The Phenomenal Presence of Invisible Legs: Beckett and the Actor

by

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INTRODUCTION:

THE PROBLEM OF PRESENCE: A FICTIVE REALITY

“I won’t contradict you; but excuse me, the actors aren’t the characters. They want to be, they pretend to be, don’t they?"

—Luigi Pirandello,
*Six Characters in Search of an Author*

Excerpted from Luigi Pirandello’s 1921 play *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (25), this line speaks to a vast and convoluted history of theoretical debates and practical considerations regarding the actor’s ontological status in performance. As William B. Worthen argues, “In the struggle between the artificial Actors and the living Characters, Pirandello imagines the critical limitations of the stage and of acting as a means of expressing reality” (194). Pirandello’s dramatic imagination in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* puts onstage the divide between actor and character, depicting their relationship as one of strife and discord. In practice, however, the nature and parameters of this relationship are constantly shifting, the only certainty being that performances of dramatic texts necessitate a negotiation between actor and character even when it involves a complete collapse of this dichotomy. Espoused by practitioners themselves as well as critics and theorists, theories about the art of the actor are numerous. Broadly speaking, modern discourses on the relationship(s) between actor and character have implicitly and explicitly stemmed from the often-problematic nature of the performing body.

The complex relationship between the performing body’s phenomenological presence and semiotic function is particularly evident in the theatre of Irish playwright Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). Beckett wrote for the theatre with a
totalitarian mindset: his texts stipulate all aspects of the performance, from the production design to the actor’s performance of text and movement. Beckett’s play *Happy Days* is a clear example of the playwright’s infinitesimally detailed specifications:

“—ah yes—(*turns towards bag*)—poor Willie—(*rummages in bag*)—no zest—(*rummages*)—for anything—(*brings out spectacles in case*)—no interest—(*turns back front*)—in life—(*takes spectacles from case*)—poor dear Willie—(*lays down case*)—sleep for ever—(*opens spectacles*)—marvellous gift—(*puts on spectacles*)—nothing to touch it—(*looks for toothbrush*)—in my opinion—(*takes up toothbrush*)—always said so—(*examines handle of brush*)—wish I had it—” (*Dramatic Works: The Grove Centenary Edition* 277)

Though Beckett was by no means an acting theorist, the performer in his plays must follow the playwright’s instructions in such a precise manner that, according to Worthen, “Beckett’s drama scrupulously clarifies the actor’s art, and substantially reconsiders the modern actor’s complex enactment” (203). My discussion uses Beckett’s theatre as a focal point, throwing the “actor’s complex enactment” into sharper focus and thereby reexamining some of the most persistent questions at the heart of modern acting theory. If Beckett’s texts provide the actor with a kind of “road map,” what does this map consist of? Moreover, how can we better comprehend Beckett’s particular road map by considering it in dialogue with canonical theories of the actor’s craft?
Though Beckett’s texts are purely dramatic—that is, they do not explicitly endorse or demand any particular acting theory or style—the actor in his plays nevertheless confronts a variety of theoretical questions and tensions. In any performance the actor is situated within a complex web of cultural, aesthetic, social, and theoretical factors, and Beckett’s plays are no exception. According to Phillip B. Zarrilli,

> [e]very time an actor performs, he or she implicitly enacts a ‘theory’ of acting—a set of assumptions about the conventions and style which guide his or her performance, the structure of actions which he or she performs, the shape that those actions take (as a character, role, or sequence of actions as in some performance art), and the relationship to the audience. Informing these assumptions are culture-specific assumptions about the body-mind relationship, the nature of the ‘self,’ the emotions/feelings, and performance context. (*Acting (Re)Considered: Theories and Practices* 4)

I will consider the particular kind(s) of actor invoked by Beckett’s theatre in constant dialogue with two key artists and theorists from the twentieth century—Konstantin Stanislavsky and Bertolt Brecht. As I will argue, the actor in Beckett’s plays should be viewed as a distinct category of performer, one that not only intersects and interacts with the “Stanislavskian actor” and the “Brechtian actor,” but actually illuminates some of the more nuanced theoretical and practical questions with which these two men grappled. Beckett’s theatre distills many of these questions and tensions, allowing for a thorough reexamination of the actor onstage. Through such
an investigation I hope to revivify the discourses begun by Stanislavsky and Brecht and thereby refigure their theories in the context of Beckett’s theatre.

While my focus here is on Beckett’s plays in reference to twentieth century artists and theorists, much of the modern discourse on the art of acting traces back to French philosopher Denis Diderot’s seminal work *The Paradox of Acting*. Written in French as *Le Paradoxe sur le Comedien* (1773-78), Diderot’s titular paradox concerns the idea that actors should not actually “feel” the emotions of their character, even if to the spectator they seem filled with passion. Diderot insisted that the actor must be “an unmoved and disinterested onlooker” (14), and attempted to define acting as a highly systematized and scientific process. He rejected any notion of a histrionic performer, instead suggesting,

[The actor] feels neither trouble, nor sorrow, nor depression [...]. All these emotions he has given to you [the spectator]. The actor is tired, you are unhappy; he has had exertion without feeling, you feeling without exertion. [...]e is not the person he represents; he [...] plays it so well that you think he is the person; [...] he knows well enough that he is not the person. (19-20)

Diderot made the underlying tension between the “real” actor and the “fictional” character explicit, foreshadowing centuries of debate about the actor’s involvement in her “representations” of character.

It is difficult to overstate the influence of Diderot’s *Paradox* on modern theatrical practices. Joseph Roach argues that the work is in fact *paradigmatic*, comparable to Newton’s *Principia* or Darwin’s *Origins of Species*. Borrowing science historian
Thomas Kuhn’s concept of the scientific \textit{paradigm},\textsuperscript{2} Roach suggests that Diderot fundamentally altered the discourse on acting theory to the extent that “[t]o this day many acting theorists, knowingly or unknowingly, formulate their views in response to perspectives introduced in the \textit{Paradoxe}” (117). He continues:

> Among the concepts originating in or at least taking their modern form in Diderot’s essay are emotion memory, imagination, creative unconsciousness, ensemble playing, double consciousness, concentration, public solitude, character body, the score of the role, and spontaneity. Above all, we owe to Diderot our concept of the actor’s art as a definable process of creating a role. As the most fully informed philosopher ever to have addressed the art of acting, he knew that character emerges directly from the nervous system of the actor; it is not an Apollonian phantom entering the actor from without. Every theorist since Diderot has had not only to confront this issue but to do so on the \textit{philosophe}’s terms. (117)

Elsewhere in his work \textit{The Player’s Passion}, Roach emphasizes the degree to which acting theories have fixated on notions of the body that are necessarily influenced by contemporaneous scientific accounts of the human organism. As Roach says, Diderot paves the way for subsequent investigations into the performing body as a vital, material being, subject to natural scientific laws and therefore susceptible to manipulation, prediction, and control. Twentieth century fascination with the performing body therefore has its roots in Diderot’s views on the objective “science” of acting.
The performing body as a living, breathing, material organism has been alternately prized and condemned in the theatre. Perhaps the most vociferous criticism of the actor’s corporeality came from Edward Gordon Craig (1872-1966) with his concept of the Über-marionette (1911). Craig advocated theatrical performance as a complete work of art, and thus a performance should arise from the vision of a single creative mind. For Craig, the performing body was simply one of many theatrical elements in the complex yet unified work of art, alongside the text, music, costumes, and lighting. Since Craig’s perfect work of art allowed for no “accidents,” the actor’s imperfect and uncontrollable body was incompatible with the art of the theatre. He furthermore concludes:

Acting is not an art. It is therefore incorrect to speak of the actor as an artist. For accident is an enemy of the artist. Art is the exact antithesis of pandemonium, and pandemonium is created by the tumbling together of many accidents. Art arrives only by design. Therefore in order to make any work of art it is clear we may only work in those materials with which we can calculate. Man is not one of these materials. (28)

The living human body is therefore unsuited to Craig’s theatrical vision. In order to replace the actor, he imagined a large and highly realistic puppet called the Über-marionette. According to Craig, “the über-marionette will not compete with life—rather will it go beyond it. Its ideal will not be the flesh and blood but rather the body in trance—it will aim to clothe itself with a death-like beauty while exhaling a living
spirit” (40-1). Craig’s theatre had no use for “flesh and blood,” and therefore the actor was banished from it.

While deliberately inflammatory, Craig’s radical theories were in fact rooted in a longstanding and systemic anxiety about the “real” performing body in Western drama. Traditional Western theatre relies on dramatic representation and, as many performance theorists have noted, thereby privileges the semiotic “text” of the fictional character over the phenomenal presence of the performer. Performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte describes a particular performance by German actress Gertrude Eysoldt as an instance when this relationship was disturbed. During her performance as the titular character in Max Reinhardt’s production of *Electra*, Eysoldt’s phenomenal body became visible to the spectators in a way that greatly impacted their perception of the performance event:

The movements she performed not only expressed the unspeakable violence that the character Electra suffers to her body. By performing such movements, she also did violence on her own body. It was no longer possible to draw a clear borderline between the semiotic and the phenomenal body, the bodily being-in-the-world of the actress. Even if one would not go so far as to state that, here, the boundary between the semiotic and the phenomenal body disintegrated, the impression is created that the particular use Eysoldt made of her body shifted back and forth—oscillated—between her semiotic and her phenomenal body. *(Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre)*
Whereas the performing body typically generates meaning through its semioticity—that is, the body’s movements and gestural expression of a specific textual fiction—Eysoldt’s body generated a second layer of meaning through its materiality in the way that she drew unavoidable attention to her “bodily being-in-the-world.” As a result of this destabilization,

Eysoldt’s phenomenal body […] came to the fore and could not be overlooked or forgotten […] While it is the semiotic body that creates the illusion in the mind and imagination of the spectator, it is the phenomenal body, i.e. the vital, organic, energetic body whose sensuousness works directly on the phenomenal body of the spectators.

(5)

Her performance was directly contrary to traditional standards of enactment and embodiment, which depended on the establishment of an illusionistic representation above all. Eysoldt’s newly foregrounded phenomenal body, in all its sensuousness and “thereness,” destroyed the possibility of theatrical illusion for the spectators: “the performance was incapable of creating an illusion in the sense of Diderot […]. It worked first of all on the body of the spectators, on their senses and nerves and not so much on their imagination, their mind” (6). Fischer-Lichte’s analysis of Eysoldt’s performance calls attention to the performing body as a site of phenomenological complications and therefore problematizes the relationship between actor and role as it had been understood until that point.

Departing from these complex questions raised by Diderot, Craig, and Fischer-Lichte, my investigation into the performing body and its various allegiances—to the
character, to the actor, to the audience, etc.—is grounded in my own experience portraying Winnie in Beckett’s *Happy Days* (1960). The performance took place at Wesleyan University on September 18th-20th, 2008. It was directed by Gedney Barclay and featured Carmen Mellillo as Willie, and the production design largely followed Beckett’s specifications for the lighting, scenic, prop, and costume design.

Rather than focus on a particular interpretation of the text, the project was framed as an acting experiment. The rehearsal process began in mid-June, 2008, which afforded us the time to fully explore the text. Neither Barclay nor I had ever worked on a Beckett play, and thus much of our focus was devoted to a thorough investigation of the particular processes of both performer and director necessitated by this particular play.

*Happy Days*, one of Beckett’s few full-length plays, presents several unique challenges to the actor portraying Winnie, making it a particularly appropriate project for me to tackle as part of this thesis. Winnie’s physical situation is perhaps the most obvious difficulty for the performer: in Act I, Winnie is buried up to her waist in an enormous mound of earth (Fig. 1), and in Act II, only her neck and head remain visible (Fig. 2). Confined as she is, Winnie relies heavily on language: the vast majority of the play consists of a largely unbroken, lively, and circuitous monologue. This is another difficulty that the actor must overcome: the highly cyclical and repetitive nature of Winnie’s text. The reiterative quality of her monologue is exemplified by her numerous “refrains,” such as “The old style!” and “That is what I find so wonderful…” While Winnie ostensibly speaks to Willie, he answers her infrequently and grudgingly. The actor playing Winnie must therefore perform
virtually unaided for over two hours. In this sense, her process in performance aligns
with Winnie’s own struggle to continue “saying” and “doing”: “I can do no more.
(Pause.) Say no more. (Pause.) But I must say more. (Pause.) Problem here” (Beckett

In this thesis, I will discuss the actor in rehearsals and performances of Beckett’s
plays, continually referring back to my own experience with *Happy Days* as well as
personal and scholarly accounts of other actors in Beckett’s plays. My investigation
will additionally make use of the theories and framing devices of scholars from a
wide range of fields, such as semiotics (e.g., Erika Fischer-Lichte), theatre and
performance studies (e.g., Jonathan Kalb, Phillip B. Zarrilli), and phenomenology
(e.g., Stanton B. Garner). My discussion focuses on three potential complications
implicit in any performance of Beckett’s text. First, I analyze the actor in Beckett’s
plays in the context of Stanislavsky’s psycho-physical technique. Stanislavsky
emphasized two routes to what he called the “creative unconscious”: a
psychologically-based route which employed the actor’s use of “inner life,” and a
physically-based one involving “physical score.” How does the actor in Beckett’s
plays make use of “inner life” and “physical score”? Moreover, how might the actor
in Beckett’s theatre contribute to the Stanislavskian discourse regarding the
relationship between these two techniques? In Chapter Two I focus on how Beckett’s
plays deal with one of Brecht’s most pressing concerns: the actor’s negotiation
between presentational and representational modes of performance. I question
whether or not the actor’s engagement in Beckett’s theatre privilege one over the
other, and how it might make use of both approaches. Additionally, I investigate what
constitutes the exact nature of the relationship between “fiction” and “reality” in Beckett’s plays. Finally, I discuss the actor’s creative agency and whether or not Beckett’s plays allow for a revelation of her phenomenal body in performance. Prominent Beckett scholar Enoch Brater contends that in Beckett’s plays “[t]he role of the actor changes. Sometimes telling a story, sometimes reciting what sound like lines of verse, the actor here is always a vehicle for Beckett. The strongest actor in this drama is the playwright himself” (Beyond Minimalism: Beckett’s Late Style in the Theater 17). From the performer’s perspective, her role becomes complicated if the actor really is nothing more than “a vehicle for Beckett” as Brater says. Restricted as she is by Beckett’s stringent text, is the actor in the performance truly any different than Craig’s Über-marionette? Overall, these three theoretical discourses converge around the interaction between the semiotic body and the phenomenal body of the performer within Beckett’s theatre, and how this interaction is manifested in the actor’s embodied, subjective experience.
Figure 1. Annie Paladino in Act I of Samuel Beckett’s *Happy Days*, directed by Gedney Barclay. Produced by the Wesleyan University Theater Department (2008). Photograph by Samantha Joy Pearlman.
Figure 2. Annie Paladino in Act II of *Happy Days*, directed by Gedney Barclay. Produced by the Wesleyan University Theater Department (2008). Photograph by Samantha Joy Pearlman.
CHAPTER ONE:

“EXPERIENCING” THE ABSURD: STANISLAVSKY’S METHOD OF PHYSICAL ACTIONS AND THE ACTOR IN BECKETT’S THEATRE

In the history of acting techniques, understandings of the tension between internal actions or “feelings” and external or physical actions have undergone many transmutations. The influence of Konstantin Stanislavsky’s (1863-1938) acting methodology—the System—on twentieth century conceptions of these two elements in undeniable, yet the System itself is also largely misunderstood. The Russian director does not provide a simple or definitive answer in regards to this debate, but rather specifies the question by asking how the actor makes use of “inner life” and “physical score” in performance. His writings explore how the actor in rehearsal and performance can allow the two aspects to interact.

Though Samuel Beckett was not a theatre theorist, this broad area of debate comes to a focal point in his plays. His plays are highly specific in terms of what they demand from the performer: perhaps the most striking feature of Beckett’s dramatic texts is his excruciatingly detailed stage directions. But while virtually the entire mise-en-scène is detailed, there is almost no mention of the characters’ psychological, emotional, or internal state. Nevertheless, drawing on my own experience of performing Beckett’s Happy Days, it is clear that the actor working on Beckett’s dramatic texts experiences a unique confluence of physical score and inner life. Beckett’s dramaturgy explicates and illuminates Stanislavsky’s two-pronged approach to acting by redefining the relationship between interior experience and exterior action for both the actor and the dramatic character. In short, Beckett’s
theatre necessitates a performative mode wherein psychological and physical lines of action are not separable but rather exist in synergy, defined in terms of each other.

Prior to discussing the actor’s use of Stanislavsky’s approaches in Beckett’s plays I must address his System itself. In the interest of brevity, I will summarize and discuss three Stanislavskian concepts that are most relevant to the performer in Beckett’s theatre: “experiencing,” “inner life,” and “physical score.” I will then turn to a thorough investigation of the actor’s process in rehearsals for and in performances of Beckett’s plays as it relates to the relationship between “inner life” and “physical score,” drawing on my personal experience as an actor in Happy Days as well as the accounts of other actors.

 Stanislavsky’s System has been subject to countless misinterpretations and misconstruals subsequent to his death, obfuscating his original ideas and intentions. This was particularly true in the United States, where the dissemination of Stanislavsky’s work by American practitioners such as Lee Strasberg and Stella Adler resulted in a false conflation of Stanislavsky’s System and Strasberg’s Method. Even The New York Times obituary for Strasberg credited Stanislavsky as the originator of the Method, asserting that “Mr. Strasberg adapted it to the American theatre, imposing his refinements, but always crediting Stanislavsky as his source” (qtd. in Carnicke 9). Additionally, the transmission of Stanislavsky’s techniques and theories was somewhat warped by complications surrounding the publication of his writings. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood was his translator and collaborator for the English edition of his writings and her translation/adaptation is the most widely available and accepted edition in the Anglophone world (See: An Actor Prepares; Building a
In the introduction to his 2008 re-translation of Stanislavsky’s acting manual, Jean Benedetti describes some considerable editorial choices Hapgood made. Most significantly, the Hapgood edition resulted from splitting what was intended to be a single volume, *An Actor’s Work*, into two separate parts: *An Actor Prepares* and *Building a Character*. Stanislavsky himself “feared that the first volume, dealing with the psychological aspects of acting would be identified as the total ‘system’ itself, which would be identified as a form of ‘ultranaturalism’” (Benedetti xvi). These misgivings were eerily prescient, as subsequent practitioners and casual readers “have seen the ‘system’ as purely ‘psychological’. They are unaware of the enormous emphasis Stanislavski placed on physical and vocal technique and on a detail analysis of the script” (xvi). The translation of Stanislavsky’s acting terminology is another major difference between Benedetti’s adaptation and the Hapgood edition. Stanislavsky attempted to use colloquial, non-technical terms to describe his System, “what he called his ‘home-grown’ vocabulary” (xviii), but the Hapgood edition instead replaces them “with rather more abstract words” (xix). “Task” became the ubiquitous and Freudian “objective,” and instead of Hapgood’s technical “unit,” Stanislavsky originally wrote that actors should break scenes up into “bits.” Benedetti’s translation, which I will cite here in order to best understand Stanislavsky’s truest intentions, attempts to rectify these problems by splicing the two parts into a single volume—*An Actor’s Work*—and using Stanislavsky’s original terminology.

As explained in *An Actor’s Work*, Stanislavsky’s System considers “internal” and “external” techniques to be separate but complementary routes to the creation of
truthful performance. The Russian director addresses the “internal” aspects first, and his ideas regarding interiority are complex. For the purpose of my discussion in this chapter, two concepts are key: “experiencing” and “inner life.” Stanislavsky’s revolutionary characterization of acting as “experiencing” is fundamental to all later understandings of interiority in the actor’s work. It is important to note that in Hapgood’s edition, “experiencing” is instead translated as “living the part,” which over the years has been generalized to any psychologically- and emotionally-based acting technique. Carnicke emphasizes the ubiquity of “experiencing” in Stanislavsky’s writing, noting that “[a]lthough perezhivanie is a common Russian word, Stanislavsky uses it so idiosyncratically that The Dictionary of Contemporary Russian Literary Language attributes one of its many meanings to him alone: ‘the genuine penetration of a psychic state in a represented character’” (109).

Stanislavsky’s reconceptualization of acting appears very early on in An Actor’s Work, when he describes acting as “experiencing a role. […] our prime task is […] above all to create the inner life of the character […] That is why we think first and foremost of the inner aspect of a role, that is of its psychological life which we create by using the process of experiencing. […] You must experience a role” (Stanislavsky and Benedetti 19).

Here arises the second key term for my discussion: “inner life.” To further clarify what he means by “experiencing” and “inner life,” Stanislavsky later articulates the difference between “actors’ emotion” and “genuine emotion”: “Actors’ emotion isn’t genuine emotion, or genuine, artistic experiencing. It is an artificial stimulation of the periphery of the body. […] You can storm and rage externally, mechanically, […] for
no reason at all […] This creates a faint likeness of physical frenzy” (31).

Stanislavsky distinguishes between genuine emotion—that is, the actual subjective experiencing of an emotional state by the performer—and the “mechanical” external likeness of emotion. He considers this genuine emotion to be greatly preferable to actors’ mechanical expression of emotion. Furthermore, *An Actor’s Work* states that the key to experiencing genuine emotion on stage is the creation of and belief in imaginary circumstances such that the actor will create a complex and fully believable inner life for the character.

In addition to these internally based techniques, late in his career Stanislavsky wrote about physical actions as a means of producing truthfulness on stage, devising a rehearsal technique now known as the Method of Physical Actions. In the Method of Physical Actions, the entire action of a scene or play is broken down into an unbroken string of physical actions called the “physical score.” Using as his example the character of Salieri in Pushkin’s *Mozart and Salieri*, Stanislavsky describes how a sequence of simple physical actions can build a complex psychological action: “Salieri’s psychology, once he has decided to murder Mozart, is complex. It is a difficult decision to make, to take the goblet, fill it with wine, add the poison in and offer it to his friend, the genius whose music enraptures people. These are physical actions” (147). Instead of working herself into an emotional state comparable to that of the character, the actor can rely on the undeniable truth of *doing*: “Carrying out a physical Task truthfully helps you create the right psychological state” (147).

Stanislavsky’s Method of Physical Actions took advantage of his era’s newly theorized mind-body continuum, building on the materialist psychology of the turn of
the century. As Rose Whyman notes, “[t]he thesis that all thought is accompanied by muscular activity seemed incontrovertible in Stanislavsky's time and the materialist reduction of mental states to activity meant that Stanislavsky saw emotion and action as inextricably linked” (62). He therefore insisted on the actor’s psycho-physical technique, proclaiming, “[p]erform a series of physical actions with a goblet of wine, with a box on the ear, justify them internally […] and then decide where the body ends and the mind begins” (147). Stanislavsky’s exploration of physical score as a pathway to inner truth does not replace his internally-based techniques, and vice versa. Rather, both are construed as distinct but complementary pathways: the Stanislavskian actor’s challenge is to navigate the tension between experiencing the inner life of her role and enacting her precise physical score.

Despite all the exhaustively described nuances and technical tools of his System, Stanislavsky never wanted to write a step-by-step “how-to” book on acting. It is thus most useful to understand Stanislavsky as an inquiring practitioner and theorist whose questions about acting are applicable and relevant to subsequent theatrical genres and movements including, I argue, the theatre of Samuel Beckett. *An Actor’s Work* is written in the form of an acting student’s diary, so that readers can approximate the experience of learning from a Stanislavsky-like teacher, Tortsov. Therefore, the tone throughout is one of lively discussion and debate. The last chapter, however, is written explicitly in Stanislavsky’s own voice. Here, he enumerates his goals in a series of declarative statements: “The ‘system’ is a guide. Open it and read. The ‘system’ is a reference book, not a philosophy. / The ‘system’ ends when philosophy begins. […] / There is no ‘system’. There is nature” (612). In light of these
sentiments, my discussion of the Stanislavskian concepts of interior experience and exterior action in relation to Beckett’s drama will consider the System as an open and dynamic guide, rather than a prescription. By examining the actor’s use of both “external” (physical score, physical action) and “internal” (inner life, experiencing) techniques in developing Beckett’s text for performance, Stanislavsky’s enduring questions and ideas gain new contexts, meanings, and applications. Such an exploration ultimately helps define and describe the unique tasks of the Beckett performer.

It is evident from the outset that attention to physical score dominates the actor’s work in Beckett’s theatre, and in a way that is often seen as tyrannical. His texts—particularly Happy Days—are written as an uninterrupted string of actions, as if he were an actor constructing a score according to Stanislavsky’s Method of Physical Actions. It is clear that Beckett’s plays are not a text which must be “fleshed out” upon the stage: for Beckett, what he writes is the performance event. The actor who performs a Beckett play is not simply creating the mise-en-scène for a given narrative text; her process is more akin to an orchestra’s performance of a musical score. The orchestra certainly interprets the piece, but overall the performance is composed of nothing more or less than the notes written into the musical score. Similarly, Beckett’s plays are written as performance scores for the actor. The exactness with which he specifies the actor’s score is most evident in the writer’s stage directions. The precision demanded by these italicized directions is extreme. In Happy Days, the character Winnie begins her day with a complex series of actions which are specified in excruciating detail:
(She turns to bag, rummages in it without moving it from its place, brings out toothbrush, rummages again, brings out flat tube of toothpaste, turns back front, unscrews cap of tube, lays cap on ground, squeezes with difficulty small blob of paste on brush, holds tube in one hand and brushes teeth with other. She turns modestly aside and back to her right to spit out behind mound.) [...] (She spits out. She cranes a little further back and down.)

Beckett’s authoritarian reputation stems primarily from highly specific stage directions such as these. Many actors resent what Rosemary Pountney calls “the stringency of Beckett’s requirements” (70). Even Billie Whitelaw, considered to be the quintessential Beckett actor, “describes in her autobiography losing self-confidence unexpectedly when rehearsing Happy Days with Beckett and asking advice from Dame Peggy Ashcroft, who said: ‘He’s impossible. Throw him out’” (70-71). Beckett’s minutely specified actions undeniably constrain the actor’s creative freedom. However, his texts can also be viewed as analogous to Stanislavsky’s rehearsal technique, the Method of Physical Actions: the essential difference between the two is that the series of actions is specified by the playwright instead of the actor. When approached in this way, what at first seems to be simple choreography is actually an expertly constructed sequence of Stanislavskian physical actions that the actor can use as a point of departure to access the character’s “inner life.”

The mastery of physical score in a Beckett play is complicated by the physically difficult and painful situations in which the playwright places the actor’s body, adding another external/physical aspect to the actor’s performance. Beckett’s
treatment of the actor’s body is extreme: “He ties ropes around their necks and crams them in urns. He ties them to rockers. He buries them in sand under hot blinding lights and gives them impossible scripts to read at breakneck speed. The word for this is torture” (Abbott 82). A clear example is Pountney’s description of the contraption that was devised for her performance of Beckett’s 1972 play *Not I*, in the 1976 Oxford Playhouse production:

A blackout curtain was let down upstage covering the entire stage area. The actress was placed on a scaffold just behind the curtain, positioned so that her mouth was the precise eight feet above stage level prescribed by Beckett. At this point a hole was cut in the curtain at mouth level, so that her mouth could protrude through the curtain. In order that the image should remain constant, however, and not move in and out of the hole when taking a breath, the most fiendish part of the procedure was devised. A piece of elasticated material with strings attached was sewn to the inside of the curtain, surrounding the hole. Into this the actress was tied before the start of the performance.

(Having been that actress I recall with feeling the extreme sense of isolation experienced on hearing the assistant stage manager’s footsteps retreating down the scaffolding after tying me in!)

Discussing this with Beckett some time later, he described the play as ‘a horror’ for the actress. (72-73)

Enoch Brater describes these physical situations that the actor must endure as both absurd and unique to Beckett’s drama:
No playwright before Beckett has made his actors so consistently uncomfortable on the stage: the positions they are asked to assume and the words they are made to recite force them to experience a level of absurdity specifically designed to ‘dislocate’ any conventional notions about stagecraft itself. (“The ‘Absurd’ Actor in the Theatre of Samuel Beckett” 199)

The added level of physical discomfort imposed upon the actor acts as both an obstacle and a tool in developing Beckett’s plays for performance. While the technical expertise and focus needed to perform under these restrictions is certainly a hurdle for the actor to overcome, it also contributes to the complex physical score which Beckett lays out for the actor in a way that is highly meaningful for both the dramatic character and the actor.

The physical restrictions in Beckett’s theatre exist on the actor as well as on the character, causing a profound interaction between the fiction of the play and the reality of the actor’s body. This confrontation calls attention to the actor’s phenomenal body for both the actor and the audience, helping generate a Stanislavskian sense of truth. Deidre Onishi describes the effect of these two levels of restriction upon the actor in performance:

At times the restrictions overlap, as in Rockaby, where the woman and the actor are forced into the rocking of the mechanical chair. […] At other times, the actor incurs an additional level of restriction: […] the actor’s head in Not I rests in a brace which allows no movement. The restrictions may be physical and mentally painful but they create a
unique situation, one which strengthens not only the production but the actor performing it. (20)

More than just causing discomfort or pain for the actor, Beckett’s physical situations generate another layer of meaning that complements the character’s given circumstances. The actor’s phenomenal experience of Beckett’s physical restrictions guides the actor into the kind of truthful action Stanislavsky so passionately sought.

Beckett’s theatre additionally demands an extreme level of precision from the actor, which, coupled with physical and often painful restrictions, helps the actor access Stanislavsky’s ideal in performance: “truthful acting.” In An Actor’s Work, Stanislavsky (speaking in the voice of the fictional acting teacher Tortsov) describes the young actors when they are “not performing” in order to illustrate this desired sense of truth: “You were really experiencing what you were doing while you were looking [for a misplaced handbag]. Everything was truthful, we could believe everything. The small physical tasks were performed with precision, they had definition and clarity, attention was sharp” (152). Beckett’s physical constraints and intensely specified physical score can help the actor achieve this truthfulness in that they make it impossible for her to “forget” her body. Beckett’s plays do not allow the actor to execute the prescribed physical score in a purely mechanical manner, since through the dovetailing physical experiences of actor and character, Stanislavsky’s “imaginary circumstances” are in fact quite real in Beckett’s most physically difficult plays. Enoch Brater explains, “the effect of minimal mobility in Happy Days is therefore the result of carefully orchestrated and physically exhausting activity on the part of the actress, accomplished only after she has confronted the absurd obstacles
placed in her path” ("The ‘Absurd’ Actor in the Theatre of Samuel Beckett” 203). My own experience with *Happy Days* corroborated Brater’s analysis: the energy, focus, and technique required simply to make it through the entire play translated into an underlying score for me as an actor, which worked in tandem with the action of the text i.e., Winnie’s action. Beckett’s restrictive stage directions, so focused on external form, are paradoxically sites of close interactions between the “internal” and “external” aspects of the performer’s technique, lending truth and believability to otherwise absurd characters.

However, a Stanislavskian approach to the inner life of Beckett’s characters becomes complicated by the fact that the playwright consistently disrupts traditional notions of character and personhood in his texts. In his early plays, up to and including *Happy Days*, Beckett’s characters retain a stable and psychological personhood—that is, they generally exhibit a selfhood that is “coherent, bounded, individualized, intentional, the locus of thought, action, and belief, the origin of its own actions, [and] the beneficiary of a unique biography” (Rose 3). Certainly their situations are unusual and their personal histories are ambiguous at best. However, in comparison to Beckett’s later characters, his early characters—such as Didi, Gogo, Hamm, Clov, Winnie, Willie, and many others—are quite realistic and conform to traditional standards of psychological personhood. In contrast, his later characters are encrusted in stone and encased up to their necks in urns (*Play*, 1963), reduced to a disembodied mouth (*Not I*), and even entirely absent, save for a brief inhalation and exhalation from some unidentified and unsituated “character” (*Breath*, 1969). Colin Counsell states that “we are offered not ‘characters’ in the usual sense but those
components of theatre used to signify character” (115), emphasizing the fragmented nature of Beckett’s characters. Thus the notion of “character” as we usually recognize it becomes problematic in these late Beckett plays. Because Beckett’s theatre presents only “components” of characters, the performer’s access to any kind of psychological interiority is made incredibly challenging. The actor must reconcile her own personhood with the disrupted personhood of her role, which further complicates the development of a continuous inner life.

Nevertheless, Beckett’s fragmented characters are accessible through the one attribute they share with the actor: their physical actions. To focus solely on the fragmented nature of Beckett’s characters—as in Counsell’s analysis—is to ignore the fact that the actor remains present on the stage as an actual, single body. Though often this body is only partially visible, hidden, or contorted so as to be defamiliarized to the viewer, the audience still apprehends its living and phenomenal presence on stage. Spectators must somehow make sense of these fragmented character “components” in combination with the actor’s phenomenal body. Onishi posits that, in addition to actor and character, there is a third and equally significant element in Beckett’s theatre, which helps the audience juxtapose character and actor within one body: “The actions gain […] independence through the actor adhering to Beckett’s specific directions. This corporeality that the actions themselves create suggests a definition of action which gives the action a presence separate from the character and from the actor” (11). Thus, action in Beckett’s theatre becomes the common thread between the “fragmented” character and the “whole” actor. As a result, the audience’s attention may “oscillate” between the two beings via their coinciding actions; the
audience will experience “the going back and forth of the mind’s eye” (States 38).
Shared action becomes a surrogate for shared body, creating an avenue through which the actor can relate to her role.

Still, the actor may find it unhelpful to approach a Beckett character through the development of a Stanislavskian inner life, at least as an initial point of departure. In rehearsal, the actor must carefully navigate the interplay between the character’s interiority and the external form of the performance as specified by Beckett’s directions. Billie Whitelaw frequently expressed distaste for psychological interpretation, rather privileging the form of the piece:

Jonathan Kalb: You’ve spoken many times about the fact that Beckett reads his work to you. Can you talk about the process of moving from that reading to your own performance? How does it become yours?
Billie Whitelaw: [...] Once I’ve heard him say albeit two or three lines of a piece, then I have some idea of the area he’s working in, the tempo of it. I then take that and go over and over it, and gradually like topsy it starts to grow. Everyone’s got to find their own hook to hang the play on. Me, I recognized an inner scream in Not I, something I’d been sitting on for a long time, and whatever it was connected with me very fundamentally, very deeply. But the words that I’ve got scribbled all over my texts are: “No color,” “Don’t act,” “No emotion,” “Just say it.” (Kalb 234)

Working on Happy Days, director Gedney Barclay and I initially focused on the external form of the piece: gestures, inflections, tempos, and my bodily
“architecture.” During these early rehearsals, we treated the spoken text and physical actions as discrete entities. The approach was similar to a process which actress Patricia Boyette describes regarding her recent work with Phillip Zarrilli on Not I and Happy Days, which involves the coordination of various “tracks”:

You have to choose one of those tracks as an initial point of departure. This particular track might be the physical score […] the vocal […]. Or, […] the problem of myself in space, and the quality of the energy I am engaging. […] All these different ‘tracks’ must be simultaneously realized in performance, and layered with mathematical, geometrical precision. Given the structure of Beckett’s plays, there is not a lot of ‘wiggle room’ between or among these tracks or layers. Personally, performing Beckett is like playing chess on three levels simultaneously. (74)

Likewise, quite different from virtually all of my prior acting experiences, my own process while rehearsing Happy Days was akin to learning the two independent parts of right hand and left hand in a piano score and then putting them together little by little. That is, during early rehearsals I explicitly focused on the two aspects of the piece’s external form: how it sounded and how it looked.

Despite this focus on what might be considered choreography, when approaching Beckett’s characters the actor inevitably encounters some kind of inner life, similar to the one suggested by Stanislavsky—though with a different trajectory than the one outlined in An Actor’s Work. For me, Happy Days had an unusual rehearsal process, where the physical actions were created and scored first into a kind of “shell,” which
only much later was “filled.” Kalb observes the frequency with which many actors performing Beckett’s plays experience a similar trajectory: “a surprising number of excellent performances develop, as it were, backwards—beginning with external physical techniques and working inward toward psychological centers” (39). It is not, however, a simple two-step process. For me, the two blended together as it became clear that one could not exist without the other. Using Beckett’s play *Footfalls* (1975) as an example, Onishi says, “[t]he character May turns as does the actor. The actor in following the directions is doing what the character does” (33). Onishi goes on to make a much larger claim: that this overlapping of actions “thereby erases a distinction between actor and character” (33). This conclusion seems hasty at best. Instead, I posit that rather than “erasing” the distance between character and actor, the actor’s phenomenal experience of the character’s actions instead creates various points of intersection between the two. The disjunction between the actor and the character in Beckett’s theatre is an important consideration for the actor and is not so easily “erasable.”

Nevertheless, the fact that the actor appropriates the character’s actions as prescribed by Beckett leads to the performer’s embodiment of the character’s inner life. While my own rehearsal process began with a focus on external actions—gestures, voice, and physical scoring—at the subordination of internal actions, attention to my/Winnie’s inner life was not only eventually necessary but unavoidable. My sense of inner life arose quite naturally to fill the “shell” that I had thus far solidified. That is, I eventually discovered that my enactment of Beckett’s specified physical score was impossible without a corresponding “internal score,” and
vice versa. Moreover, the relationship between the two was not causal: in the end, they became one and the same, resulting in a single psycho-physical score. This kind of approach in rehearsals results in particularly embodied performances, whereby the actor’s bodily being-in-the-world is in fact essential to Beckett’s intended effect. As Stanton B. Garner states, “Beckett’s is an intensely embodied theatre, both in the traditional sense that its characters are bodied forth by actors for spectatorial consumption and in a more deeply phenomenological sense in which Beckett foregrounds the corporeality of actor and character within his stage’s exacting field” (“‘Still Living Flesh’: Beckett, Merleau-Ponty, and the Phenomenological Body” 449). The foregrounded corporeality that Garner describes necessarily involves what Erika Fischer-Lichte calls the actor’s phenomenal body. In contrast to the actor’s semiotic body, the dramatic expression of character that is typically privileged in mainstream theatrical performance, the phenomenal body is the performer’s bodily being-in-the-world. According to Fischer-Lichte, in performances where the phenomenal body becomes visible, dualistic assumptions “as the basis of the old embodiment concept becomes obsolete. The actor no longer lends his body to an exclusively mental process but makes the mind appear through the body, thus granting the body agency” (The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics 82). While Fischer-Lichte contends that performances of this nature were not explored until the avant-garde movements of the 1960s, the dissolution of the mind-body split is exactly what Stanislavsky sought to engender in his theatre. Beckett’s theatre necessitates the synergy of inner life and physical score in a way that heightens the performer’s phenomenal presence, despite the text’s emphasis on
the character’s semioticity. The unique constraints of Beckett’s texts redefine these two aspects of performance so as to make them indistinguishable, achieving Stanislavsky’s ultimate vision of psycho-physical action.

Though Beckett’s theatre is stylistically different from the canon Stanislavsky sought to address with his revolutionary System, the actor’s process/performance in productions of Beckett’s plays can nevertheless shed light on Stanislavsky’s investigation of the irrefutable tension between interiority and exteriority in acting. For the performer in Beckett’s plays, Stanislavskian “experiencing” of the character is initially quite useless, and a thorough reliance on precise physical score is imperative. Yet inner life soon emerges out of this exclusively external process. A successful performance will ultimately rely on the actor’s synthesis of physical score and inner life. Superficial understandings of Samuel Beckett’s theatre frame his plays as mechanical and lifeless, diametrically opposed to the dynamic “experiencing” of Stanislavsky’s System. Based on my own experience, Beckett’s seemingly automaton-like characters are actually vehicles for profound human behaviors and emotions. I find that Kalb aptly describes this quality of Beckett’s theatre when he says that “[Beckett’s] dramas are not about experiences; they are those experiences themselves”5 (4), unwittingly echoing Stanislavsky’s revolutionary redefinition of the actor’s craft.
CHAPTER TWO:

BECKETT AND BRECHT: THE ACTOR’S PLAY WITH PRESENTATIONAL AND REPRESENTATIONAL PERFORMATIVE MODES

For whom does the actor in Beckett’s plays perform, and what is her relationship to the fictive stage reality? In Beckett in performance, Jonathan Kalb argues:

Many critics have pointed out shared characteristics with one or the other or both of these [Stanislavsky and Brecht], but few have gone on to draw the obvious conclusion: that Beckett really represents a third category situated between Stanislavsky and Brecht because of the way he renders the presentational and representational indistinguishable. (38)

Kalb’s triangular categorization of these theatre artists implies a tidy identification of Stanislavsky and Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) with representational and presentational theatre, respectively, while placing Beckett squarely at the crossroads of these two approaches. Yet Brecht’s theatre in particular is resistant to such classification. The persuasive power of Brecht’s theatre lies in its use of dialectics. His dramaturgy disrupts the possibility of a unified, hermetic truth emanating from either the dramatic narrative or the stage figure. Brecht’s Alienation-effect, a cluster of techniques aimed at disrupting the audience’s empathetic connection to the narrative, causes a constant and purposeful oscillation between numerous dialectical polarities. Among these is the tension between the actor’s dual presence: at times she acts within the fictive drama, calling attention to the character, while at other times she performs for the spectators, revealing and commenting on the socio-political situation. Brecht’s
theories explore and exploit this duality; indeed his Epic theatre depends on the existential divide created by these two performative modes. The alternating exploration of both modes—that is, representational and presentational—is central to Brecht’s theories. Kalb’s assessment is therefore overly simplistic, for it aligns Brecht with the presentational mode at the exclusion of the representational one. In this chapter, I argue that Beckett’s theater utilizes the same tensions and dialectics that Brecht exploited, yet in a distinct, more nuanced, and especially subtle way. Rather than “render[ing] the presentational and representational indistinguishable,” Beckett’s theater invites a performance in which the actor must attend to both spheres of theatrical meaning simultaneously. In doing so, the performer in a Beckett play must clarify and distill many aspects of the presentational mode, while never letting it dominate the performance.

In his numerous theoretical and practical writings, Bertolt Brecht specifies a number of possible ways to create an Alienation-effect (A-effect) onstage, all of which depend on the inherent tension between presentation and representation. He explicitly calls for the actor to abandon all illusionistic pretenses:

The first condition for the achievement of the A-effect is that the actor must invest what he has to show with a definite gest of showing. It is of course necessary to drop the assumption that there is a fourth wall cutting the audience off from the stage and the consequent illusion that the stage action is taking place in reality and without an audience.

(Brecht and Willett 136)
A-effect requires a style of acting that is demonstrative rather than experiential. In other words, the performer explicitly presents the character separate from her Self, in an act of showing rather than being. Brecht writes, “The actor does not allow himself to become completely transformed on the stage into the character he is portraying. He is not Lear, Harpagon, Schweik; he shows them” (137). The audience is not expected to perceive actor and character as a unified entity. Moreover, it is the disjunction between the two sources of meaning production that leads to A-effect’s primary goal: to prevent the spectator from relating to the dramatic character via empathy and thereby create distance, inviting a critical/intellectual take on the narrative rather than sentimental apprehension of the drama.

Still, Brecht’s presentational aesthetic can only create alienation if both parties—performer and spectator—remain deeply aware of the negation of assumptions surrounding the representational mode. In an appendix to his “A Short Organum for the Theatre,” Brecht himself acknowledges the need for both modes of performance:

The contradiction between acting (demonstration) and experience (empathy) often leads the uninstructed to suppose that only one or the other can be manifest in the work of the actor (as if the Short Organum concentrated entirely on acting and the old tradition entirely on experience). In reality it is a matter of two mutually hostile processes which fuse in the actor’s work; his performance is not just composed of a bit of the one and a bit of the other. His particular effectiveness comes from the tussle and tension of the two opposites, and also from their depth. The style in which the S. O. [“Short Organum”] is written
is partly to blame for this. It is misleading often thanks to a possibly over-impatient and over-exclusive concern with the ‘principal side of the contradiction’. (277-78)

A-effect works by constantly revisiting the representational aspects of the drama in order to disrupt them. Counsell’s analysis of A-effect reveals that “[w]hat alienation actually does is juxtapose two contradictory discourses in the arena of the stage object. ‘Making-strange’ employs the plurality of available discourses in order to undermine the supremacy of dominant ideological perceptions” (103-4). In order to “undermine the supremacy” of illusion-based representational theatre, the actor must first acknowledge its dominance prior to the process of “making-strange.” I agree with John Rouse’s retranslation of Brecht’s original Verfremdung as “defamiliarization” rather than “alienation,” emphasizing the need for the familiar in the first place. He says, “Brecht’s ultimate point is that a spectator will not think about anything happening on stage if clichéd conventions or a mistaken naturalism make what is happening appear familiar to him” (32). The dialogue between presentational and representational modes of performance remains active in Brecht’s theatre despite the dominance of a presentational aesthetic. Thus the Brechtian actor becomes a locus of contradiction, alternately privileging one polarity or the other. This coexistence of what Brecht calls “two mutually hostile processes” is heightened and reinvigorated in Beckett’s theatre, although with entirely new parameters such that neither performative mode is privileged.

Beckett’s theatre exhibits a self-awareness that is difficult to define; his plays carry a metatheatrical frame that makes spectators keenly aware that they are highly-
crafted works of art and yet they never quite allow the spectator to perceive the full extent of their presentational nature. Earlier works like *Waiting for Godot* (1952) contain explicit evidence of such metatheatrical quality: thinking that they are under attack, Vladimir tells Estragon to escape through the auditorium. When Estragon refuses do so, Vladimir slyly acknowledges the audience’s presence:

**VLADIMIR:** We’re surrounded! (*Estragon makes a rush towards back.*) Imbecile! There’s no way out there. (*He takes Estragon by the arm and drags him towards front. Gesture towards front.*) There! Not a soul in sight! Off you go! Quick! (*He pushes Estragon towards auditorium. Estragon recoils in horror.*) You won’t? (*He contemplates auditorium.*) Well I can understand that. Wait till I see. (*He reflects.*)

Your only hope left is to disappear. (*Dramatic Works: The Grove Centenary Edition 66*)

Here, Beckett blatantly mocks Realism’s “fourth wall” convention: Estragon “recoils in horror” despite Vladimir’s assurance that there is “not a soul in sight.” Such presentational use of theatricality has led some scholars to compare Beckett’s theatre to Brecht’s Epic theatre. Kalb notes that “[t]here are two usual bases for associations of Beckett with Brecht, apparently separate but actually related, the first of which is their shared interest in clowns […] the issue of clowning leads into the second basis for association: the fact that the plays of both sometimes call attention to the machinery of the stage” (45). Yet the extent to which Beckett’s “clowns” reveal the illusion of their own performance is not the same as in Brecht’s theatre. Kalb uses
Brecht’s favorite clown, Charlie Chaplin, as an example to further clarify this distinction:

As has been frequently observed, Chaplin-as-Chaplin always remains to a certain extent visible behind his roles, but that is exactly what does not happen on Beckett’s stage. His actors play characters who are fully aware that such self-irony is possible but who hold unappeasable doubts about whether it has any effect, whether it is worth their trouble, or whether they are “as much as being seen.” (45)

Spectators thus recognize that Beckett’s theatre is self-aware enough to be capable of Brechtian self-irony, and yet they are not allowed the satisfaction of complete alienation from the stage illusion. This speaks to the diverging purposes of the two playwrights: Beckett’s existential Absurdism undermines the spectator’s attempts to generate coherent meaning, whereas Brecht’s socio-political didacticism demands that the spectator apprehend the drama’s socio-political implications.

One consequence of the ambiguous self-awareness of Beckett’s theatre is a radical destabilization of the spectator’s positionality. Kalb rightly describes Beckett’s characters as doubting “whether they are ‘as much as being seen,’” which complicates the spectator-performer relationship. Certainly Beckett’s plays underscore the presence of the audience in addition to the world of the play. But rather than casting the spectator as an individual capable of social thought and action as in the Brechtian presentational mode,

Beckett’s spectator is staged […] not as the disembodied eye/I of traditional realist spectatorship but as a body situated with its own
positionality and material presence. [...] But as with the characters, merely to note the heightened thereness of Beckett’s audience is to neglect the deepening ways in which this presencing becomes subject [...] to phenomenological complication [...] disclosing the body that underlies and sustains theatrical seeing at the very moment that they subject this body to a marked perceptual decentering. (Garner “‘Still Living Flesh’: Beckett, Merleau-Ponty, and the Phenomenological Body” 445)

So while Beckett’s theatre does involve a defamiliarization that may appear analogous to Brechtian A-effect, the difference is that Brecht’s theatre strives to make the staged representation appear strange to the spectator—whereas Beckett subjects the audience itself to a similar process of “making-strange.”

In order to achieve such an effect on the audience, Beckett’s performers must navigate the delicate balance between two opposing performative modes. Too much emphasis on one or the other undermines Beckett’s particular dramatic effectiveness. While rehearsing *Happy Days* I struggled for a long time with how to deal with the two levels of performance. On one level, Winnie is always performing for Willie and herself; at the same time, from the start of rehearsals I felt very strongly that Winnie’s reality should include the audience even if not always overtly. At a public rehearsal a week before opening night, an audience member commented that he was left feeling somewhat confused about who exactly Winnie was performing for. While this is exactly the kind of existential question that Beckett’s theatre depends on, at that point in the rehearsals I was perhaps placing too much emphasis on Winnie’s dialogue with
the audience. Over the next week I attempted to develop and refine this dual performance, training to focus my attention at all times both “inside” and “outside” the stage drama. Kalb nicely sums up this peculiar demand on the actor: “Winnie speaks ostensibly to Willie, even though he remains invisible behind her until the end and we sit in front watching her soliloquize from a flagrantly metaphorical lodgement. [The actor’s challenge is] to appear to play simultaneously with two different consciousnesses, in the play and of the play” (36).

These two realms of meaning—“in the play” and “of the play”—must indeed exist simultaneously, and I argue that they remain distinct rather than “indistinguishable,” particularly from the performer’s point of view. Throughout my rehearsals I confronted a challenging dichotomy between performing and acting. I often asked myself: When Winnie talks, does she speak to the audience, aware in some sense of its presence, or does she talk exclusively to Willie, fully enmeshed in the fictional world she inhabits? Throughout the rehearsal process, I learned that the actor performing Beckett’s character must do both: she acts within the play while at the same time performing for the audience. Yet in order for the audience to apprehend both levels of meaning, even if their understanding remains unconscious to some degree, the actor must play with both representational and presentational modes of performance while maintaining a clear distinction between them. Moreover, while Kalb asserts that “the two realms of meaning, presentational and representational, can be blended into a consistent atmosphere of ambiguity without the actors having to make constant shifts back and forth between them” (35), it seems virtually impossible for the performer to consistently play this “blended” ambiguity. Rather, the actor
experiences a distinctly double consciousness: every action is “justified” within the representational drama while at the same time “performed” outward, breaking the “fourth wall.”

The exact nature of the actor’s double consciousness in Beckett’s plays can be further explicated by analyzing a key moment in my Happy Days production: the curtain call. For Happy Days, we decided not to have a curtain call; once the play had ended, I and the actor playing Willie simply left the stage during a blackout. The curtain call is a curious phenomenon, supposedly serving as a transitional phase between the fiction of the actors’ symbolically charged character-bodies and their “real” selves. In his book Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater Bert O. States discusses the phenomenology of the curtain call, emphasizing the ways in which it is efficacious:

The curtain call is a seam in social nature: actually, a beginning and an ending, a return and a farewell. […] Since a seam by definition contains only what it joins, to talk about the curtain call at all is to talk about both art and manners, in this instance two forms of role playing. […] As a more useful metaphor we might think of the curtain call as a decompression chamber halfway between the depths of art and the thin air of reality […] the actors remain in costume but not in character. Or, not exactly in character; for it often happens that an actor, if not the entire cast, will deliberately retain traces of his role […] or […] a general gravity of mood in which, say, the actor who played Hamlet remains vaguely Hamletic beneath a “house” smile. (198-9)
States’ qualification of the phrase “not in character” hints at the peculiar problem of the actor during a curtain call. This transitional state, in which the actor may only partially abandon her character, is nevertheless necessary for the audience to leave the staged fiction behind and return to their daily reality. However, since in Beckett’s plays the actor’s performance is simultaneously “in the play” and “of the play,” this transitional mode—that is, the presentational, self-aware mode of the actor during curtain call—is present throughout the entire performance. My hope in forgoing the traditional curtain call was that its absence would draw attention to the tension between presentational and representational action in *Happy Days*. Successfully withholding this standard transitional “decompression chamber” suggests that this final moment was not even necessary in the first place, which consequently provokes questions about both the ontology of the performance itself and the shifting dynamics of the performer/spectator relationship.

I do not mean to imply that the audience always perceives or consciously comprehends both levels of meaning; in fact, any meaning generated by this kind of dual performative mode is neither conclusive nor fully authorized. The two existential levels of the actor’s performance coexist seamlessly, so that the spectator perceives both via a kind of binocular vision: like an optical illusion, one image or the other may occasionally gain temporary dominance. This complicates any attempt to perceive a single, unified meaning from the performance. Fischer-Lichte terms this state “perceptual multistability” and concludes that induction of such a state causes the spectators to “realize that they cannot prevent the unintentional shifts and are fluctuating against their will. In such a moment they are conscious of their own
perception as emergent and elusive. [...] the meanings generated through these perceptions [...] simply emerge in consciousness in the act of perception” (The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics 149). The performer, and not the spectator, attends to the two levels of meaning generated by eliciting the potential synergy between the representational and presentational modes of performance.

Ultimately, Beckett’s theatre thrives on a synergistic interaction between presentational and representational performative modes. Similar to Brecht’s Epic Theatre, Beckett’s emphasis is on the dialectical relationship between being “in the play” and “of the play,” rather than privileging one at the total exclusion of the other. If Brecht punctuated his plays with isolated and identifiable “defamiliarizations,” in Beckett’s plays the audience does not experience such dramatic shifts between the representational drama and the self-aware performance. Nevertheless, the performer in Beckett’s plays makes use of and further refines the same dialectical tensions that Brecht strove to exploit. In terms of the phenomenology of the actor, there is another key difference between the theatres of Beckett and Brecht. For Brecht, the “defamiliarized” actor is not merely “herself;” she is deliberately characterized by Brecht as a critical, objective “commenter.” According to Garner, “[w]hether or not Brecht may have equated embodied subjectivity with the unitary ego he was ideologically compelled to reject, Brechtian Verfremdung is, to a striking degree, an estrangement of the body as phenomenal site” (Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama 164). Brecht strives to fracture the ideology of representational drama’s coherent narrative, but does so within a performative
structure that alternately continues to “hide” the phenomenal body within the semiotic body or bodies. As I discuss in the next chapter, Beckett’s theatre is conversely an intensely “embodied” one wherein “the body as phenomenal site” becomes an integral part of the performance event as written.
CHAPTER THREE:
CHARACTEROLOGICAL SIGNS AND THE PHENOMENAL BODY IN
BECKETT’S THEATRE

As I discussed in the preceding chapters, the actor in Beckett’s theatre encounters a variety of necessary negotiations during rehearsal and performance. For one, she must navigate the inherent tension between inner life and physical score. In addition, she must establish a kind of double consciousness in order to simultaneously perform “in the play” and “of the play.” Despite these existential and methodological considerations, the performer in Beckett’s plays ultimately seems to be stripped of authorial credit in the performance, since the stage directions prescribe exactly what the actor should and should not do. Based on interviews with numerous actors about their experiences performing in Beckett’s plays, Ralph Yarrow concludes that the unique demands of Beckett’s theatre “seem to reduce the scope of the performer, to make it difficult or impossible to ‘act’. Actors ask what they are supposed to do in this situation: what ‘function’ do they have?” (146, emphasis his). Since they are deprived of their usual “function,” actors approaching Beckett’s plays express a kind of desperate helplessness, entirely unconvinced that they can retain any creative agency in the performance. As I discussed briefly in Chapter One, Beckett’s stage directions dictate the physical score of the performance in such exact detail that there appears to be no allowance for generative input on the part of the performer. Additionally, these stage directions impose specific and often painful physical demands. In order to perform under Beckett’s bizarre demands, a larger-than-usual portion of the actor’s focus must be devoted to matters of stamina, endurance, and sheer physical ability.
Particularly in Beckett’s later plays, the characters’ bodies become increasingly fragmented and objectified. This bodily fragmentation is both challenging for the actor to confront and impedes any attempt at creating a psychologically-based dramatic character.

All of these aspects of Beckett’s theatre create a problematic frame for the body—both the performer’s body and the character’s body (or the remnants of it). Many scholars and critics have pointed out the heightened corporeality that Beckett’s theatre evokes. In this chapter, I posit that performers of Beckett’s plays experience a disjunction between their phenomenal bodies and the semiotic bodies of the dramatic characters they are asked to perform; this dislocation leads to a foregrounding of the performer’s phenomenal presence. The individual performer’s corporeality is therefore an important source of meaning in Beckett’s theatre, and is the primary means through which the actors in his plays remain creative agents and gain authorship of the performance.

Faced with the daunting requirements and nonrealistic characters of Beckett’s texts, many performers must radically adapt their creative process, often moving towards an extreme minimalism which at face value seems to limit them as artists. Alan Schneider—the only person to have directed all of Beckett’s plays—describes many actors’ perception of Beckett’s dictatorial control: “They feel he […] removes their creativity and individuality […]. After all, if they cannot move freely about the stage, cannot use their voices and bodies […] what are they but impersonal or even disembodied puppets of his will?” (35). Drawing on his interviews with actors, Ralph Yarrow describes the dismaying process that many Beckett actors experience:
The actor’s process becomes:

- Not acting;
- Removing intonation and ‘pointing’;
- Breaking all units down as far as possible;
- Getting left in a *vide/bide* (Lecoq’s term for the moment when all ‘props’ are taken away but you have to go on…);
- Starting again from there. (146)

“Not acting” means, for the Western actor accustomed to psychological Realism, that Beckett’s plays necessitate an often shocking departure from her usual methods. Rosemary Poutney astutely notes that for the actor approaching Beckett’s characters, “[r]ather than a process of accretion, of building up a character, she must try to strip her performance down to the inner core […] it is the challenge of going beyond the normal boundaries of performance that produces the depth of identification with the role that actors find so exhilarating” (71-2). In Poutney’s view, transgressing the “normal boundaries of performance” is one way in which the actor remains a creative and active contributor to the performance event, though she does not specify what exactly such a transgression entails.

One aspect of the actor’s transgression of the “normal boundaries of performance” involves the specific and sometimes absurd demands placed on the actor by Beckett’s texts, which cause the performer’s body to be construed differently than in other theatrical performances. Beckett’s physical restrictions are infamous: the performer must be placed in an urn and encrusted with stone (*Play*), concealed except for her mouth (*Not I*), stuffed in a sack (*Act Without Words II*, 1956), buried in a mound
(Happy Days), seated utterly still in a rocking chair (Rockaby, 1981), or hidden in a
garbage can (Endgame, 1957), for example. In addition to such extreme physical
demands, the actor is often faced with ridiculous or impossible stage directions, as
Enoch Brater notes: “in All That Fall, a play for radio, [the actor] must ‘sound’ fat or,
perhaps even more exasperating, he must ‘sound’ blind” (“The ‘Absurd’ Actor in the
Theatre of Samuel Beckett” 199). As I mentioned in Chapter One, these demands on
the performer lead Brater to describe the actor in Beckett’s theatre as herself being
“absurd.” Specifically, these absurd physical demands create a disjunctive experience
for the performer:

The experience of Beckett’s playwriting therefore presupposes a new
method of interpretation for the actor. Within his familiar medium,
now made unfamiliar to him, the actor must undergo physically on
stage (not only emotionally) the same spirit of painful dislocation the
man in the audience takes a lifetime to travel. (207)

Such new and unfamiliar experiences of physicality in performance cause the actor to
radically reconsider her “function” in the performative event.

In addition to the challenging physical conditions to which the actor is subjected,
Beckett’s theatre deconstructs and fragments its characters to a striking degree,
casting the character’s psychologically “whole” selfhood into serious doubt. The most
blatant example of this problem is Not I, in which the actor must somehow embody a
character who has been reduced to a chattering mouth suspended in an undefined
void. But even in Happy Days, one of Beckett’s relatively early plays, Winnie’s
psychological personhood is questionable. According to Stanton B. Garner, Jr., “the
play’s staging reduces character to body region and body part (Winnie’s upper torso, then head; Willie’s head, arm)” (Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama 450), denying the performer a “complete” character to embody. Beckett’s italicized directions likewise “underscore this dismemberment through language that subverts the impression of bodily unity and corporeal agency: ‘Happy expression off,’ ‘Head up,’ ‘Impatience of fingers’” (450). Thus, the deconstructed nature of Beckett’s characters is the result of the staged dismemberment and fragmentation of their bodies. A less literal dismemberment is evident in the way Beckett directed his own production of Happy Days. In his production notebook, he envisioned Winnie as speaking in ten distinct “voices,” each corresponding to a specific subject matter or recurring phrase. For example, Winnie’s narrative stories about Mr. and Mrs. Shower/Cooker and Milly were to be performed using a specific voice which Beckett called “Narrative.” Thus, it cannot be assumed that all of the words allocated to “Winnie” in the play are actually emanating from a single ego. Yarrow describes this deconstructive quality of Beckett’s text as a kind of annihilation of selfhood, since “[t]he performer is nailed down to practicing the reduction of language to sonic quanta, which […] reject any coherent naming of world and self in narrative flow” (147). This situation can be intensely anxiety-provoking for the actor, since a breakdown of the character’s self suggests a parallel fracturing of the performer’s personhood.

This fragmentation is not abstract—in fact, the actor’s most heightened disjunctive experience involves the very real non-coincidence of her own body and the deconstructed body of the character. In most of Beckett’s plays there is a discrepancy
between the performer’s own “whole” body and the character’s fragmented body. The play *Not I* exemplifies this phenomenological problem: although Mouth does not have a “body” it belongs to, the actor herself cannot erase the subjective experience of her own “whole” body. If in most theatrical performances, the body of the actor and the body of the character coincide to a significant degree, fusing into a single body—in Garner’s words, the “stage body” is “jointly claimed by actor and character” (*Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* 44)—this is not necessarily true in Beckett’s theatre. In a discussion with prominent performance studies scholar Richard Schechner, Alan Schneider unwittingly testifies to the troubling disjunction between actor-body and character-body:

Schechner: Did [the characters in *Play*] have bodies?

Schneider: No; that was the justification for not being able to move anything. […]

Schechner: Was it a similar kind of problem in *Happy Days*?

Schneider: Yes, but the actor had more freedom. […]

Schechner: Did her body vanish as the dirt came up, or did she keep her body when buried?

Schneider: She kept her body—whatever that means—but she couldn’t move it, or feel it, or control it. (130)

The actor in these cases faces a conundrum: she must truthfully embody a character whose body schema does not match her own. Schneider’s addition of “whatever that means” testifies to the fact that whereas an actor portraying the blinded Gloucester in
King Lear knows that at least he at one point had eyes, actors playing Beckett’s characters have no such certainty. Moreover, what would it even mean for the actor to know whether Mouth at one point “had” a body?

My personal experience as a performer in Happy Days can help specify the exact nature of this bodily disjunction. While Schneider asserts that Winnie “kept her body,” the existence of Winnie’s legs is nevertheless only partial: not only has she lost control over them, she has lost all proprioception.8 As such, the actor must in some sense ignore her own corporeality—the fact that she does have legs under the mound and can feel them throughout the performance. In the set design for my production, the mound itself was made out of chicken wire covered in burlap, and therefore it was hollow. I sat on a wooden platform, which adjusted to a different height for Act II. Consequently, I did not experience anything similar to Winnie’s physical situation: my legs could move freely, and any constraint of my torso was entirely self-imposed. Likewise, in Act II Winnie’s head is immobile, yet my own immobility was achieved not through any external restraint but rather through a sustained muscular effort on my part to remain motionless.9 As a result, I experienced two distinct levels of awareness: one which attended to my reality as an actor, and another which focused on my performance of Winnie. I do not mean to say that I took on a separate consciousness (i.e. Winnie’s) in addition to my own. The majority of my consciousness dealt with Winnie’s actions as specified by the text and my physical score. At the same time, an entirely separate level of awareness attended to those sensations and perceptions which could not exist for Winnie: anything involving my legs and lower torso in Act I or my entire body below my neck in Act
II. This level of consciousness would be aware that a sharp edge of the platform was restricting the blood flow in my legs, for example, and I would respond by shifting my weight imperceptibly. Or, it would be responsible for moving my toes before they became numb. My consciousness thus had to encompass two separate and conflicting body schemas, resulting in an intensely physical disjunctive experience.

Before I proceed further, it is useful to revisit Erika Fischer-Lichte’s use of the terms “semiotic body” and “phenomenal body.” According to Fischer-Lichte, “[w]hile it is the semiotic body that creates the illusion in the mind and imagination of the spectator, it is the phenomenal body, i.e. the vital, organic, energetic body whose sensuousness works directly on the phenomenal body of the spectators” (*Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* 6). While some performances may draw primary attention to one or the other, both the semiotic and the phenomenal body are always present. Furthermore, Fischer-Lichte’s analysis of Gertrud Eysoldt’s performance in which her phenomenal body came to the fore emphasizes the actor’s particularly violent use/abuse of her own body:

Gertrud Eysoldt had stepped over a boundary which had been drawn by the theoreticians of acting in the eighteenth century that had hardly ever been touched or questioned since then. The boundaries which the actor has to draw through acting should differentiate more or less clearly between the violence that is done to the character being played and the actor’s own body that does not actually suffer from such violence. (4)
In Beckett’s theatre, the disjunction between phenomenal experience and signified character might suggest a subordination of the actor’s phenomenal body in order to privilege the character’s semioticity, but in fact it serves to paradoxically call attention to the individual actor’s phenomenal presence. The discrepancy between semiotic body and phenomenal body is not hidden from the audience. As William B. Worthen points out, “we never see the actress playing Mouth, and may be unaware of her hardships. Inevitably, though, we wonder about her body and how it is concealed, and this curiosity leads us to a finer point concerning the dialectic between text and body” (206-7). The “finer point” that Worthen mentions is the spectator’s inherent attention to the tension between the actor’s physical presence and the character’s semioticity. Fischer-Lichte rightly states that “[t]he character […] is […] generated through the very process of embodiment. Each character is bound to the specific corporeality of the actor who engenders it. The actor’s phenomenal body […] constitutes the existential ground for the coming into being of the character. It does not exist beyond the individual body” (The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics 147-8). This is particularly true of the actor’s embodiment of Beckett’s characters. By highlighting the disjunction between the two legible bodies on stage, the individual body of the actor is consequently made particularly salient.

One particular way in which actor’s individual materiality emerges in performances of Beckett’s plays is through a heightened focus on her performance of physical exertion. As I have discussed, the physical requirements of Beckett’s texts often require extreme exertion on the part of the actor, such that merely executing the physical score becomes more of a challenge than “acting” in the conventional sense.
Indeed, according to Worthen, “to a certain extent the physical enactment of a
Beckett play threatens the life of the play itself, placing the actor under such difficult
physical conditions that his ability to complete the performance becomes
questionable” (206). Yet, unlike other performances of physical exertion such as
sporting events or circus, the emphasis in Beckett’s theatre is on restraint rather than
excess. Worthen calls this quality “negative athleticism,” and suggests that it
additionally reflects the minimalism of Beckett’s spoken text: “Beckett’s limping,
legless, or even bodiless creatures speak a halting language appropriately depleted of
theatrical resource” (205). My personal experience as a performer supports Worthen’s
assessments of the kind of physical engagement Beckett’s plays elicit from actors.
More than the taxing nature of the play itself—Winnie speaks virtually uninterrupted
for almost two and a half hours—being deprived of the use of more than half of my
body meant that I had to rely on a severely limited physicality to generate Winnie’s
relentless energy.

In other performances of extreme physicality or athleticism, the phenomenal
quality of the individual body is brought to the forefront, eclipsing its semiotic value
and thereby diminishing dramatic or symbolic meaning. Fischer-Lichte points to the
Olympic Games as an exemplary performance of athleticism, noting in particular the
focus on the athletes’ individual bodies. She specifically discusses the first modern
Olympic Games, which took place in Athens in 1896. In contrast to a theatrical
performance, the Olympic Games did not rely on semiotic expressivity in order to
generate meaning. According to Fischer-Lichte, “emphasis was laid on their dynamic
and energetic bodies. […] In the competition, it was only the phenomenal bodies of
the athletes that counted. There was no expressivity that might contravene performativity” (*Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* 81). Similarly, the Beckett actor’s “negative athleticism” makes the performer’s specific phenomenal presence exquisitely perceptible to the spectators. In performative events that draw attention to the actor’s phenomenal body, the spectator often has “difficulty identifying a semiotic body relating to a dramatic character and [is] unable to maintain a reflective distance” (*The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* 87). Like the extreme, individual athleticism of the Olympic Games, such performances hinder the audience’s reception of dramatic meaning; in short, the phenomenal body of the performer contradicts or negates her semiotic body.

However, this is not the case in Beckett’s theatre. According to Garner, the actor’s physical presence adds a competing yet ultimately complementary level of meaning to the dramatic text. He says that in Beckett’s theater,

> the actor’s body reveals itself more deeply, its exigencies sharpened by the performative requirements with which they are constrained.

> Behind Mouth’s suffering in *Not I* lies an anterior suffering—that of the performing body subject to its own pain and deprivation, unified with its stage counterpart in an *agon* of expression. (*Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* 81)

The performer’s phenomenal presence is thus made immediate and visible for the spectator, but this non-fictive body is nevertheless thematically, spatially, and perceptually linked to the dramatic text. The performing body becomes expressive in
its own right, paradoxically unifying semiotic and phenomenal expressivity through the actor’s disjunctive experience and her performance of “negative athleticism.”

The primary way in which the actor in Beckett’s theatre retains creative authorship over her performance is therefore through a highly complex use of her body. The individual performer’s corporeality contributes meaning to the performance of Beckett’s text such that her physical presence becomes an integral, phenomenal part of the spectator’s reception of the play. Beckett’s specific treatment of the performing body, both in its phenomenality and semioticity, means that the actor’s usage of her own body becomes intensely creative and generative. From the perspective of the audience, Worthen notes that the disjunction between character-body and actor-body—or more specifically, the concealment of parts of the actor’s body—“make[s] his physical presence manifest to the audience, [serving] to make the perception of the actor’s performance part of our experience of the play” (209). The vitality and undeniable “thereness” of the phenomenal body is increasingly apparent in Beckett’s theatre, even as the semiotic body becomes radically deconstructed and thus dehumanized. Garner chronicles Beckett’s heightened formalistic aesthetics at length but ultimately concludes that “[a]s Beckett pares away scenic and characterological naturalism through his theatrical via negativa, in other words, it is the human presence—what Molloy [in Beckett’s novel Molloy] calls ‘that unstable fugitive thing, still living flesh’—that limits objectification and formal reduction” (Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama 80). Resistant to complete objectification, the actor’s phenomenal body becomes dislodged from its
subservience to the semiotic body; the actor’s subjective experience of this

disjunction is in turn apprehended by the audience as a new level of meaning.
CONCLUSION:

BECKETT’S EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN: ACTING AS PHENOMENON

“Does she feel her legs? he says. (Pause.) Is there any life in her legs? he says. (Pause.) Has she anything on underneath? he says.”

—Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*

By examining three particular dialectical relationships in the actor’s performance in Beckett’s plays—inner life versus physical score, representational versus presentational modes, and semiotic versus phenomenal body—my discussions in the three preceding chapters have considered, from several perspectives, the issue of the body on stage. It seems that the actor’s embodied experience of these dichotomies is somehow essential to the spectator’s reception of the performance event as a whole. In recent writings, Erika Fischer-Lichte and Phillip B. Zarrilli have proposed new and exciting theories regarding the role of embodiment in the creation of a performance event. Their works underscore the changing conceptions of the performing body in the fields of theatre and performance studies, and suggest new parameters for understanding acting as a phenomenon.

In her 2008 book *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Erika Fischer-Lichte describes “a radically redefined idea of the term embodiment” (82), wherein the actor’s body appears to the spectators as what she calls an “embodied mind.” She explains that “the mind does not exist in opposition to the body. Rather, the mind finds its existential ground in the body, which brings it forth and can thus appear as embodied mind” (173). According to Fischer-Lichte, the human being as “embodied mind” is not a special status afforded exclusively to participants in performance
events. Rather, she finds that “the embodied mind describes the ordinary human being. Thus, the ordinary human being appears in these performances, transfigured through the phenomenon of presence. Presence makes the ordinary remarkable and lifts it into consciousness” (173).

Fischer-Lichte is not alone in her focus on embodiment as an integral component of performance. In a 2007 article, Phillip B. Zarrilli presents a meta-theoretical approach to the phenomenon of acting, focusing on the performance event as emergent from the “particular moment within [the] specific (theatrical) environment” (“An Enactive Approach to Understanding Acting” 638). Zarrilli uses a phenomenological, first-person account of his own experience as an actor in Beckett’s Ohio Impromptu. Based on this description and his subsequent analysis, Zarrilli argues that “acting may be (meta-theoretically) defined as ‘enactive’: a psychophysiological process by means of which a theatrical world is made available at the moment of its appearance/experience for both the actors and audience” (641). Zarrilli conceives of the performance event as a complex autopoiesis involving the embodied experiences of performer and spectator within the specific theatrical environment. Indeed, Fischer-Lichte describes what seems to be a similar process as the “autopoietic feedback loop” between actors and spectators. To Fischer-Lichte, the way in which this feedback loop was understood and utilized fundamentally changed in the 1960s:

Performances since the 1960s have not only addressed these issues; they have increasingly been constructed as experiments that seek to offer answers. Today, performance is no longer seen as the mysterious
locus for an inexplicable encounter between actors and spectators. Rather, performance provides the opportunity to explore the specific function, condition, and course of this interaction […] making the functioning of the feedback loop visible by foregrounding certain factors and variables, whilst minimizing, if not fully eliminating, others. (*The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* 40, emphasis mine)

The instances Fischer-Lichte refers to are considerably more radical in their techniques than any of Beckett’s plays. For example, she describes several events in which physical contact occurred between performers and spectators, thereby revealing the autopoietic feedback loop.

However, Beckett’s plays exhibit a similar experimental quality in that they manipulate the relationships between actor and character, phenomenal and semiotic body, subject and object, signifier and signified. In this sense, his theatre heralded the rise of the embodied and enactive actor that Fischer-Lichte observes in performance events since the 1960s and that Zarrilli has begun to describe based on his own performance-based research.

Ultimately, my exploration in this thesis supports and is supported by my practical, experimental investigation of Beckett’s theatre in my performance of *Happy Days*. Using this experiential knowledge in conjunction with accounts from scholars and other actors/practitioners, I have focused on the complex problems facing the actor in Beckett’s plays. As if foreshadowing later performance events that explore the body as the site of phenomenological experience, Beckett’s plays
foreground the actor’s presence as “embodied mind” despite their highly objectified and semiotic characters. Though his theatre can be positioned in dialogue with the theories of Stanislavsky and Brecht—as I have done in this thesis—Beckett’s plays offer a unique and exquisite creative opportunity for the actor, in that they demand a more wholly phenomenal, embodied, and enactive actor than either of the two canonical artists.

This study is only a beginning, and as such I hope that it will contribute to further artistic and theoretical considerations of the actor in Beckett’s plays. Clearly, Beckett’s theatre is forward-looking in that it reinforces many recent trends in understanding acting as a phenomenon even though it predates them. The shifting conceptions of the actor’s experience as suggested by Fischer-Lichte and Zarrilli implicate a virtually endless list of questions and hypotheses. Indeed, my interest in the actor’s unique presence in Beckett’s plays began with an open-ended question, as evidenced by my program note for Happy Days. This short note, written in early September 2008, summarizes my question-driven, experimental approach to this investigation:

I like to think of my thesis […] as an experiment. Unlike many experimenters, I began this process not with a hypothesis, but with a question: How and when does the actor’s own physical being-in-the-world interact and come into contact with the presented character, as perceived by the audience? The answer to this question invariably varies across different theatrical movements and styles, and has a specific manifestation in the theater of Samuel Beckett. In Beckett’s
work, the existential dilemma within the fictive drama is reciprocally projected onto the real world of the audience as the play unfolds. In our rehearsal process, Gedney [Barclay], Carmen [Mellillo] and I have attempted nothing more than to trust in the text’s construction of such an event, and explore exactly what sort of presence and attention this kind of text demands of its actors. In turn, we ask the audience nothing more than to approach our performance as we approached Beckett’s text: with honest credulity and curiosity unmediated by any sort of presupposed expectation of what Beckett, or what theatre, should be.

Or, as Winnie would have put it, “And you, she says, what’s the idea of you, she says, what are you meant to mean?” (294).
Notes

1. Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy initiated by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) that deals with “the thing itself.” In other words, “Phenomenology is the study of givenness […], of the world as it is lived rather than the world as it is objectified, abstracted, and conceptualized” (Garner “‘Still Living Flesh’: Beckett, Merleau-Ponty, and the Phenomenological Body” 448).

2. Kuhn’s influential book, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962), specifies that landmark scientific advancements such as Newton’s *Principia* should be understood as paradigms because “[t]heir achievement was sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity. Simultaneously, it was sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve” (10). Further, the dominance of a particular paradigm influences the way new knowledge is constructed: “In the absence of a paradigm or some candidate for paradigm, all of the facts that could possibly pertain to the development of a given science are likely to seem equally relevant” (15).

3. Both “Stanislavsky” and “Stanislavski” are accepted transliterations of the Russian name.

4. This notion of personhood has been problematized by many scholars. Nikolas Rose, in his Foucaultian study *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*, presents a “critical history” of personhood, noting that “it is only at this historical moment [i.e. the current one], and in a limited and localized geographical space, that human being is understood in terms of individuals who are selves, each
equipped with an inner domain, a ‘psychology’” (23). Keeping this context in mind it is nevertheless useful to apply this framework to considerations of Beckett’s dramatic characters: are they or are they not “persons” according to this definition of selfhood? As such, while I use the term “personhood” here without qualification, I am fully aware of the deep complications that Rose and others have discussed at length.

5. Kalb adapts Beckett’s description of James Joyce, noting that “Beckett's oft-quoted words about Joyce also describe his own work: ‘You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read - or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not about something; it is that something itself’” (Kalb 3-4).

6. There is considerable confusion surrounding the terms “presentational” and “representational.” Two contradictory definitions seem to be prominent. One definition considers these terms in light of the performative act itself, aligning “presentational” with immediate, phenomenal presence. For example, Fischer-Lichte discusses the “tension between the phenomenal body of the actor, or their bodily being-in-the-world, and their representation of the dramatic character” (The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics 76, emphasis mine). This is a somewhat recent definition of the two terms. The earlier, conflicting definition of “presentational” and “representational” was based on the dominant aesthetic attitude of the performance. While representational theatre upholds illusionistic assumptions and is generally characterized by a naturalistic aesthetic, presentational theatre involves “underlying production conventions [that] cause the performance to present itself generally as a self-reflexive and nonfictional entity, although it can contain
fictional elements that point beyond it. [For example:] traditional genres such as ballet, the circus, vaudeville, and the like” (de Marinis 234). In this definition, “presentational” refers to the fact that the performance is presented to the audience “honestly,” fully revealing its artifice. For this chapter, I will use the latter definition of these two terms, such that “presentational” is a performative mode that acknowledges itself as performance per se, completely aware of the performer-spectator relationship, while “representational” generally refers to the naturalistic performative mode that has largely dominated theatre since the late nineteenth century.

7. These ten voices are: “usual; To herself; [To] Willie; Willie’s ‘I worship . . ’ whine; [Mr.] Showers’; Reason [says, tells me]; Something [says, tells me]; Description [of] Dolly; Narrative (Mildred, Showers); Quotes” (Happy Days: The Production Notebook of Samuel Beckett 31).

8. Proprioception is sometimes called the “sixth sense”: “that continuous but unconscious sensory flow from the movable parts of our body (muscles, tendons, joints), but which their position and tone and motion are continually monitored and adjusted, but in a way which is hidden from us because it is automatic and unconscious” (Sacks 43). In his essay “The Disembodied Lady” (in The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat), clinical neurologist Oliver Sacks describes a clinical case he encountered where the patient had lost her proprioception. Trying to understand her strange situation, she said, “This ‘proprioception’ is like the eyes of the body, the way the body sees itself. And if it goes as it’s gone with me, it’s like the body’s blind. My body can’t ‘see’ itself if it’s lost its eyes” (47).
9. This example is in contrast to many other productions, which often make use of restraining devices, such as “a modified neck brace so that movement of the head is constricted—one shift of the neck to left or right and the illusion is destroyed” (Brater “The ‘Absurd’ Actor in the Theatre of Samuel Beckett” 202).

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