***Catastrophe*, Unreal City Theatre Company, Toxteth Reservoir, Liverpool**

**Directed by Adrian Dunbar**

**Featuring Stanley Townsend (Director), Orla Charlton (Assistant), Brian Burroughs (Protagonist), and Michael Cummins (Luke)**

**Saturday 7 May 2022**

**Review by Alexander Coupe**

The Covid-19 pandemic that began in 2020 has added a new dimension to the class divisions that preceded it. While many office-based jobs adapted to working from home until lockdowns eased, others had a more difficult time. Theatres across Britain and Ireland closed down, with many creative workers having to take on alternative jobs, and during relatively less infectious times performing in hastily arranged and not entirely safe conditions. For those who worked in fields, factories, hospitals, schools, transport, and care homes, exposure to the virus ensured that others could survive in their social isolation. For a while, the term ‘essential worker’ seemed to expose the irony that those upon whom we rely for our health and sustenance, even in ‘normal’ times, often have the least healthy working conditions. Writing in the early stages of the crisis, Slavoj Žižek saw promise in the sharpening of such contradictions: ‘What I am hoping is that the pandemic will follow the logic of *Kairos*: a catastrophe that will compel us to find a new beginning.’[[1]](#footnote-1) We may still be waiting for this reinvention of social and political life, but the choice to stage Samuel Beckett’s *Catastrophe*, a short play precisely about the ambivalence of moments of disaster, seems particularly timely.

*Beckett: Confined* – a collaboration between Unreal Cities theatre company, the University of Liverpool’s Institute of Irish Studies, and the Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies at the University of Notre Dame – touted itself as a meditation on the aftermath of the pandemic. Issues of vulnerability and ill-health lay at the heart of their production of *Catastrophe*, directed by Adrian Dunbar as part of the Liverpool-based festival. Performed in a former reservoir in Toxteth’s High Park Street, built in 1853 to store the large quantities of water needed to supply the city’s expanding working-class districts with clean water, the chosen setting of the production brought these themes into focus.[[2]](#footnote-2) The reservoir was part of what was the first extensive public health and sanitation programme in the British Empire, and, confronted with the dishevelled figure of the Protagonist (Brian Burroughs) dressed in night-clothes and the fussing, cleanly figure of the Female Assistant (Orla Charlton), this vast forest of iron columns and vaults could easily be mistaken for a decrepit hospital ward. The change of setting from the theatre to a context with deep associations with questions of public health reflected a wider push, on the part of the festival directors, to explore the play’s resonances in light of the pandemic.

From the very beginning, the production made compelling use of the enormous reverberating space to foreground the original play’s exploration of the theatricality of power and the power of theatre. The performance began with the slamming of an unseen door, and the ominous footsteps of the Director (Stanley Townsend) approaching, unseen, from stage right. The chamber amplified Townsend’s voice so that each of his orders echoed long after being given, producing an impression of gravitas that outstripped his physical presence in front of the audience. This tallied with the fact that nothing violent is shown directly in Beckett’s play. The audience is left to second guess the precise consequences of disobedience, a strategy the Director himself endorses in response to the Assistant’s suggestion that they gag the Protagonist:

For God's sake! This craze for explicitation! Every i dotted to death! Little gag! For God's sake!

Authority, the play suggests, is exerted primarily through implication rather than force. This is precisely why Beckett objected so strongly to the decision, taken by the director of the original 1982 production of the play at the Avignon Festival, to bind the Protagonist with ropes, describing the production as ‘literally massacred’.[[3]](#footnote-3) For the Unreal Cities performance, conjuring with the audience’s imagination proved far more effective than literal coercion; Townsend’s Director played upon dangers that we envisaged lurking in the darkened corners of the vaulted reservoir to extend his authority.

The pandemic experience added an additional dimension to the Director’s coercive power, particularly with regards to the Female Assistant. Historically, the Assistant’s place within the hierarchy of the play has been the role most open to directorial interpretive licence. David Mamet’s *Beckett on Film* version, for instance, dispensed with the Director’s cigar and lighter and transformed his demand for “light” into a request that the Assistant illuminate the Protagonist with a small torch, emphasising the complicity of the Assistant within the wider power structure.[[4]](#footnote-4) Later, when the Director moved upstage to survey his masterpiece, she walks over his chair, dusts it off, and sits down, implying that she desires to ascend the very hierarchy in which she is currently subjugated. As Shannon Jackson argues, the Assistant ‘presents an image of co-optation, enduring the tyranny of the powers above her to keep from losing the little power she has.’[[5]](#footnote-5) Orla Carlton played the role in a different manner. Her Assistant was more openly harried and fearful, jumping at the Director’s booming voice, struggling to light his cigar with nervous fingers, and fretfully dusting and cleaning the space. In this context, taking the Director’s seat was less a statement of ambition than a reflection of just how weary she was from her constant labour and vigilance. Though the Unreal Cites production did not offer a simple analogy between *Catastrophe* and the present, these subtle changes invited the audience to explore the issues raised by the pandemic, tying its elaboration of power and domination to the overwork, exhaustion and vulnerability felt by many ‘essential workers’.

The Protagonist’s anatomisation also carried significant contextual weight. Beckett famously wrote the play with the imprisonment of dissident Czech writer Václav Havel in mind, but what jumped out in this production was the script’s emphasis on medical and fitness terminology. The Director’s examination of Burroughs’s ‘cranium’ and ‘skull’, as well as his diagnosis of ‘fibrous degeneration’, recalled associations with the hypochondriac paranoia of lockdown: the experience of treating oneself as an anatomical object for signs of infection. In Britain, the pandemic triggered in the media a popular obsession with the physically degenerative effects of a more sedentary working life. Articles asked us to bear witness to ‘the health secrets of people who got much fitter in lockdown’; P.E. with Joe Wicks (‘body coach’) became an online sensation; and apparently half of all UK consumers purchased workout equipment in 2020/21.[[6]](#footnote-6) Beckett’s script calls attention to the potential for dehumanisation in all this medical and fitness talk. The Director treats the Protagonist as a body to be managed, manipulated, made ideologically (and economically) productive. In the context of the pandemic, this anatomisation invited the audience to consider the questions of knowledge, power and control that surfaced during lockdown; about whether the catastrophe *really* precipitated a break from old habits, or whether it profited those, such as the Director, already at the top.

It is this context that made the conclusion of the play is one of the more remarkable moments I have encountered since theatres reopened. Working with the Assistant and Luke, the unseen technician, the Director attempted to realise the perfectly controlled staging of his ‘catastrophe’:

A: [*to* L.] Once more and he’s off.

[*Fade-up of light on* P’*s body. Pause. Fade-up of general light*.]

D: Stop! [*Pause.*] Now… let ‘em have it. [*Fade out of general light. Pause. Fade-out of light on body. Light on head alone. Long pause.*] Terrific! He’ll have them on their feet. I can hear it from here.

[*Pause. Distant storm of applause.* P *raises his head, fixes the audience. The applause falters, dies.*

*Long pause.*

*Fade-out of light on face.*]

For a few moments the outline of Burroughs’s angular face was seared into my retina – an effect of the change in light remarked upon by other spectators – like the ghostly presence of something or someone that refuses go away, or to fade into memory. Of this moment Beckett declared: ‘He’s saying: you bastards, you haven’t finished with me yet!’[[7]](#footnote-7) For me, the lingering after-glow was a reminder that we have yet to finish with the pandemic – not only in the medical sense that the virus is still circulating, but also in the political sense suggested by Žižek. Just as the Director’s attempt to stage the perfect catastrophe is undermined by the unruliness of his actors, so attempts to use the pandemic to justify particular models of governance are liable to come unstuck. Not only has the virus itself exposed the vulnerabilities of a variety of political-economic configurations, both in this country and beyond, but so too has the defiance of its (disproportionately old and poor) victims. Though in Great Britain we are still working through the longer-term implications of the last two years, the question remains as to what duties society owes to those, like the Protagonist, who suffered and, for a brief time, took centre stage.

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1. Žižek defines *Kairos* as ‘the moment of fateful decision’. Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic 2: Chronicles of a Time Lost* (New York & London: OR Books, 2020), p.116. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Richard Pollard and Nicholas Pevsner, *Lancashire: Liverpool and the South-West* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), p.76. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p.680. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Catastrophe*, dir. by David Mamet (Channel 4, 2001), online film recording, YouTube, 3 June 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSG0GDLX23g> [accessed 26 June 2022]. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Shannon Jackson, ‘Performing the Performance of Power in Beckett’s *Catastrophe*’, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 4.2 Spring (1992), pp.23-49 (27). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Sirin Kale, ‘‘I got a whole new mindset’: the health secrets of people who got much fitter in lockdown’, *Guardian*, 27 Oct. (2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/27/i-got-a-whole-new-mindset-the-health-secrets-of-people-who-got-much-fitter-in-lockdown> [accessed 27 June 2022]; Anon, ‘Half of UK consumers purchased home workout products during the pandemic’, *GlobalData*, 6 April (2021), <https://www.globaldata.com/half-uk-consumers-purchased-home-workout-products-pandemic-75-intend-continue-working-home-post-pandemic-according-latest-research-globaldata/> [accessed 27 June 2022]. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Quoted in *Damned to Fame*,p.680. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)