered no emotional relief or consolation. The grim tone and bare aesthetics were compelling features of this *Lear* and prompted associations between the production and Beckett's plays.[10] Brook's stage assistant Charles Marowitz recalled that during the rehearsals, their "frame of reference was always Beckettian" (104). Referring to the undecorated features of stage and costume designs, he noted that the "world of this *Lear*, like Beckett's world, is in a constant state of decomposition" (Marowitz 104).

Traces of *Endgame*'s deteriorating universe were evoked not only in the stage designs, but also through the unemotional style of acting deployed in the portrayal of such characters as Lear, the Fool and Gloucester. The bare *mise en scène* consisted of a few stage props made from rough wood and rusty metals. For the scene where Paul Scofield's Lear divided the kingdom, the background was dominated by a white cyclorama, two white flats from which rusty thunder sheets were hanging, a wooden bench and a table with some old utensils. The costumes did not "make a temporal statement, focusing instead on defining character" (Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare* 172). Lear initially wore a robe and a crown that, despite their rough appearance, signalled his kingly status, and the weathered black leather he wore in the following scene was replaced by old rags in the final scenes.

Although the marks of Beckett's bare aesthetics were pervasive throughout the performance, they manifested more conspicuously during the Dover scenes. In the company of his son Edgar – disguised as Poor Tom – the blind Gloucester is made to believe he is walking on a "Horrible steep" (IV.iii)[11] towards a cliff from whose summit he intends to jump. The character obviously falls on the ground, only to be persuaded once again by Edgar that he has miraculously survived a deadly fall. In his comparative analysis, Kott notes that Gloucester's attempted suicide recalls *Act Without Words*: it "is merely a circus somersault on an empty stage" (Kott 118). Drawing on Kott, Brook set the scene in a platform the bareness of which evoked the iconic wasteland of *Waiting for Godot*. Reviewer Roger Gellert observed that "on the blasted heath a striking kinship with Beckett's world emerged" (715). Equally Beckettian was Lear's meeting with Gloucester, one of the most touching moments in the Shakespearean play. In the text, the visibly mad king cynically lectures about mortality, ingratitude,[12] the injustice of power,[13] and female sexuality.[14] Without advancing the plot, the scene delays the progress of the action leading to the tragic death of Lear, his daughters and Edmund at the end of the play. Lear's insistence that he is "every inch a king" (IV.vi) adds an element of poignancy to his madness, which increases the scene's potential for conveying pathos. In Brook's hands, however, the characters' lines were delivered in a matter-of-fact tone that failed to release the tragic pathos suggested in the text.

The scene's affiliation with performative and visual patterns emblematic of Beckett's plays moved the scene away from naturalistic approaches conventionally intended to move audiences and make them sympathise with Lear's predicament. Depriving the performance of moments of consolation, Brook's adaptive treatment of the Shakespeare text furthered the affinity between this *Lear* the austere world of *Endgame*. The most noticeable textual cuts were the servant's demonstration of compassion towards Gloucester after his blinding (III.vii.98–106); and Edmund's repentance and frustrated attempt to save Lear and Cordelia (V.iii.241–44). Brook's cuts threw any possibility of redemption in the nihilistic ashcans of *Endgame*. Combined with the visual austerity and the unemotional performance style of the production, the cuts highlighted the absurdity of Lear's world, and presented *King Lear* as Shakespeare's *Endgame*.

While some critics felt that the production's overwhelming bleakness deprived *King Lear* of its essence, most reviewers greeted with enthusiasm Brook's rupture with redemptive and Christian interpretations of the play. Kenneth Tynan was among the critics who praised the Beckettian impulses of this *Lear*. He remarked that "where the [Beckettian] concept fits, as it mostly does, the production burns itself into your

[10] Since there are no video-recordings available for this production, I have relied on critics' accounts of it, particularly Alexander Leggatt's, who attended the production at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre (32–52).

[11] Quotes from *King Lear* are taken from the Arden edition, edited by R. A. Foakes. For practical purposes I will inform only the act and scene where the quotes were taken from.

[12] "They told me I was everything; 'tis a lie." (IV.vi).

[13] "Through tattered clothes great vices do appear; Robes and furred gowns hide all." (IV.vi).

[14] "Down from the waist the waist they are centaurs, though women all above. But to the girdle do the gods inherit, beneath is all the fiend's. there's hell, there's darkness, there is the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding, stench, consumption!" (IV.vi).

mind" ("A world without gods").[15] The audience's perception of the production as Beckettian undermined Brook's claim that Beckett was only invoked during rehearsals. As J. Trewin has recalled, after the premiere the audience gradually "recognized that Brook had directed a Beckettian *Lear*, an end-game of the heath" (129). I agree with Brook, however, that the notion that his *King Lear* was entirely grounded on Beckettian patterns overestimates Beckett's impact on the production. The elements initially perceived as remarkably Beckettian were only slight indications of visual, performative and thematic characteristics that constitute Beckett's absurd theatre. Far from embracing the patterns of repetition on which Beckett's plays are grounded, the production respected the narrative structure of Shakespeare's play. This is indicative of how the Beckettian elements appropriated in the production were drastically reconfigured when assimilated into the tragic framework of *King Lear*. While this approach to the text aligned with the RSC's ambivalent efforts to contemporise Shakespeare without compromising his authority, the audience's responses to the Beckettian overtones foregrounded how the meaning of Shakespearean performance relies on an intricate intersection of text, *mise en scène*, context and reception.

With the critical acclaim Brook's *Lear* and other successful productions received in the 1960s, the intertextual style Hall and his fellow directors developed was soon established as an RSC brand. The recycling of a Beckettian approach to *Lear* in later RSC productions is suggestive of how the company has remained indebted to its own theatrical past. Bate and Rasmussen remind us that "there have been very few productions since [Brook's *Lear*] which have not followed his lead in some regard, whether their focus be political, metaphysical or domestic" (166). In his 1971 film of *King Lear*, Brook made some directorial choices that furthered the affinities between *Lear* and *Endgame* previously established at the RSC.[16]

Adrian Noble's *King Lear* is among the later RSC productions noticeably indebted to Brook's legendary staging and, in turn, to Jan Kott and Beckett. The Shakespeare-plus-relevance framework within which Beckett was appropriated in the Brook *Lear* also impacted on the assimilation of a Beckettian aesthetic into Noble's production. The RSC's search for highly innovative ways of doing Shakespeare in the sixties had given place to a repetition-with-change policy that encouraged the recycling of theatrical approaches to Shakespeare's plays employed in earlier productions. Collin Chambers reminds us that Noble's RSC was deeply committed to the preservation of the company's legacy: "continuity with change" (97) was its motto. The debt to the RSC's past achievements was suggested in a programme note that reiterated the key principles of the artistic policies that had oriented the staging of Shakespeare's plays during the sixties: "the RSC brings a contemporary awareness to its productions of Shakespeare fed by its modern work which in turn benefits from the company's experience of classical discipline and its sense of language" (Royal Shakespeare Company, 1983). Since the RSC continued to promote modern theatre in parallel to its work on Shakespeare, it is unsurprising that Beckett was not left out of its repertory in the eighties.[17] Although his major plays had been canonized and, therefore, were no longer considered avant-garde, they remained synonymous with modern theatre at that time. They had retained their appeal among British spectators who, now overfamiliar with the plays' texture and iconography, readily responded to the Beckettian overtones of Noble's *King Lear*.

Noble drew heavily on the imagery and tragicomic texture of *Waiting for Godot* to bring out the absurd in Shakespeare's play.[18] The emphasis on Lear's reliance first on the Fool and then on Gloucester was the most remarkable feature of the production, and the main means by which its affinity with *Godot* was established. After Lear's division of the kingdom in the opening scene, the Fool's entrance suddenly placed the performance within the realm of the absurd. He was a fusion of twentieth-century tramp-clowns such as Max Wall, Chaplin, and Vladimir. Sher's Fool resembled a character from a slapstick comedy: he walked on stiff legs, played his violin, made ludicrous voices and faces, songs, sexual gestures and farting noises. Sher drew on music-hall acting styles and conventions that brought the Fool and his companion close to Beckett's tramps. While joking about the division of the kingdom, the Fool acted like a magician, making an egg appear out of nowhere and placing the two half-shells on his eyes. Traces of music-hall double acts, circus and comedy duos in their characterisation established a compelling association between the production's texture and the tragicomic substance of *Godot*. With his flamboyant demeanour, the Fool nearly upstaged his master,

[15] Milton Shulman likewise found this staging "provocative and stimulating." He interpreted it as a "comment on man's futility and despair as poignant and contemporary as anything written by Samuel Beckett" (420).

[16] For more on Brook's film of *King Lear*, see Griggs (41–62); Leggatt (105–117); and Davies (143–166).

[17] *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Catastrophe* were performed in 1984. For more, see the RSC archive catalogue: http://collections.shakespeare.org.uk/search/rsc-performances/view_as/grid/search/rsc_person:beckett (accessed 1 July 2020).

[18] My analysis was based on photographs and a video recording of the production held in the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Archive (Call number: RSC/TS/2/2/1982/KLE1). I have undertaken a more detailed examination of the tragicomic features of Adrian Noble's King Lear elsewhere (da Silva Gregório 1–15).

but the characters were so connected that "Lear entered into the music-hall delivery of one-liners as if they had been doing this routine for ages" (Crowl 126). While the Fool mockingly declared "Would I had two coxcombs and two daughters" (I.iv), he and Lear performed a ventriloquist act that failed to provide comic relief; instead, the vaudevillian cross-talks turned bleaker the message the Fool was trying to get across to his companion.

The Fool's death drove Lear into madness. Like Scofield, Gambon employed an unemotional style of acting that avoided the emotional overtones evoked in interpretations of Lear as a "weak and despised old man," "more sinned against than sinning" (III.ii). While the physical weakness he demonstrated during his arrival at Dover raised expectations for a tearjerker moment, Lear's encounter with Gloucester once again turned the performance into absurd tragicomedy. Their bitter-sweet encounter gained its Godotesque resonance through the playful tone of their dialogue, which recalled Vladimir and Estragon's tragicomic routines. Gloucester's poignant question "What? With the case of eyes?" (IV.vi) was delivered as a joke at which Lear laughed heartily. Echoes of *Godot*'s iconography furthered the scene's affiliation the Beckettian play: in addition to the bare stage, the characters' gesture of taking off each other's boots alluded to Estragon's attempt to remove his boots. These connections with Beckett's memorable tramps turned Lear and Gloucester into comedians rather than tragic heroes.

Their humorous performance undermined the potential for tragic pathos raised both by their physical and mental vulnerability, and the bleak subject matter of their dialogue.[19] The scene was thus made to reflect the absurdism of *Godot*, whose fusion of tragedy and comedy provides neither emotional release nor consolation. *King Lear*'s "affordance" allowed Noble to deploy patterns of modern theatre in order to depict a "godless universe" compellingly reminiscent of Beckett's most famous play.[20] Leggatt has noted that although Noble may have gone too far, "he went too far in a direction the play clearly offers" (73). He reinvented an already-known method of re-interpreting *King Lear* in the light of Beckettian theatre without drastically subverting the audience's shifting perception of what constitutes the essence of Shakespeare's play. As with Brook's *Lear*, the spectators' prompt recognition of the Beckettian patterns evoked onstage was instrumental in establishing the production's affiliation with *Godot*. When accommodated within the confines of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the vast scope of *Godot* was once again reduced to a few recognisable features, namely the bare aesthetics and patterns of performance emblematic of the play. The general impression was that, despite the textual cuts and the production's overt debt to the Theatre of the Absurd, this *Lear* remained true to the text.

This reductive appropriation of Beckett was also manifest in Gregory Doran's *King Lear* (2016), the most recent RSC production that admittedly reimagined the now conventional way of rendering *King Lear* contemporary through the incorporation of Godotesque patterns.[21] Paratextual materials provided valuable points of entry into the production's debt to Beckett. The programme included a note by James Shapiro in which he argues that several of *Lear*'s "surreal scenes, rich in black comedy, might easily be mistaken for something written by Samuel Beckett" (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2016).

The production overtly engaged with previous RSC productions that appropriated Beckett to re-interpret key moments in *King Lear*. As Doran pointed out, "you are going to draw on some of those [previous directorial] choices, and you are going to make new choices."[22] The performance opened with Sher's Lear majestically carried in a glass box, dressed in a gown adorned with golden insignias that recalled the furry coat worn by Scofield's Lear in Brook's film of *King Lear*. The economical approach to acting, costume and stage designs that dominated the opening scene in Brook's production was, however, replaced by the scenic spectacle widely used in the first half. Sher's Lear was an authoritative figure, almost with a god-like status, to whom his court willingly paid homage. Though the characters' black costumes suggested that this was a bleak pre-Christian world, they could not be pinned down to specific historical periods. The storm scene relied on spectacular sound and lighting effects that distracted spectators from the actors' delivery. Another display of scenic spectacle occurred during the eye-gouging scene, performed in a glass box against which Gloucester's eyeballs splashed. Doran remarked that for the first part he intended to create an opulent universe that would be entirely stripped down in the second half. Unlike Noble's *King Lear*, little emphasis

[19] Shulman complained that his "eyes were never pricked with the prospect of tears" as they had been in other productions (420); Don D. Moore likewise found this *Lear* "curiously unmoving" (260).

[20] The *Mail on Sunday*'s reviewer noted that Lear and the Fool, in their attempts to "fend off the world's cruel absurdities with little jokes and rhymes," resembled the tramps in *Godot*. ("King Lear: Stratford-upon-Avon"). Critic Sheridan Morley compared Lear to a "Beckett tramp awaiting a Godot who as usual never comes" ("Noble Lear").

[21] I had the opportunity to watch the performance at the Barbican Theatre in 2016.

[22] This is my transcription of Doran's commentaries accompanying the DVD of the production.

was placed on the relationship between Sher's Lear and Graham Turner's Fool, which carried no traces of the absurdist patterns that had shaped their interactions in the 1982 production.

As the performance progressed, the audience was surprised by a sudden change into absurdist minimalism: a bare stage, three white flats and a withered tree. As with the other two *Lears*, the Godotesque set placed Lear and Gloucester's characterisations within the realm of the absurd, instantly prompting comparisons with Didi and Gogo's tragicomic relation of co-dependence. The lack of a forward-moving action in the scene was once again re-signified through associations with the cyclical structure of *Godot* elicited by the Godotesque features of the *mise en scène*. Sher's portrayal of Lear as a sad, vulnerable old man who learned from his mistakes conveyed a sense of humanism that was absent in Brook's *Lear*. Although the emotionally charged interactions between Sher's Lear and Troughton's Gloucester was rather unlike the colourless acting style conventionally employed in the rendition of Beckett's characters, their performance gained a strong Beckettian resonance when related to the visual minimalism of the scene. *Godot*'s bare *mise en scène* provided Doran with a language in which to represent visually the characters' stripping down to essentials: Lear lost his throne, his daughters, his sanity; Gloucester lost his sight, his estate and his sons. The manifest tenderness of this moment in the performance resonated with a more current understanding of *Godot* as touchingly humanist rather than unfeelingly absurdist.

Even though Beckett's impact on the three productions examined here was mainly restricted to hints of the visual, thematic and performative patterns that constitute the intricacies of his absurdist dramaturgy, it played a pivotal role in re-discovering *King Lear*'s currency over the last decades. Explored alongside the Shakespeare text and the various non-textual elements on whose dialogic interaction the meaning of the productions was grounded, the appropriation of Beckettian forms gave rise to different ways of reimagining *King Lear*'s tragic substance through an absurdist prism. The interplay of Shakespeare and modern theatre took shape within the intertextual framework of contemporary Shakespearean performance, primarily concerned with deploying all the relevant sources to render Shakespeare's 400-year-old plays meaningful to audiences at different epochs. RSC directors will probably continue to draw on Beckett to experiment with new possibilities of reinventing *King Lear* onstage, for as long as his absurd plays retain their appeal for British spectators.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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