

## **Review of the Happy Days Enniskillen International Beckett Festival, Enniskillen, July 21-25, 2022**

The Happy Days Enniskillen International Beckett Festival took place between July 21 and 25, celebrating its 10th anniversary after a pause of two years due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Events were held in various locations, indoors and outdoors, around the scenic town of Enniskillen, in County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland. It is nowadays a popular destination for boating and fishing lovers, but is also the place where the young Samuel Beckett went to school. As in previous years, the Festival featured acclaimed Irish and British actors and musicians, and was presented by Arts Over Borders, a local organization which focuses on the influence of Irish writers associated with the region.

The opening lecture was delivered by Robert Northridge at the Royal Grammar School, a historic building formerly known as Portora that overlooks the whole town. Here Beckett was a boarding student between 1920 and 1923, sent along with his brother, presumably to protect them in difficult times for Dublin-based protestant families during the War of Independence. Northridge, himself a former pupil and later a teacher at Portora, has researched the history of the school and traced evidence of Beckett's time there. In the lecture, he referred to Beckett's 1932 poem *For Future Reference* – copies of which were handed to the audience – explaining why the 'red-faced rat of a pure mathematician' is likely to be a reference to Beckett's maths teacher, W. R. Tetley. Northridge mentioned Portora students who died in the First World War and the efforts the school made to honour their memories, presenting this as an important factor in the atmosphere of the school, and therefore an influence on the young Beckett.

The former Regal cinema (now a toy warehouse and office for the local Branch of the Ulster Unionist Party) hosted four multimedia shows. These included the world premiere of Robert Wilson's seven-minute *Video Self Portrait, 2022*, featuring the scene on the Upper Lake from Wilson's famous production of *Krapp's Last Tape*, which was presented in full at Enniskillen in 2012. The video compresses the live production, playing with the idea of old film and video tape. Two works commemorated the centenary of the publication of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*: Pierre-Yves Macé's sound installation *Ear to Ear: The Waste Land, 2022*, and Lisa Cazzato-

Vieyra's *The Waste Land: A filmed reading*, 2022. In tribute to Joyce, Alan Gilson's *Ulysses*, 2020, was also shown.

*Ohio Impromptu*, performed on Devenish Island, directed by Adrian Dunbar and featuring Vincent Higgins and Lalor Roddy, was a gem. After a twenty-minute boat ride across the scenic Lough Erne on an exceptionally sunny Friday evening, we arrived at the island where we were separated into two groups: one went for a short walk to the imposing 12th-century round tower and the ruins of an Augustinian priory, while the other group watched the performance before switching. The play was performed inside a small stone shed with capacity for twenty spectators who, upon entering the space, see Reader and Listener seated closely in total stillness around a table behind a wire mesh. The diffusion of the light created an image astonishingly resembling a seventeenth century Dutch oil painting of a domestic interior. As specified by Beckett, the characters are perfect *doppelgängers* in their long black coats and long white hair. The performance is delightfully precise and intimate, the final two-handed choreography an instant of special beauty.

The *Theresienstadt Recital* in St. Macartin's Cathedral featured baritone Konstantin Kimmel, mezzo-soprano Ema Nikolowska and pianist Julius Drake. It was thematically linked to *Waiting for Godot*, a play Beckett wrote in the aftermath of World War II and the loss of one of his closest Jewish friends, and a tribute to the composers who lived in the ghetto of Theresienstadt all of whom were later sent to Nazi concentration camps, none surviving. The programme comprised songs of different genres composed by Ilse Weber, Victor Ullman, Gideon Klein, Pavel Haas, Adolf Strauss and Carlo Taubert. The singing and piano were superb, especially moving during the final duo, a rendition of Weber's Lullaby.

Another headline event featured acclaimed actor Toby Jones, who delivered *The Graveyard Readings* at the Breandrum Chapel. The location, in a cemetery, was highly atmospheric. As we learned later, the cemetery is currently only accepting spouses of deceased already interred there, and the building is little used nowadays, with cobwebs under the wooden benches adding to the ambience. In a very captivating style, Jones read from *Fizzles*, *First Love* and *Texts for Nothing*. During one short pause he commented to an attentive, packed audience: 'You can't rush this stuff'. The title of the event included the words 'Astride a grave', an image twice evoked in *Waiting for Godot* and brought back with chilling effect by the surroundings and the texts magnificently voiced by Jones. But, as I heard someone comment on our way out

of the Chapel, 'It's bucketting!' The weather had changed dramatically during Jones' first event, affecting the rest of the festival.

*Inferno/Not I* was one of the site-specific performances – along with *Waiting for Godot* and *Ohio Impromptu* – intended as the main attractions of this festival. It was designed as an immersive experience deep down in the nearby Marble Arch Caves, where spectators were taken on silent boats into the cavern to watch *Not I* in the darkness. This was to be followed by a walk through a soundscape of cantos from Dante's *Inferno* in a babel of different languages, before listening to Purcell's *Dido's Lament* and, finally, *Amazing Grace* upon returning to the light above. On Saturday, however, my experience was different. After arriving at the Caves in pouring rain, we heard that the show would have to be cancelled due to the danger of flooding. But shortly afterwards Festival Director Seán Doran announced that Clara Simpson was willing to perform *Not I & Pas Moi* in the Visitors' Centre. So, with water dripping through the roof, we watched the talented Lyon-based Irish actress Simpson become Mouth, first in English and then with no pause in French. Her performance captivated the audience, which was unexpectedly able to see her body and hand movements generate the intense, charged, mad monologue. If, during a conventional performance of this powerful play spectators access Mouth's mind only through the lips and sound and meaning of the words, these fortuitous circumstances enabled us to witness the intimacy of an actor's entire body creating that traumatized universe. Then was the turn of the cantors, this part less interesting due to the loss of any real underworld context. Finally, Ruby Philogene sang heartily and beautifully from an upper floor overlooking the hall. At one point during *Amazing Grace* a big door was banging as if pushed by ghosts, and mezzo-soprano Dame Sarah Connolly (also appearing at the festival) ran to hold it closed.

*Walking for Waiting for Godot* was premiered in the 2017 Festival, announced as a tragi-comedy taking place on an upland bog in the open countryside near the Irish border. This year's two performances of this production were also impacted by the weather. On Saturday the show had to be cancelled towards the end of Act I when the pages from which the actors read began disintegrating. Sunday's show skipped the walking altogether and was transferred to the ex-Portora school to which the festival volunteers took us by bus. The actors performed the play in the school hall; all around us the Beckett connection seemed palpable. There was no staging or lighting design since it was a last-minute location; the original tree of this production (created by

artist Antony Gormley in a commission by the festival in 2012) was replaced by a miniature bronze sculpture. However, this was largely compensated for by the proximity of the audience to the actors and the way the characters were brought to life. Andrew Bennett, an experienced interpreter of Beckett in various productions for Pan Pan Theatre, was a humane, slightly desperate Vladimir, while Rory Nolan as Estragon successfully applied skills from his background as a comedian. Pozzo, played by Ned Dennehy, an actor who has featured in the TV series *Peaky Blinders*, was appropriately hard-faced, and Alex Murphy as Lucky was bewilderingly proficient in his long monologue towards the end of Act I. Enniskillen Royal Grammar School student Harry Welsh played the Boy endearingly. Although not the full, site-specific experience promised, watching this version of Beckett's most famous play was highly rewarding.

The Festival also included an Opening Song Recital with mezzo-soprano Dame Sarah Connolly and pianist Julius Drake, Schubert's *Winterreise* with Fleur Barron and Drake, an opening concert by Liam O Maonlaí, and *Beckett in Folkestone (a secret wedding)*, a promenade journey to three televised monologues of Beckett's life. Blakes of the Hollow pub became the unofficial festival club, where performers, academics and visitors mingled with the locals every evening, in a friendly, animated space, frequently accompanied by live music. A few meters away a mural in an alley commemorates Enniskillen-born Adrian Dunbar, quoting the phrase of his character Superintendent Hastings in the BBC TV series, *Line of Duty*: 'Now we're sucking diesel'. For an event that suffered from some organisational as well as meteorological setbacks, the Happy Days Festival managed on many levels to 'suck diesel'.

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