

MARIA HELENA SERÔDIO

## Staging Voices<sup>1</sup>

### 1.

Three of Beckett's plays are carefully named according to the medium they were written for: *Words and Music* (1962) for the radio, *Play* (1963) for the stage, and *Film* (1967) for the cinema. For this reason, we could perhaps say that Beckett was fully aware of (and mostly accepted) Marshall McLuhan's declaration that "the medium is the message". His TV plays, however, lack this commitment, since the inscription does not hold up for *Eh Joe*, *Ghost Trio ... but the clouds...*, *Quad*, *Nacht und Träume*. But perhaps there may be a reason for this missing link.

In my paper I would like to address this media specificity, mainly as far as broadcasting is concerned. Even if I am fully aware that when we compare his radio and stage plays, we can perceive a growing conflation between them, thus preparing for what has been the appeal for producers, theatre directors and actors to cross borders: staging radio plays or taking his stage plays into radio (and TV) studios. For obvious lack of time and circumstance I am deliberately overlooking narrative and, for the most part, disregarding TV plays as well.

On choosing this subject of crossing borders in Beckett's plays as defining his very personal dramaturgy, my intention is to proceed eventually to analysing how his radio plays have been recently staged in Portugal. At the same time I shall be briefly broadening the canvas so as

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations of Beckett's plays are taken from the recent edition of *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006).

to consider some of the most interesting strategies adopted on the Portuguese stage over the past two decades or so to allude to radio imagery, its material signs and its virtual symbolism.

## 2.

Beginning in the 1920s, radio broadcasting enjoyed considerable success, appealing to playwrights who wanted to be in tune with the latest technical inventions. But it also appealed to some producers of public radio stations as was the case with the BBC, France-Culture or Süd-Deutsche Rundfunk that commissioned plays to most major playwrights within their different national boundaries, but sometimes crossing them in fruitful invitations.

It is interesting to read Bertolt Brecht's articles written between 1926 and 1932 (*apud* Silberman 2001: 33-48) claiming for new uses of this communications apparatus in order to free theatre from its decaying situation, but also aiming at changing radio itself in its relation to drama. He pleaded for a blending of a story, a report and an ideological interpellation of these two ingredients. That was put in practice in *Lindberghflug: Ein Hörspiel* (1929)<sup>2</sup>, a radio play that developed from a report on the topical event of Charles Lindbergh's pioneer flight over the Atlantic Ocean in May 1927, documenting the event as the struggle between technology and nature (personified in the elements fog, snow and ice) and as the achievement of a collective – rather than the triumph of an individual – heroic adventurer.

This idea of a narration (whether or not presented as a report) has been one of the most compelling traits of radio plays making it possible to align broadcasting to an oral tradition of storytelling, stressing the oral condition and performativity of language. Though considered as a second form of orality (Ong 1988) – because of its technological mediation – this “art of sound” (Amheim 1936) may recall a time “where the word was still sound and the sound still word” (*Ibidem*).

It calls for our aural perception, which is clearly highlighted by the German word “Hörspiel”, and declared in the subtitle of a radio play

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<sup>2</sup> In 1930 Brecht revised the play for publication, altered its title to *Der Flug der Lindberghs: Radiolehrstück*; for republication in 1950 he changed its title to *Der Ozeanflug*, and the name and character Lindbergh to the Flier owing to Charles Lindbergh's expressions of sympathy with National Socialism.

written by Wolfgang Borchardt in 1947 – *Draussen vor der Tür* (*Outside the Door*): “A play which no theatre wants to produce and no audience wants to see” (*Ein Stück, das kein Theater spielen und kein Publikum sehen will*). However, we have to bear in mind that the action of the play recalled the terrible experience of a soldier coming home after the war, which in 1948 could still ring a bell of sinister memory.

It is this “audible invisibility” (Street 2006)<sup>3</sup> that has called for the image of “blind art form” (Drakakis 1981) or “blind medium” (Grant, Introduction) to speak about radio drama. Incidentally, quite adequate to poet and storyteller Homer’s presumed blindness, and in tune with Beckett’s declaration about *All that Fall*: “the whole thing’s coming out of the dark” (Zilliacus 1976: 3). Not to mention the fact that one of the characters of this play – Mr. Rooney – is himself a blind man, thus supposedly explaining why Mrs Rooney is fetching him at the railway station (we shall, however, learn later on that she wanted to surprise him since it was his birthday). But again, in *Embers*, Henry’s father, whom he recalls while listening to the waves, was also blind.

Quite often, some specific (conventional, I should say) characteristics have been attributed to this genre of drama: a limitation of words and action (McWhinnie 1959), a reduced number of themes to be dealt with in each play, few characters, recourse to mnemonic oral processes as repetitions, proverbs, antitheses, etc. (Ong 1988), as well as an insistence on the expressive and phatic functions of language (Mendes 2000). As opposed to the written novel and in line with the short story, an oral narrative must, according to Vivian Mercier, “say little, yet imply everything” (1977).

Some specific types of fictional worlds have also been appointed as more suitable to broadcasting: Martin Esslin saw it as the adequate medium for absurd drama and R. Wilkinson for lunatic humour, as seen in Roland Dubillard, for example (Bradby 1991: 689-691). But in Angela Carter’s words, radio drama seems suitable to depict madness, “the exploration of the private worlds of the old, the alienated, the lonely” (*apud* Grant, chap. one). Anyway, the three seem to agree that radio favours an insight into deep psychological realms, as well as, according to Jonathan Kalb, the “precarious suspension between existence and non-existence” (1996: 129).

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<sup>3</sup> This definition was recently adopted as a title by a Portuguese author – Eduardo Street – in his book on radio drama in Portugal.

As for its performance by actors on radio, several essays point out the fact that it is of great import, in radio drama production, the selection of the actual voices for the plays. Indeed if it may be true that radio requires certain types of voices in order not to confuse the listener, some even profess that casting for radio is more important than for the theatre (Zilliarcus 1976: 65). But, of course, this kind of concern is also related to certain conventions. In a recent publication on Portuguese radio theatre the author states that among us this genre has called for stereotyped voices according to stock characters: gallant heroes had always warm and velvet voices, heroines produced warbling sounds, cynical characters hissed all the time, while kind doctors, lawyers and priests rustled in a sympathetic and good-hearted way (Street 2006: 38).

### 3.

Looking at Beckett's six radio plays set in a chronological sequence we can see a definite dramaturgical evolution from *All that Fall* to *Cascando*. Indeed he gradually seems to narrow the frame, excluding social settings, zooming in on the protagonist, and eventually descending into the subject's mind, in an ongoing process of disembodying voices. But that descent is combined with a growing adoption of radio specificities, ingeniously using its special devices and the advancement brought by technical progress. It has also progressively transferred a possible outdoor existence into a radio studio location where voice and enunciation seem to take the lead.

In the fifties, a new technical development that affected radio drama<sup>4</sup> not only enhanced the quality of sound, eliminating practically all interference, but also enabled the listener to perceive the nuances of speech as well as the play's environment without disruption.

Thus, in *All That Fall*, the pauses and silences often give way to the "background" sound of dragging feet (bringing in a kind of rhythmic pattern to the play), as well as to the outdoor sounds of a rural location, similar to what could be found in Beckett's native town Foxrock (Melese 1969:90). In *Embers*, the pauses seem faintly occupied by the sound of the sea which haunts the protagonist's mind (*Ibidem*), bringing to the play what someone once called, paraphrasing Wordsworth, "intimations of mortality" (Alpaugh 1970: 216-225).

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<sup>4</sup> I am referring here to frequency modulation (FM) or very high frequency (VHF).

Another improvement came into play in broadcasting with the possibility of pre-recording and editing. This process can be perceived in Beckett's radio play *Cascando*<sup>5</sup> (1962), where Voice delivers his lines in a rapid, almost unintelligible stream, but is cut off at intervals to create the effect of a pre-recorded narrative. However, Beckett's fascination for technology of sound recording (capturing and chopping up a voice) was already present in his stage play *Krapp's Last Tape*, written four years before *Cascando* (1958), it's true, yet two years after *All that Fall* (1956) his first experiment on radio play.

In *Cascando*, as he had done before in *Words and Music*, Beckett was indeed able (rather, eager) to separate the voice from the music, though occasionally venturing the possibility of mingling them as polyphonically superimposed. This process will seem so in line with some of Beckett's concerns, that we can see it also doubled on stage where bodies and voices will alternate in individual, dual or multiple figures and voices.

Indeed *Ohio Impromptu* (1981) may be read as duplicating a single figure into Reader and Listener, since it will be clear from their outward image that they are "as alike in appearance as possible" (Beckett 2006: 445): both in long black coats, with long white hair, seated at a table, bowed heads propped on the right hand.

This tendency both to replicate the same and to split the wholeness into various splinters corresponds to a recurrent pattern of reflexion and refraction of images in Beckett's fictional worlds. It is tempting to invoke the Narcissus myth, in its implication of a mirror image. Curiously enough, Didier Anzieu (2000: 39-43), when focussing on this theme in Beckett's texts tends to single out not really Narcissus himself, but rather Echo, giving her the lead, although in order to emphasise her impotence: with no personal voice of her own and unable to achieve a shared love.

We read this motif also in *Endgame*, when Hamm talks of "the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together in the dark" (Beckett 2006: 126). But it is also present in the play *That Time*, where the sources of sound are multiplied, thus turning the Listener's memories into a multilayered language construction. As Beckett wrote in a first manuscript, the three voices A B C, coming from both

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<sup>5</sup> The word *cascando* is a musical term equivalent to *calando*, but referring specifically to the end of a piece. It involves the decrease of volume and the deceleration of tempo.

sides and above, should represent, respectively, A: cognitive source (bringing confusion of names, dates, places); B: mental layer (mistaking thoughts); C: the sensitive side, confounding senses (*apud* Fehsenfeld 2000: 50).

Ludovic Janvier will speak of the fundamental structure of Beckett's theatre as being the *I plus the Other*: "frères (...) doubles en chair, en os, en paroles, en démarche et en présence" (2000: 50).

Referring to this movement from contraction to expansion and backwards, linked to a narration where a certain point is aimed at – be it silence, the sea or the end, anyway a solace for a panting life – some critics have interpreted this *punctum* as indeed the site of creativity, the source, the origin so many Beckettian wanderers are trying to reach. And in this regard, the relevance of Derrida's description in *Writing and Difference* has been noted: "To grasp the operation of creative imagination at the greatest possible proximity to it, one must turn oneself toward the invisible interior of poetic freedom. One must separate from oneself to be reunited with the blind origin of the work in its darkness" (Gontarski 1982: 135).

We can distinctively locate that overlapping as a wishful thinking in *Words and Music*, where Croak (a master / a radio producer) commands both Words and Music to be friends in elaborating on the different themes he proposes: love, age and face. What Croak ultimately wishes is that they would come together, which will be achieved through singing in the end, even if it is not at all a heroic finale.

Besides this possibility of a montage, separating or overlapping voice and body, voice and sound, or voice and music, we can perceive how some of the technical resources afforded by radio not only refer to some of the procedures Beckett often used, but also relate to the repetitiveness that we read in many of Beckett's texts (and not only in drama).

This could also be the clue to Beckett's stubbornness in refusing his radio plays to meet the stage, at least during a certain time.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, when speaking of *Embers*, Marjorie Perloff, for instance, relates the play to a possible autobiographical sense of filial guilt, but what she asks is why it should be so specifically related to radio. In fact, as she points out:

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<sup>6</sup> Beckett's letter to his American editor, on August 27<sup>th</sup>, 1957 states quite clearly: "*All that Fall* is a specifically radio play, or rather radio text, for voices, not bodies. I have already refused to have it 'staged' and I cannot think of it in such terms. A perfectly straight reading before an audience seems to me just barely legitimate, though even on this score I have my doubts. But I am absolutely opposed to any form of adaptation with a view to its conversion into theatre" (*apud* Zilliacus 1976: 3).

*Embers* is closely allied to Beckett's later fictions as *Company*, which shares many of its actual images and incidents (and a similar case could be made for *Krapp's Last Tape* and *The Unnamable*, both of them written just a few years before *Embers* (...). The answer cannot be that radio gave Beckett the best possible vehicle for 'skullscape' or 'soulscape', for certainly *Company* and *Krapp's Last Tape* are soulscapes too. (...) Rather, I would like to suggest that the 'radio-activity' of *Embers*, as of *Words and Music*, *Cascando*, and *Rough for Radio I* and *II* (...) is that its sounding of disembodied voices makes it the perfect vehicle for the dance of death that is its subject. (Perloff 1998)

So, I could venture to say, that, in his radio plays, Beckett found the perfect vehicle for a dramaturgy that operates through theme and variations, an obsessive repetitiveness, indeed one of the features (as argued above) of the oral narration summoned by the radio medium. Decisively a revenant condition for an accomplished "ghost sonata".

But besides such procedures as montage, and overlapping voices and sounds, his experiments with broadcasting possibilities did also allow him to come back to the stage, restoring vision without having to attach a voice to a visible body, something he, anyway, had already previously done when writing short and long fiction. Indeed, many of his plays for the stage (after *All that Fall*) force bodies to endure strange metamorphoses (Chabert 1982: 23-28): they can be immobilized, fragmented, partly hidden from the audience view, overheard when existing off stage, etc.

In line also with this tendency, some of his plays for the stage have developed dramaturgically into mainly sound-based pieces beginning with *Play*. Written one year after *All that Fall*, it presents three grey urns from which "a head protrudes, the neck held fast in the urn's mouth" (Beckett 2006: 307) speaking one at a time when a spotlight points at its direction.

Another possible illustration of this process is the play *Not I* (1972), an endless and repetitive litany delivered by a mouth with the rest of the face in shadow and leaving the body unseen behind a curtain. However, this female mouth is directing its voice to a mute figure across the stage: the Auditor. And this Auditor may symbolise both the real audience in the room, and the physical body of that insane mouth. It is indeed important to note how Beckett describes this figure: "sex undeterminable, enveloped from head to foot in loose black djellaba, with hood, faintly lit" (*Ibidem*: 376). Later plays resort to dubbing voices (*Rockaby*, 1981), locating voices off-stage to haunt characters on stage (*Footfalls*, 1975), or prompting voices from different sources (*That Time*, 1974), etc. As Marek Kedzierski would explain:

Radio made Beckett realize that the potential dramatization of consciousness (...) can be performed, and that in its purest form this performance does not presuppose the presence or existence of the body. The physical stage becomes an acoustic screen onto which the contents of consciousness are projected. (Kedzierski 1995: 152)

It is then not surprising that “disembodied voice” (Kalb 1996: 126) was early listed as one of *Beckettian motifs* by an editorial board, formed at Chicago MLA Convention, in December 1977. It was identified in *From an Abandoned Work* (1957), as the first text to be submitted to this kind of taxonomical project opening to citing entries (Taylor 1980: 107-116), but this motif was indeed spotted definitely as a repeated process in many of Beckett’s writings.

While understanding how much his experience in radio may have opened up new possibilities for his playwriting in general, I would also like to focus on the implications of transferring some works from their first “element” – radio – into another – visual – dimension.

#### 4.

Commissioned by the BBC (Third Programme), Beckett’s radio play *All that Fall*, according to the writer, derived its first inspiration from an atmospheric soundscape to which the author eventually added characters and themes:

Never thought about radio play technique ... but in the dead of t’other night got a gruesome idea full of cartwheels and dragging feet and puffing and panting which may or may not lead to something. (*apud* Grant: chap. two)

So, besides dragging feet, the play includes rural and mechanical sounds, to which a Schubert melody (*Death and the Maiden*) is added. All of them contribute to a melodic composition based on musical principles rather than a strong dramatic plot.

The play adopts the framework of a journey to the railway station where Mrs. Rooney is to pick up her husband off the 12.30 train. She will encounter several villagers on her way, leading to scraps of dialogue, as well as plaintive outbursts and sarcastic comments from her. In a second movement, on the railway station, she is faced with some confusion, partly because of the delay that only later in the play will be explained. The third part of her journey will be returning home with her husband, not



without the final revelation that a child had fallen off the train and been killed: alas, the reason for the delay! The messenger who brings the news seems an avatar of the classical messenger, but he is also reminiscent of the boy at the end of both acts of *Waiting for Godot*, with the difference that this one brings an object to hand down to Dan Rooney: “a kind of a ball, and yet not a ball” (Beckett 2006: 198). This ambiguity seems to combine with a hint of mystery as to the possible responsibility of Mr. Rooney in the child’s death, marking the end of the play with a whodunit mood, the energy of a question to be raised but left unuttered.

Seen as a report on that fictional world located in an Irish village – significantly called Boghill –, there is an obvious recurrence of images of decay, suffering and death, as many critics have already mentioned. Indeed characters, props, weather, voices, sound effects, motion and the main off-stage event (the death of the child) all provide variations on the theme which is indicated by the title – all that fall – which, as we know, is part of a Bible quotation, and is said to inspire the sermon to be delivered the following day.<sup>7</sup>

Mrs Rooney’s journey is therefore seen not only as a way to map that human territory, but also as a symbolic journey. Curiously enough, two quite different meanings have been read in it: a religious one – a kind of Calvary, “a station drama portraying the passion” (Kalb 1996: 127) even if sarcastically sketched – and a picaresque one, when comparing Mrs Rooney to Chaucer’s Wife of Bath (in his *Canterbury Tales*) ascribing to her the tradition of the *picara*, showing a tough resistance against a world in which female in general suffer distress, sterility and illness (Bryant-Bertail).

Another trait of this journey is the way it presents an inventory of several means of transport, a recurrent concern of Beckett in many of his writings: a cart pulled by a hinny, a bicycle, a motor-van, a motor car and a train.

In its dramaturgy, the humour of the play seems to derive from a farcical self-awareness that the work has been created for radio, as in Mrs Rooney’s line: “Do not imagine, because I am silent, that I am not present, and alive to all that is going on” (Beckett 2006: 185)

This conscious playing with the medium will inspire Donald McWhinnie, the BBC producer not to evoke the realistic image of a rural

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<sup>7</sup> Psalm 145: “The Lord upholdeth all that fall, and raiseth up all that be bowed down”.

environment naturalising the sound effects in *All That Fall*. Instead, he resorted to stylised human imitations of animal noises, and established the convention of the play which is, according to him, “a mixture of realism and poetry, frustration and farce” (McWhinnie 1959: 133).

However, besides these humanly fabricated sounds for animals, other acoustic effects of a mechanical type are important for the characterisation of that fictional world: the bicycle brakes squeak and then the bicycle bumps along with a flat tyre; the car engine drives away in a grinding of gears; exaggerated station sounds arise at the approach of the train – bells, whistles, hissing of steam, couplings clashing. But also Schubert’s *Death and the Maiden*, played on an old gramophone with the customary noises of such old machines. All of them are quite suggestive and varied to provide an appealing scenario for voices in everyday conversation set in the Irish countryside.

## 5.

Beckett, as I mentioned above, was quite reluctant to allow his writing to be adapted for media other than the ones they were created for. He was, however, more easily convinced when the texts were to be set to music, which may show not only how fond he was of music, but also that he could sense a certain convergence between his writing and music in general.<sup>8</sup>

When he was approached to let *All that Fall* be produced in the theatre, he reacted against the possibility of having the voice of Mrs. Rooney embodied on stage. However, his attitude mellowed later on, thus making it possible to see this play and other Beckett writings transferred into formats different from their original genre.

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<sup>8</sup> In the course of one year, from 1976 to 1977, Beckett’s agents approved at least six different musical settings or operas of his work. Furthermore, *That Time, Not I*, and *Come and Go* were all set to music around the same time. Many other fragments of his work have also been used for a musical purpose, and not surprisingly it is generally the experimental composers who are attracted to Beckett’s writings. Polish-born Roman Haubenstock-Ramati (who lived mainly in Paris from 1957 onwards, though I do not know if he actually spoke with Beckett about his work) wrote a piece for voice and eight instruments, *Think, Think, Lucky*, with text from *Waiting for Godot*. Hungarian composer, György Kurtág (who studied in Paris in the late fifties) wrote *Samuel Beckett: What is the Word*, for reciter, voices and chamber orchestra. The internationally distinguished Italian composer Luciano Berio, in his *Sinfonia* (1968), uses texts from *The Unnamable* as the basis for his lyrics which are shouted, whispered, spoken or sung by the eight vocalists.

Some narratives were staged, as was the case of, among others, *The Lost Ones* (*Le dépeupleur*) by the Mabou Mines in 1975 (directed by Lee Breuer, music by Philip Glass, with actor David Warrilow) and *Beginning to End*, a montage of parts of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Unnamable*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, which actor Jack MacGowran performed from 1965 on, to be revised and fixed by Beckett himself.<sup>9</sup> The latter had its première in Portugal in 2006 in a very good performance by João Lagarto (both as director and actor).

Anyway, as Ludovic Janvier declares, Beckett's narratives may have their true dimension revealed when set on stage. He then points to their most important qualities, but in all of those features he specifies what we see is definitely all that is congenial to radio: since they are written for the voice, the breath, the sound, the silence, the rhythm, the music.

But as far as transposition from one medium into other is concerned the most astonishing example is perhaps a stage production of *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, as mentioned by John Pilling (1984: 138).

## 6.

In January 2006, in order to celebrate Beckett's centenary, theatre director João Mota decided to stage *All that Fall* with his theatre company A Comuna, in Lisbon. In his thirty-year-long career as a theatre director who has shown a preference for artistic experiment and a special interest in contemporary theatrical worlds, this was however his first approach to the famous author.

In any case, choosing to produce a play written for the radio, which had not previously been staged or translated in Portugal, proved to be an original approach. Yet, in my view, of all the Beckett plays he could have staged, this one might indeed better correspond to his artistic interest in a repertoire focussed on a combination of realism and dream-like atmosphere, as well as on characters with both human and grotesque features.

A curious biographical detail is that João Mota's first venture into "theatre" was at about the age of nine in a radio play for the public radio

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<sup>9</sup> It was jointly published in 1968 by Gotham Book Mart & Oliphant Press, but in a limited edition: only three hundred copies.

corporation. Although he would soon quit this activity on the radio, this fact should not go unnoticed, especially as it may have inspired some of his technical solutions to produce sounds on stage in a singular mixture of radio devices and his own theatre aesthetic options (resorting to simple and handmade materials).

To produce *All that Fall* he not only commissioned the translation (to Carlos Machado Acabado) but he also invited for the leading character a renowned actress (of his generation) – Maria do Céu Guerra – who directs another independent theatre company called A Barraca.

Of the four possible rooms available at his theatre in Praça de Espanha, João Mota chose the small auditorium (called New Tendencies), which offers a frontal exposure, has no raised platform and favours an engaging proximity between stage and stalls.

To create his set design, João Mota resorted to two structuring elements that could point to the specificity of a play not originally written for the stage. Indeed he invented a white transparent screen to divide stage from auditorium, and placed the actors on stage lining them up on the right and left side of the scene sitting in front of tables with varied instruments to produce sounds, as we could have found formerly in a regular radio station, combined with simple musical instruments too.

The position of the actors on stage showed them as part of the chorus, but it also allowed them to impersonate secondary characters (leaving the table and going to middle stage) in an efficient and smooth way that seemed quite adequate to that quality of handmade sonority that also Donald Mcwhinnie had spotted in the text.

As for the white gauze curtain, it could be seen as the front screen of old radios (partially duplicating the one set on the left side of the hall, near to the stage that a spotlight showed at the beginning of the performance), but it could also create the idea of a geometric design, compromising the real three-dimensional character of the figures on stage.

These two theatrical designs aimed at making it clear that the image was not to be taken as realistic, and are, indeed, recurrent procedures as used by this director, who has not forgotten both Bertolt Brecht's and Peter Brook's examples.<sup>10</sup>

What was most interesting in this stage design was that Mrs Rooney was represented by an incredibly swollen figure reminding us of Botero's

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<sup>10</sup> João Mota worked with Peter Brook in Paris, at the CIRT (Centre International de Recherche Théâtrale) in the early 1970s.

drawings, paintings and sculptures. Moreover, the actress, Maria do Céu Guerra, added a touch of madness, through her sarcastic laughter, to this boisterous Falstaffian character.

Two other features of the performance linked it to broadcasting circumstances, entirely based on a shared civic memory: in the opening scene, while the radio set was revealed by a projector, we would hear a voice off announcing a “theatre programme” on the radio, which was once a regular show among us. On top of that, it was easy to identify the radio announcer – Luís Filipe Costa – who played an important role in our Carnations Revolution in 1974. Indeed on April 24<sup>th</sup>, near midnight, he did announce the well-known song – a real hit by then – by Paulo de Carvalho – *E depois do adeus (And after goodbye)* – that the revolutionary officers knew to be the sign to leave the barracks and launch the attack on the government and on the police forces.

The scene would soon be alive with the rural and mechanical sounds referred to in the stage directions, as we see them being performed on stage, but it is the dragging feet of Mrs Rooney that impose an insidious rhythm onto the action.

As far as costumes were concerned, their dominant colour was grey and they mostly evoked the 1950's, when radio was still a top communications apparatus. Moreover, all actors wore a hat, quite appropriate to the different characters, and that is indeed a recognizable icon in many of Beckett's texts. Such features fundamentally enhanced the whole performance's visual dimension.

All the means of transport cited in the play were only suggested by the actors' gestures and movement (together with the sounds), which relate to João Mota's tendency to focus on the actors' bodies to trigger the audience's imagination. Though expressive in their physicality, the actors did not indulge in simple parody; they would rather keep a tension between the effort and its repeated devaluation, thereby stressing, in their performance, the idea of a subtle theatricality, moving between compassion and a mocking frame of mind.

At the rear of the stage, the stairs and a small platform were the perfect site to create the confusion of the railway station.

## 7.

The data base developed by the Centre for Theatre Studies of the University of Lisbon<sup>11</sup> lists over one hundred and thirty performances, staged in Portugal on Beckett's texts, since the première of *Waiting for Godot* in 1959, at the Teatro da Trindade, in Lisbon. However, his radio plays only reached the stage – in different combinations and scenic solutions – in 2006, beginning, as I mentioned earlier, with *All that Fall*, on January the 19th.

Indeed, both *Cascando* and *Embers* are parts of two different dramaturgical reconfigurations. The former was staged, under the title *Reset*, at Culturgest, in Lisbon (in the framework of the international festival *Temps d'images*), on October 18<sup>th</sup>. In this performance, the radio play *Cascando* appeared as a middle text of what was presented as a “musical theatre on three texts by Samuel Beckett”: the poem “What would I do without this world?”, was the first one, and the stage play *Ohio Impromptu* was the third text to appear. The way *Cascando* entered the stage image was a curious one, since the minimal setting would be temporarily hidden by a white curtain (as if around a regular shower), thus receiving the projection of an image of parts of a tape-recorder (for cassettes) being constantly put on and off, while a voice off would read the lines on the backdrop of that mechanical noise.

The radio play *Embers* entered in a theatre montage of *Rough for Radio I and II*, and was to be read on March 27<sup>th</sup> on the stage of the municipal theatre Maria Matos, in Lisbon, that was reopening after having been refurbished. So the centenary of Beckett was coinciding not only with this official circumstance (and World Theatre Day), but it also provided the occasion for the newly appointed director of the theatre – brilliant young actor Diogo Infante – to show how much he would appreciate crossing boundaries in his programme for this venue. And indeed, in his later initiatives he did invite film directors, singers and artists from other fields to venture into theatre productions.

This performance – under the title *Rough for Radio* – had the particularity of being read on stage by actors standing before microphones, and was broadcast live through Channel Two of our public radio corporation. However, out of respect for the specificity of radio, no

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<sup>11</sup> See: <http://www.fl.ul.pt/CETbase/default.htm>.

photographs of the performance were allowed, and the only image that was given on the poster is clearly a montage of three male faces around the *fetish* image of microphones on a kind of a target supposedly conveying the idea of the sound circulating in the air through waves. Beckett's face is at the centre above, and the two directors of the performance, who also took part in the reading – João Lagarto and Gonçalo Waddington –, are represented on both sides of the spectrum. The three faces indicate authorship (both of texts and performance), thus leaving in the shadow the two actresses who also participated in the reading (Carla Maciel and Valerie Bradell), as well as another – younger – actor (Afonso Lagarto).

But this performance proved to have quite a curious pre- and post-production. Indeed it opened at Centre Olga Cadaval in Sintra two days earlier with the same actors, but actually including *Embers*, *Rough for Radio II* and *Rough for Radio I* (in this exact sequence). At Maria Matos, they skipped *Embers*. In the framework of this co-production with the Channel Two of the public radio, there was also a reading with no audience that was recorded at Olga Cadaval, including *Cascando* and *Embers*.

The microphones that we saw in these two productions seem, indeed, to be a much preferred icon to stand for radio. However, we can find them in many performances not only as a device to enhance the actors' voices in careful elaborations, but also providing curious sound effects, and sometimes also pointing to symbolic meanings.

Sometimes they have stood for images of a desire to be heard, an impulse to communicate, stressing, however, the impossibility of achieving that goal. We saw microphones on stage in a production of Teatro da Cornucópia – *Oratory* – in 1983, directed by Luís Miguel Cintra. The performance assembled texts from three authors of quite different historical periods: Gil Vicente (late Middle Ages, early Renaissance), Goethe (*Prometheus*) and Brecht's *Lindberghflug*, which I mentioned earlier in this paper.

Looking at the setting, designed by Cristina Reis, we recall how much this performance wanted to convey an atmosphere of distress and non-resistance as if declaring that the three ideological configurations of the world (Christian, Romantic and Marxist) were definitely obsolete leaving us in a kind of a spiritual *cul-de-sac*. It meant to be a disturbing statement by Cintra and his peers in the company, stating a sense of crisis and revealing their disappointment regarding the high expectations of the revolution (the Carnations revolution of 1974) that were sadly frustrated.

One year later a more profound and elaborate artistic expression of that state of mind would be seen through the ravishing staging of Heiner Müller's *Der Auftrag* (*The Mission*).

Much more recently, Lúcia Sigalho, working on a contemporary Portuguese novelist – Gonçalo M. Tavares – staged *Sobreviver* (*To Survive*) resorting to a network of microphones on stage mainly in order to show the confusion of props, with a bunch of cables everywhere, and the micros set in unexpected positions, forcing the actors into huddling around them or trying to reach them with visible effort. But that would also indicate how many voices and bodies were desperately clinging to the possibility of being heard and, who knows, succeeding in being rescued from that wild place on earth. In one case, of the singer who sticks to an old tune, he will be severely hit by boxes (thrown at him by various actors on stage) and buried under them.

But it is director Ricardo Pais (in charge of the National Theatre in Oporto – Teatro S. João) who has more often (and in a more sophisticated way) turned to microphones and radio imagery in the performances he has directed, for specific aesthetic reasons and sometimes with wonderful results. Not always, however, devoid of controversial reception. As Paulo Eduardo Carvalho writes in his excellent study on this stage director that was recently released – *Ricardo Pais: Actos e variedades* (*Acts and varieties*) – Pais gives very special attention both to visual and sound designs in his work, experimenting with all the technologies available as if he were under an ethical obligation, as theatre director, to “control the whole hallucinatory potential available to widen the meaning” on stage (Carvalho 2006: 209). His recurrent use of microphones serves the reinforcement of voices, but it also makes it possible to amplify, distort and diffuse voice, as well as music and sound in general, all over the scene, in an impressive exercise of performative theatricality (if I may use this pleonasm).

With an elective team of very competent and creative accomplices, Ricardo Pais has indeed been responsible for some outstanding shows, blending technical mastery and provocative text reading. In my view, the most inspired and prodigious performance he has ever directed was in 1989 at the National Theatre in Lisbon working on a poetic set of fragments – of *Faustus* – left unfinished by our modernist poet Fernando Pessoa. A kind of “visual opera”, as someone wrote at the time, the performance offered an astonishing “territorial immensity” through a fabulous architecture of space (by set designer António Lagarto). The



extraordinary metaphor built on stage was a radio studio. On the right side of the proscenium, three tiny rooms, vertically inserted in the wall, suggested images of the poet's personal everyday way of living, in a static and intimate surrounding.

The whole stage, however, evoked a radio studio, as I said before, but with perfectionist – almost frantic – minutiae, foregrounding lighting and sound design to convey the idea of a fragmentary text as a puzzle to be continuously reassembled in laborious rehearsals. All the more so, when, on the one hand, his author Fernando Pessoa refracted his personal voice into heteronymous personae and, on the other hand, the myth of Faustus is itself not devoid of contradictions. All these features surely favoured a plurality of voices in multiple configurations: dialogue, recitation, cantata, declamation, comment, murmur, blast. Most of the techniques used in broadcasting were activated in order to scrutinize the multiple – and paradoxical – layers of meaning both of text and performance. The result was a superb inventory of various and concrete registers of subjectivity as well as of the poetic word.

One of the most eloquent signifiers in the performance was triggered when a kind of fire curtain – duplicating the studio door – closed the scenery, in a most claustrophobic way, leaving a thin and rectangular window through which we could glimpse at the actors straining to communicate. The red recording light reminded everyone that the microphone was on, and recommended “Silence”. That was, indeed, the ultimate paradox the theatrical metaphor activated: the microphone was on, but no sound would reach the audience.

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