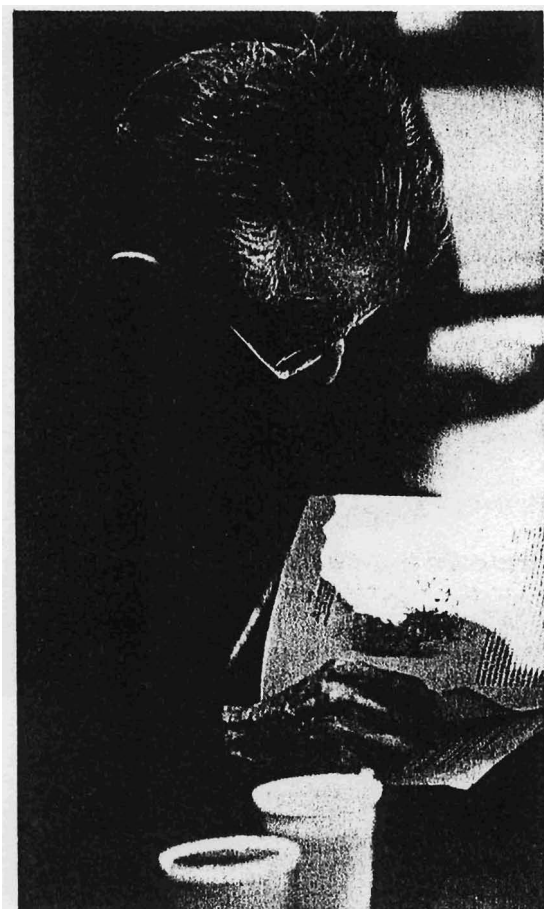


THE GATE THEATRE
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PRESENTS

THE
**BECKETT
FESTIVAL**

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BECKETT AND IRELAND

Eoin O'Brien, author of the highly acclaimed book *The Beckett Country*, examines native influences on the writer who always carried in his imagination memories of the Dublin mountains and the great sweep of the bay.

Samuel Beckett was an Irishman. This simple statement should be taken for what it is, a mere declaration of fact. It should not be seized upon by the patriotic purveyors of national character and genius for public display. Beckett's nationality, taken at face value, is nothing more than an accident, as a consequence of which he was brought up in a small island with a people peculiar to that region. There is, of course, more to it than that. Beckett's confinement to Ireland occurred during a period of his life when influences are formative and lasting; a period when the culture, mannerisms and eccentricities of a particular society are not only fundamental to the development of personality, but may provide also the essence of creative art, should a sensitive talent be among its youth. To these influences this Beckett Festival is devoted.

As Beckett said once of Joyce's *Work in Progress*: 'It is not to be read - or rather it is not only to be read - he is to be reread. Indeed, as one does so new sensations are awakened at each revisitation. We see in the prose or poetry (distinction between the two is not always possible in Beckett's writing) at one time, pathos and humour, on another beauty and outrage; allusions once simple later become recondite. Then the works begin to blur as one blends into another until the totality of Beckett's composition becomes apparent, each work yielding a different treatment of sensation, event or emotion, originating often from a single experience. With this realisation comes another; much of the apparently surrealistic in Beckett's writing is linked, sometimes very positively, sometimes only tenuously, with the reality of existence, and much of this existence emanates from memories of Dublin, a world rendered almost unrecognisable by Beckett's technique of denuding his landscape and its people (while also annihilating time) in his creation of the 'unreality of the real'. It should be added, however, that though much of Beckett's writing has within it many firm anchorage points with reality, an obsessional diligence in identifying these, would blight the creative beauty of Beckett's imagination, the 'soul-landscape'. We should also bear in mind Beckett's concept of art: 'the artist who stakes his being is from nowhere, has no kith'.

It is still early days in Beckett scholarship, and not surprisingly, perhaps, the Irish academic beacon (with but a few exceptions) has been directed elsewhere, and it should hardly be a cause for wonderment that the Irish influences in Beckett's

writing have, for the greater part, passed unnoticed. What is perhaps of greater curiosity is that though not a few Irishmen may be unaware of Beckett's Irishness, there are those who, while not actually denying him an entitlement to nationality by birthright, nonetheless do not consider him to be truly Irish. The reasons for this, though not always clear, may derive from his so called Anglo-Irish origins and education, his prolonged absence from the homeland (allowances seem to have been made for Joyce), his adoption of a foreign tongue, or perhaps because his writings are at variance with the generally accepted verdurous concept of Irish literature.

Beckett's adoption of France as a homeland does not lessen the relevance of Ireland to his writing. He left Ireland for good reasons, the most important being the preservation and development of his talent to edify art. The inebriating ambience of Dublin had laid to rest many a budding flower in 'lakes of boiling small-beer'. Nor should his physical departure from Ireland be equated with a spiritual exodus. He brought with him to France the tools of his trade, his models, the design for the sets against which they would act out his dramas, their dialogue to be spliced on occasion to another language, their aspirations and despairs. Though Beckett departed his homeland he did not, as those who equate exile with perfidy would have it, desert Ireland. He revisited Dublin with the same intensity that Proust went back to Combray. He returned with increasing frequency in his more recent writing, to the sea, the sky, the mountains and the islands pulsating in 'a mighty systole'. In the Dublin mountains and along the seashore of Dublin Bay lies the real Beckett country, the country that so dominated the early novels, faded (but never quite disappeared) from the drama and prose of the middle years, and to which he returned in his seventh decade when 'the old haunts were never more present'.

Con Leventhal, Beckett's close friend and confidant, was one who marvelled at academe's inability to appreciate the Irish influence in Beckett's writing. The indecision in 1969 as to whether France held precedence to claim Beckett as her eleventh Nobel prize-winner, over the country of his birth claiming him as her third after Yeats and Shaw, drew an interesting analysis from Leventhal: 'There is no one here to make the full Irish case. Few to talk of the kinship with Swift though more to tie the Dubliner in a Joycean knot. No one, however, is sufficiently aware of the background to notice the Irishness of the

Godot tramps. The highest praise that the dramatist Anouilh can give to *Waiting for Godot* is that in it we have Pascal's *Pensées* played out by the Fratellini clowns. How could he be expected to recognise the Dublin lilt of the dialogue as translated by the author? How few French people were able to realise the added humour and pathos to the French version of *Fin de Partie* when in its English form it was acted by Patrick Magee and Jack MacGowran in the author's own production! The French, ignorant of the exciting possibilities of an *Endgame* played by the right Irish actors, are likewise unfamiliar with the revelatory new touches which these two actors can give to their interpretation of a Beckett text on radio and television.' And how much further it goes. It is obvious that *All That Fall* is set in Foxrock but what is

not so well known is that *Happy Days* may have had its origins in a seaside cove bearing the delightful name of 'Jack's Hole', that one of the climactic episodes in *Krapp* occurred on the pier of Greystones harbour, and that a good case can be made for placing Vladimir and Estragon's vigil for Godot on the Dublin mountains. *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* and *More Pricks than Kicks* are set squarely in Dublin, whereas *Murphy* is played out in both Dublin and London. *Mercier and Camier* spend their time between the city of Dublin, its canals and the Dublin mountains, and likewise much of Dublin can be identified in *Watt*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, *Company*, *That Time*, *Eh Joe*, *Embers*, much of the later prose and quite a bit of the poetry. Let us be careful not to overexert ourselves on

Father and son on a mountain road to nowhere, from *The Beckett Country* by Eoin O'Brien. Photograph by David Davison

