

## Out of the Dark: Samuel Beckett and radio

*By Hugh Chignell*

“Whatever quality it may have (...) depends on the whole thing’s coming out of the dark”.

(Beckett quoted in Kalb, 1994, p. 129)

This article primarily addresses the BBC radio broadcasts of Samuel Beckett’s work including drama written for radio and radio versions of some of his novels and stage-plays. There is undoubtedly an increased interest in old radio, stimulated by improved access as analogue radio archives have been digitised. This is a process pioneered by the ‘LARM’ project in Denmark and even in the UK there are some slow steps towards making old radio programmes and programming accessible. In the specific case of the work of the Irish novelist, playwright and Nobel prize winner, Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) the release on CD in 2006 of ‘Samuel Beckett Works for Radio, the original broadcasts’ (BBC/British Library) provided important access to his radio drama output. Beckett wrote five plays written for radio; *All That Fall* (1957), *Embers* (1959), *Words and Music* (1962), *Cascando* (1964) and *Rough for Radio 2* (1976). In addition to this work there are important radio versions of extracts from some of his novels and a reading of part of *From An Abandoned Work* (1957) is included in the British Library’s CD collection; other readings were taken from *Malone Dies* (broadcast in 1958) and *The Unnamable* (broadcast in 1959). Beckett’s first two published plays, *Waiting for Godot* (first performance on the English stage 1955) and *Endgame* (first performance 1958) were both produced as radio plays. Although the work written for radio is available on the British Library CD collection the same is not true for the readings (with the exception of *From and Abandoned Work*) or the radio versions of stage plays. So Beckett’s radio

output is only partially available with priority given to work written for the medium, and there is significant neglect of other writing including, it must be said, one of the most important plays of the twentieth century, *Waiting for Godot*; broadcast on BBC radio in 1960 but unavailable in its radio form.

The media historian interested in Beckett and radio is confronted with some considerable obstacles and not only the relative inaccessibility of some of the great man's radio output. To understand the significance of Beckett's contribution to radio inevitably requires reading part of the very substantial literature on the man, his work and philosophy. In addition, as the following pages will show, Beckett presents the listener with some of the most aurally challenging and intellectually demanding radio drama heard on the BBC. In his two main radio dramas, *All That Fall* and *Embers*, in particular, fundamental questions are posed about the nature of the medium. The modern listener has the great benefit of commentaries on Beckett's radio work (for example, Kalb, 1994 and Frost, 1991) but the sheer indecipherable strangeness of Beckett's radio plays remains. This question of listener reception, of giving meaning to 1950s avant-garde, radio drama is surely as important an issue as the challenge of gaining access to old radio. This former question, concerning the meaning and significance of Beckett's radio work, will be addressed here. For reasons of space this is a highly selective account which focuses on what I think are Beckett's most enduring radio contributions.

### **BBC drama in the 1950s**

It is important to place the Beckett broadcasts in the context of the BBC and its drama output in the 1950s. A more complete discussion, not attempted here, would also include something about the experience of listening, probably on a mains-powered valve radio, perhaps with other family members.

The BBC emerged from the Second World War in a considerably better state and with a far enhanced reputation compared to its pre-war status (Chignell, 2001, p.56). The war years had seen the success of radio news in particular and the 'arm's length' independence of the BBC from the government's Ministry of Information had added to

the respect the listening public had for the corporation. Radio features thrived at this time and these often brilliantly combined factual content with drama, most notably in the case of Louis MacNeice's masterpiece, *The Dark Tower* (1946). The Radio Features department at the end of the war and into the 1950s was the home for some of the most important dramatic work produced by the BBC at the time. Dylan Thomas's verse play *Under Milk Wood* (1954) and David Jones's equally magnificent (but largely forgotten) *In Parenthesis* (1948) were both the products of Features not Drama.

Before considering the reasons behind Drama Department's comparative under-achievement it is important to note changes to the organisation of the BBC radio 'networks'. William Haley took charge of the BBC as Director General in 1944 and developed ideas for a 'cultural programme' to raise cultural standards in BBC output and to provide for the educated elite: "The audience envisaged is one already aware of artistic experience and will include persons of taste and intelligence, and of education..." (Haley quoted in Whitehead, 1989: 16). What emerged from this aspiration for radio was the Third Programme, dedicated to artistic productions in speech and music, while the Home Service provided a much broader range of less challenging output (including drama) and the Light Programme was less demanding still. The Third Programme was launched on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1946 and although it frequently broadcast to tiny, even unmeasurable, audiences, it had a major impact on British radio drama. As the historian of the Third Programme, Kate Whitehead put it;

Virtually every creative writer in Britain during that period (1946-1970) had some contact with the Third Programme, whether as a contributor of material or as part of the audience influenced by its frequently avant-garde broadcasts. (Whitehead, 1989: 16)

All might have been well for experimental radio drama in the 1950s were it not for the fairly dominant conservatism of the BBC at the time. Much has been written about the cultural progressiveness of the 1960s (Marwick, 1998) and in the BBC the arrival of the progressive Director-General, Hugh Carleton Greene heralded a decade of more liberal and innovative approaches to programming. The idea of a radical turn only makes sense,

however when the 1960s are contrasted with the far less well documented 1950s, the decade in which Beckett's impact was at its greatest.

Before considering the problems in the Drama Department it is worth mentioning similar atrophy in Radio News and Current Affairs where the ultra-cautious Tahu Hole reigned over a news operation which was a pale imitation of its war-time predecessor (Miall, 1994, p.123). Likewise the Drama Department suffered during the post-war period under the conservative Val Gielgud who was Head of Drama at the BBC from 1934-1963, a remarkable twenty-nine years! Gielgud's approach to radio drama was that the BBC was the 'National Theatre' and would bring the classic repertoire of complete plays to the general public. The Second World War created the opportunity for Gielgud to establish the policy of what he called 'straight drama' arguing that "few things can be more important during a war than the preservation of civilised values for which that war is being fought" (quoted in Rodgers, 1982, p.55). This doctrine continued after the war and on the Home Service in particular the serialisation of classic novels (for example by Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens and George Eliot) alongside complete performances of plays by Shakespeare and Ibsen attracted huge audiences. This approach to the programming of drama on radio strongly reflected the principles of public service broadcasting and a belief in the role of radio, and then television, in educating an otherwise poorly educated population by allowing the classical repertoire to reach a wider audience (Whitehead, 1989:135). This tradition in the BBC of recreating classic dramas, on television as full costume dramas, has persisted to this day and remains a defining feature of British television drama.

Gielgud's conservatism was profound, it led him to dismiss in the most outspoken terms the attempts to introduce very early radio serials or 'soaps' to BBC radio. As Heidi Svømmekjær has described (2014) the radio soap was pioneered in Denmark in the late 1920s but twenty years later at the BBC, Gielgud was utterly contemptuous of proposals to do the same in Britain (Hilmes, 2012:149). It followed of course that Gielgud would resist any attempts to bring foreign or experimental drama to BBC radio but this is why the launch of the Third Programme was such an important opportunity enabling a major

rethink of radio drama (Whitehead, 1989:137). The Third Programme became the place for the 'difficult' dramatic repertoire, classical Greek drama, lesser-known British dramatists and, above all, the avant-garde.

The decisive role of key individuals in the BBC has been noted by several commentators on the corporation's history (most notably Hendy, 2012). As Hole and Gielgud imposed a policy of caution and cultural conservatism, so the arrival of more progressive figures served to have the opposite effect and this fact is an important element in the story of Beckett and radio. Donald McWhinnie, Beckett's principal producer, was appointed Gielgud's deputy in 1953 and was joined by another pioneer, Michael Bakewell, in the script department. A crucial figure in the BBC's relationship with Beckett was Barbara Bray, the Third Programme's senior script editor, who unusually for the time, was aware of cultural developments in France (Cronin, 1997, p.462). In addition, the Controller of the new Third Programme, John Morris was very receptive to avant-garde approaches to drama and met Beckett in Paris in 1956 to ask him to write a his play for radio (Cronin, 1997, p.460). There were in effect three factors which enabled Beckett to be heard in a variety of forms on BBC radio; the presence of individual producers who, despite Gielgud, advocated a more progressive approach; the launch of the Third Programme and the emerging avant-garde tradition in European radio drama. The scene was set for Beckett and this was made even more possible and even desirable by the growing influence and popularity of television. As audiences flocked to the excitement of early television drama in the 1950s, enhanced by the launch of commercial television in the UK in 1955, so radio was seen as a natural place for experimentation and innovation. This was the official line as described in the annual report of the BBC;

Sound Drama will tend more and more to concentrate on work specially scripted for the microphone and making full use of radio's flexibility, intimacy and capacity for imaginative and evocative story-telling (BBC Handbook, 1955 quoted in Priessnitz, 1981, p.33).

The cultural conservatives at the BBC were satisfied with the 'straight drama' on the Home Service and the attention of the mass audience was diverted to the wonders of television drama. At that moment, somewhere in the mid to late 1950s, the Third Programme was given the green light to experiment with radio drama.

### **Samuel Beckett**

It is hard to overstate the significance in twentieth century literature of Beckett who was born in Ireland in 1906 but eventually became a resident of Paris and wrote mainly in French. Described variously as 'the most significant writer of the twentieth century' (Calder, 2001:1) and 'the most experimental writer since Joyce and the most influential dramatist since Ibsen' (Fletcher, 2000:9) Beckett was one of the central figures in twentieth century western culture and made important contributions to the novel and drama and experimented with radio, television and film. He is most famous for the 1953 stage play, *Waiting for Godot* and together with his second published play, *Endgame* they 'constitute a crux, a pivotal moment in the development of modern Western Theatre' (Worton, 1994: 68). There is something of a 'Beckett industry' which includes not only the extraordinary wealth of writing on him but also a journal dedicated to 'Beckett Studies' and various research centres (for example the Beckett International Foundation at Reading University in the UK) and archives (including the Beckett digital manuscript collection at Austin, Texas) as well as festivals to celebrate his work.

It is helpful to have an overview of Beckett's early writing before considering his specific contribution to, or influence on, radio. Beckett moved from Dublin to Paris in 1928 as *lecteur* at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and befriended that other Irish literary giant, James Joyce. He returned to Dublin then gave up his academic career to become a writer and eventually returned to Paris soon before the war and began to write in French. Beckett began his writing career primarily as a novelist (including *Murphy*, 1938; *Molloy*, 1951; *Watt*, 1953) writing mainly in French. He began writing his most famous work, *En Attendant Godot* in 1948 and it was first performed in Paris in 1953 and in London, in English in 1955.

So by the mid 1950s, although already a well known if decidedly avant-garde and ‘difficult’ writer, Beckett had had no impact on radio. Here we need to address at least some key aspects of Beckett’s writing and philosophy; what he said and how he said it, in order to provide a commentary on his contribution to radio drama. Beckett’s themes are profound; pain and suffering, death and decay are central to most of his work. The essential futility of existence is fundamental and his writing was clearly influenced by the horrors of war and the possibility of nuclear holocaust. For Beckett “it would have been better never to have been born” (quoted in Calder, 2001, p.2). In addition to this apparently existentialist agony are two further major themes which are particularly important for understanding his radio output. In some, but not all of Beckett’s writing, tragedy is combined with comedy; life may be terrible, pointless and miserable but somehow that is, in Beckett’s eyes, very funny. The curious result of this tragi-comic combination is that his best work is both profoundly disturbing and philosophical, but also very entertaining. Another theme in Beckett’s work is his life-long struggle with language. In his effort to communicate the absurdity and meaninglessness of life, Beckett modifies and reinvents language, using unexpected words and expressions, juxtaposing the familiar and the unfamiliar (Calder, 2001, p. 86). The process of moving from writing in English to French and then translating French work back into English allowed Beckett to further distil his use of language. At the same time there is a sense of language in decay. Martin Esslin, not only a serious contributor to Beckett scholarship but also Gielgud’s successor as Head of Radio Drama at the BBC, describes ‘the radical devaluation of language’ in Beckett (Esslin, 1968, p.26). Elsewhere, we read of Beckett’s need to ‘tame [language] to express what he wanted’ (Calder, p.17) and the need to ‘bore one hole after another in it’ (Beckett quoted in Calder, p. 17). A consequence of this attack on language was the shortening of his work; his earlier novels were substantial, *Waiting for Godot* is a full length play, but his later plays had fewer and fewer acts and *Breath* (1969) is only a few minutes long. Associated with the increasing brevity of his work is a move from the use of language to more visual representation. By the early 1960s Beckett seemed to lose interest in the non-visual medium and experimented with both television and film.

### *Waiting for Godot*

Although not written for radio, Beckett's best-known play provides a way in to his thinking and writing which is important for radio scholars. The story of the play is also a useful reminder of the resistance to Beckett at the BBC. The BBC drama producer, Reyner Heppenstall saw the first production in French in March 1953 and recommended it for BBC broadcast. Although Beckett had written an English translation of the play, it was rejected by Gielgud: 'I am left with the impression of something that is basically "phoney"' (quoted in Rodger, 1982, p. 113). The play was therefore rejected but it was eventually broadcast on 24<sup>th</sup> April 1960.

*Waiting for Godot* features two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir, waiting on a lonely road by a tree for a man called Godot. After a while a local landowner, Pozzo and his servant, Lucky, arrive: the unfortunate Lucky is made fun of and then these two leave. Before the end of the first act a boy arrives to say that Mr. Godot will not be coming today but will come tomorrow. The second act is similar to the first, the two tramps are joined by Pozzo (who is now blind) and Lucky, they eventually leave, the boy arrives to repeat his message that Godot is not coming but can be expected tomorrow and the play ends.

The radicalism of *Waiting for Godot* was partly in its stripped-down simplicity and lack of plot. British theatre at the time was dominated by bourgeois dramas, often with complicated plots with clearly presented characters in elaborate and realistic sets. Theatre was an evening's entertainment for the middle class. In contrast, *Waiting for Godot* had almost no plot and the set consisted of a stone to sit on and a tree (which in act two had sprouted a few green leaves).

There is a pervading sense in the play of waiting and wondering what the point of life is and this is communicated by Beckett's use of language. The repartee between the two tramps has a poetic and rhythmic quality and its humour is strongly reminiscent of music-hall comedy.

*Estragon: Charming spot. Inspiring prospects. Let's go.*

Vladimir: *We can't.*  
Estragon: *Why not?*  
Vladimir: *We're waiting for Godot.*  
Estragon: *Ah, yes. You're sure it was here?*  
Vladimir: *What?*  
Estragon: *That we were to wait.*  
Vladimir: *He said by the tree. Do you see any others?*  
Estragon: *What is it?*  
Vladimir: *I don't know. A willow.*

As a student, Beckett had spent a lot of time in Dublin music halls (Cronin, 1997, p.57) and heard comedy pairs produce their fast, rhythmic style of humour. Vladimir and Estragon's 'repartee' is combined with silences, a particular Beckettian feature, and these underscore the sense of alienation and a fruitless anticipation.

Although not a radio play, *Waiting for Godot* was highly significant for British radio drama, signalling the possibilities of 'absurd' drama as a comment on human existence communicated through dialogue and silence. The word-play of music-hall comedy and the often bleak and tragic exchanges in a drama almost without plot would influence a generation of dramatists who embraced what came to be called the 'theatre of the absurd' (Esslin, 1961). The work of Harold Pinter, Edward Albee and Tom Stoppard, among others, owed a great deal to Beckett's influence and in particular *Waiting for Godot*.

### ***All That Fall***

Soon after the first London performance of *Waiting for Godot* Beckett was invited to write a play for radio. He had met the drama producer, Donald McWhinnie and *All That Fall* was broadcast on the Third Programme on 13<sup>th</sup> January 1956. Of the five radio dramas, this is by far the most accessible and speaks most persuasively to a contemporary audience. Like *Waiting for Godot* it has little plot but it does have a plot structure and it also contains moments of typically Beckettian humour. It could be argued that these two works provide the modern listener with an accessible Beckett

whereas much of his other writing appeals mainly to the specialist audience with an interest in the most experimental and challenging forms of writing.

*All That Fall* has a 'realist' quality and is the story of Maddy Rooney's journey to Boghill Railway Station in rural Ireland to meet her blind husband, Dan and their walk back home. Dan's train had been delayed and at the end of the story it is revealed that this was caused by a child falling from the train and being killed. However, this simple story is not at all what the play is about. The opening scene is aurally enigmatic and signals that this is very far from a quaint story of Irish rural life. These are Beckett's instructions to the producer:

*Rural sounds: Sheep, bird, cow, cock, severally, then together. Silence. MRS.ROONEY advances along a country road towards railway station. Sounds of her dragging feet. Music faint from house by way. "Death and the Maiden." The steps slow down, stop. MRS.ROONEY: Poor woman. All alone in that ruinous old house.*

The animal sounds are clichés of rural life but here they have a deliberately artificial and stylised quality as if to repudiate any sense of realism, as explained in considerable detail by the producer (McWhinnie, 1959, pp. 133-151). Other sounds intervene, a very loud bicycle bell, a strange thumping sound, noises of an old car, the sound of a steam train but given an artificial quality. Later we hear chickens squawking but again in a disturbingly distorted manner. Martin Esslin has described how, in the attempt to 'remove sounds from the purely realistic sphere' they had to be treated electronically, 'slowing down, speeding up, adding echo, fragmenting them by cutting them into segments, and putting them together in new ways' (Esslin, 1982, p. 129).

An explanation of this stylised realism is probably, as Everett Frost explains in his discussion of Beckett's radio work, that this is all occurring in the mind of Maddy Rooney (Frost, 1991, p. 367). The words, music and sounds we hear are as perceived by Maddy and importantly do not exist at all independently of her. The significance of this interiority is the impossibility of a visual realisation of *All That Fall*. Nothing exists

unless it is heard in Maddy's mind and for that reason the visual image would fatally undermine the central illusion. *All That Fall*, to use a particularly useful term from radio studies, is 'radiogenic', it is perfectly and only suited to radio.

Alongside the artificial sound effects, the words spoken produce a mixture of Irish colloquial speech and arrestingly grim but funny observations. A Mr. Tyler tries to comfort Maddy Rooney and she responds:

*MRS. ROONEY: What kind of a country is this where a woman can't weep her heart out on the high-ways and by-ways without being tormented by retired bill-brokers.*

Later while leading the blind Dan she exclaims "concentrate on putting one foot before the next, or whatever the expression is" and then he responds after trying to help her, "suddenly you stop dead. Two hundred pounds of unhealthy fat. What possessed you to come out at all?" In more contemplative mood, Dan claims, "the loss of me sight was a great fillip. If I could go deaf and dumb I could hang on to be a 100".

*All That Fall* is a masterpiece of radio drama; it provides a sound world which is both completely interior to Maddy's mind but also intensely visual. Themes of death, murder and physical decay are presented in this bizarre but powerfully radiogenic and innovative aural experience. In order to provide the special sound quality which Beckett demanded, the BBC set up the famous Radiophonic Workshop, and so Beckett's radio vision led directly to innovation in his newly chosen medium. And yet *All That Fall* is not some sort of experimental post-war avant-garde curio, it works as a challenging but often funny drama the neglect of which is a very sad comment on the status of old radio drama in the UK.

### ***Embers***

Beckett's next play for radio was broadcast three years after his first on 24 June 1959 on the Third Programme. An old man, Henry walks by the sea (or imagines that he does) with his daughter, Addie and addresses his dead father. Then Henry and the mother of

Addie, Ada, reminisce about the past, some of which is heard as auditory flashbacks with additional characters. *Embers* is a radical development from *All That Fall* in which ‘conventional plotting and recognisability of place have been sacrificed’ (Kalb, 1994, p. 129). The play contains long passages of monologue, and so is not dissimilar to the novel adaptations broadcast at about the same time. Henry’s first speech continues for 17 minutes before another character is heard but the presence of artificial sound effects and his own distressed and rambling speech makes for a dramatic if extremely challenging listening experience. Another striking feature of this drama is the absence of any humour and indeed when Ada asks Henry to laugh and smile what we hear is a terrifying cackle.

The artificiality of the sound effects, as in *All That Fall*, is repeated and at one point we hear Henry shout ‘hooves’ followed by unrealistic horses hooves, he then shouts ‘Again!’ and the sound is repeated. Other distorted sounds are used in the play to suggest that this is an imagined or dream world peopled by ghosts in Henry’s mind. Most striking is the use of the voice; shouting, screaming, laughing or rambling incoherently in a way which suggests the sounds to be heard in a home for people with dementia. The idea that Beckett was attempting to capture the atmosphere or sounds of old, demented people is not presented in the literature but this is certainly the most obvious reference for a modern listener. In this original recording the part of Henry is played by Jack MacGowran, a regular performer in these early Beckett dramas, and his oral performance is central to the effectiveness of the drama. At times his crazed and rambling delivery have an almost demonic quality. This horror aesthetic is also suggested by the disturbing background electronic sounds which are subliminal in places.

### ***Endgame***

First performed on the stage in French in April 1957, *Endgame* was broadcast on the Third Programme on 22 May 1962 and produced not this time by Donald McWhinnie but another drama producer with a particular interest in ‘the absurd’, Michael Bakewell (who is normally associated with the British playwright, Harold Pinter). There are four

characters (two typically Beckettian pairs) Hamm (who is blind) and his servant, Clov and Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell. The play is in one act and, as in *Waiting for Godot*, very little happens and the action is essentially about filling time. The play begins rather curiously with a long spoken description of the stage directions read directly from the published play which are both very detailed and also difficult for a listener to follow,

*[Clov] looks up at window left. He turns and looks at window right. He turns and looks at window left. He goes out, comes back immediately with a small step-ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window left, gets up on it, draws back curtain. He gets down...*

The other character at the beginning of the play, Hamm, sits in an armchair with castors under an old sheet. He is revealed as follows;

*Hamm stirs. He yawns under the handkerchief. He removes the handkerchief from his face. Very red face. Black glasses.*

From these stage directions it is clear that *Endgame* is much more visual than *Waiting for Godot*. Nagg and Nell appear from two 'ashbins' but this image is of course absent from the radio performance. The spoken stage directions which are used at the beginning of the radio production are missing entirely later in the play and this adds to a sense of confusion on the part of the radio listener.

It could be argued that the more powerful visual imagery in *Endgame* militates against its success as a radio play and to a degree that is true but the quality of the dialogue in this visual but essentially static drama does result in a significant contribution to the art of radio drama. The mood of anger and hatred in the Hamm/Clov relationship is powerful and this works well on radio, indeed the absurdity of the exchanges between the two seems to be amplified by its non-visual representation. The following exchange is a good example,

*HAMM: Where are you?*

*CLOV: Here.*

*HAMM: Why don't you kill me?*

*CLOV: I don't know the combination of the larder.*

*[Pause]*

*HAMM: Go and get two bicycle wheels.*

*CLOV: There are no more bicycle wheels.*

*HAMM: What have you done with your bicycle?*

*CLOV: I never had a bicycle.*

The comic repartee here is typically Beckettian and even more so in the exchanges between Nagg and Nell (as she observes, 'nothing is funnier than unhappiness'). The dialogue between these two characters includes the sort of straight 'gag' (or joke) to be heard on more conventional radio comedy at the time,

*NAGG: Our hearing hasn't failed.*

*NELL: Our what?*

Their relationship is also another opportunity for Beckett to comment on old age;

*NAGG: I thought you were going to leave me.*

*NELL: I am going to leave you.*

*NAGG: Would you give me scratch before you go?*

As in *Embers* the listener is reminded of the sounds of an old peoples' home. Demented old people reverting to an infant dependency, but in Beckett's drama they are literally in the dustbin.

The case for valuing Beckett's *Endgame* as a contribution to radio is strengthened by Clov's extraordinary, lyrical speech towards the end of the play from which this is a short extract,

*CLOV: I say to myself – sometimes, Clov, you must learn to suffer better than that if you want them to weary of punishing you – one day. I say to myself – sometimes, Clov, you must be there better than that if you want them to let you go – one day.*

Listening to this 1962 production of *Endgame* is a lesson in the contradictions of Beckett's radio contribution. The inability to see the production adds to a sense of confusion but the intensity of the writing seems to be amplified by our 'blindness'. This, however was one critic's reaction to the play on radio;

(...) faultily constructed and abominably verbose. I couldn't see the set for one thing in my mind's eye (...)

the majority of the play was on the usual, long, whining, self-pitying note, the dirty water running out of the bath in which Joyce died.

(Martin Shuttleworth, *The Listener* 31 may 1962, p.968)

### **Readings from novels**

Some of the most challenging of Beckett's radio contributions are the readings of extracts from his novels which should be acknowledged here. These are *From An Abandoned work* (14 December 1957), *Malone Dies* (18 June 1958) and *The Unnameable* (19 January 1959, this featured a short musical introduction by John Beckett); all were produced by Donald McWhinnie. All of the readings were performed by Beckett's favourite actor, Patrick Magee and he was so impressed by Magee's performance that he wrote his stage play *Krapp's Last Tape* for him. The readings are interesting as oral performances and in *From an Abandoned Work* Magee's high-pitched voice has a certain roughness and breathlessness in the delivery which is often so rapid that at times it is impossible to understand. The profoundly alienating experience of listening to these readings serves as a useful reminder that producers at the Third Programme in the late 1950s did not have to worry too much about the listener experience.

*Krapp's Last Tape* provides a sense of completion to Beckett's radio career; using a tape recorder we are presented with a man at three stages of his life and a dialogue ensues. So a radio device and technique takes centre stage in a play first performed by Beckett's principal radio performer.

### **Conclusion**

This article sees Beckett's contribution to radio from the point of view not of a Beckett scholar but of a radio historian. Here I have not consulted the BBC Written Archives to look at the internal debates in the BBC Drama department around Beckett's work, important though that is, nor the reception to Beckett on radio in the late 1950s and early 1960s, these must wait for another day. I have, however listened, mainly for the first time, to broadcasts and drawn on a small amount of the literature. This admittedly cursory research has nevertheless shown that Beckett clearly made an important contribution to radio and in particular that *All That Fall* and the radio production of *Endgame* are worthy of listening and re-examination today.

A reassessment of Beckett's radio output means listening afresh to work made over half a century ago. I would argue that, aided by the detailed account of its construction by the producer (McWhinnie, 1959), *All That Fall* has survived intact as the masterpiece of radio innovation that it is. However, the BBC television version of *Waiting for Godot* is a disappointing reminder of the failings of early black and white television drama. We are so accustomed to the colourful, high-definition picture quality of contemporary television that watching the 1961 *Godot* is historically but not artistically rewarding. So in the case of Beckett, old radio has clearly triumphed over old television.

Famously, in *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett stripped the stage bare and so changed the very nature of theatre. But his struggle with language and his willingness to manipulate sound, and the sheer intellectual challenge he presented in his writing, also served in the

reinvention of radio drama. Beckett was the flag-bearer of experimental and absurdist radio drama and there is an urgent need to assess the extent of his influence.

### **Abstract**

Samuel Beckett was one of the most influential and famous cultural figures of the twentieth century and his radio contribution is significant. This article recognises both work written for radio as well as readings from novels and adaptations of stage plays. His acceptance at the BBC was problematic but made possible by the creation of the Third Programme.

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