

# Context Interrupted: Samuel Beckett in Czech between 1964–1996 and Jan Nebeský's *Endgame* (1996)

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**ABSTRACT:** The focus of the study is the 1996 production of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, directed by Jan Nebeský. The study attempts to reconstruct the interrupted context regarding Beckett's reception in the Czech environment. The first part situates Samuel Beckett within the Czech theatre and culture, particularly his *Waiting for Godot*. The second

part looks at productions of the play between 1964 and 1991. The last part presents Jan Nebeský's production and his approach to the text, which he often intersperses with other textual fragments through which he reveals the interpretative layers of text. In *Endgame*, he explores the theme of salvation.

**KEYWORDS:**

Samuel Beckett, Jan Nebeský, *Endgame*, context, theatre production, theatre of the absurd

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
 You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.  
 In order to arrive at what you do not know  
 You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
 In order to possess what you do not possess  
 You must go by the way of dispossession.  
 In order to arrive at what you are not  
 You must go through the way in which you are not.  
 And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
 And what you own is what you do not own  
 And where you are is where you are not.

(T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*<sup>1</sup>)

Samuel Beckett's 1957 *Endgame* was translated into Czech by the poet Jiří Kolář already in 1963. Published in the journal *Světová literatura* [World Literature],<sup>2</sup> it was one of the first plays associated with the theatre of the absurd that the Czech public could experience.<sup>3</sup> However, the first production of Kolář's translation of the play did not take place until 1996. Directed by Jan Nebeský (1953) at the Divadlo Komedie in Prague (Comedy Theatre, premiered on 6 June 1996), the play appeared almost 40 years after its inception in a completely different artistic, social and political context. Outside its context, however, the play opened up to new contexts: Nebeský's *Endgame* was the first part of a loose mystical trilogy in which Beckett's play was followed by productions of Lenka Lagronová's *Terezka* [Little Therese] (premiered on 7 March 1997), about Therese of Lisieux and her mystical journey to God, and Egon Tobiaš and Jan Nebeský's textual collage entitled *Marta* (*Mal d'Or*) (premiered 19 April 2000), about the French mystic Martha Robin. To emphasize the close relationship of all three productions, Nebeský set them in the same scenography called the "chamber" by the creators, a hermetically enclosed room located with the audience on stage. Similarly, the characters of Hamm and Clov, played by the same actors Miloslav Mejzlík and David Prachař, returned in certain modifications in the production of *Marta* (the characters of two detectives/clowns) and the character of father figure enacted by the actor Jiří Klem appeared in both *Endgame* (Nagg) and *Terezka* (Daddy)<sup>4</sup>

1 ELIOT, T. S. *Four Quartets*. In *Collected Poems 1909–1962*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963, p. 187.

2 BECKETT, S. *Konec hry* [*Endgame*]. Translated by Jiří Kolář. In *Světová literatura*, 1963, Vol. 8, Issue 3, pp. 233–256. Kolář's translation has never been published in the book format.

3 Some may question the extent to which Beckett's works are compatible with Martin Esslin's notion of the theatre of the absurd, especially those produced long after the English critic first used it in his 1960 essay. The essential point is that *Endgame*, mentioned in the essay, belonged to a theatrical context for which Esslin was seeking a conceptual framework, an adequate language of interpretation and understanding. It is therefore not my purpose to interfere in this undoubtedly serious Beckettian debate. The terms "theatre of the absurd" or "absurdist plays" are here only auxiliary notions, historically delimited identifiers through which I intend to provide access to the context of the reception of Beckett's work in the Czech environment. It should also be added that I am talking about a milieu for which Beckett still represents a complicated and ambiguous, but nonetheless exemplary example of the theatre of the absurd, despite all the inaccuracy and inadequacy of the term. Compare ESSLIN, M. *Theatre of the Absurd*. In *Tulane Drama Review*, 1960, Vol. 4, Issue 4, pp. 3–15.

4 On January 19, 2002, the last performance of *Endgame* was performed along with both productions in an eight-hour

In this paper, I intend to identify Nebeský's stage adaptation of Beckett's *Endgame* as a radical recontextualization which (1) revealed something that remained in Beckett's text as a tacit challenge of his apophatic theology – his mystical, i.e., extremely physical, at times painful and not merely intellectual, concentration in which something as sensitive as the journey to salvation through sacrifice occurs; and (2) suggested a theme symptomatic to the Czech milieu, that of discontinuity, of vanishing or interrupted contexts. In this sense, I will attempt to trace the interrupted context<sup>5</sup> of Beckett's stage reception in the Czech environment that preceded the 1996 production of *Endgame*, which – being itself an interruption – was an eloquent testimony to the culture of interrupted, disappearing and re-imagined contexts.

### HOME OF THE ABSURD: CONTEXT PREPARED

The first production of any of Samuel Beckett's plays in the former Czechoslovakia, in which *Waiting for Godot* shared the bill with *Act without Words*, took place in 1964 at the Divadlo Na zábradlí (Theatre on the Balustrade, premiered 18 December). *Waiting for Godot* was translated by Jiří Kolář and directed by Václav Hudeček, while the *Act* was adapted and performed by Ladislav Fialka, the founder of the Theatre on the Balustrade's mime ensemble and the leading figure of post war Czech pantomime.

Samuel Beckett's plays did not enter a bare, unexperienced territory. The reception of Beckett in former Czechoslovakia was for several reasons prepared and – aesthetically and structurally speaking – cultivated. In the following summary, which I have divided into five defining points, I intentionally leave aside the complex socio-political context of 1950s Czechoslovakia, for which absurdity and paradox were an inherent part of everyday life. As Barbara Day in her *Trial by Theatre* states: "(...) situations which appeared illogical and absurd to citizens of a Western democracy were familiar occurrences within Czechoslovakia and the other Soviet bloc countries. There was nothing more absurd than everyday life."<sup>6</sup> Land was fertile for the absurd.

(1) The readiness of the audience is essential for the adoption and reception of new poetics or dramaturgy. In this respect, Czech audience had an opportunity to encounter the theatre of the absurd in practice before the Balustrade production of *Waiting for Godot*. Between 1960 and 1964, it was the productions of Edward Albee, Stanisław Mrożek, or Eugene Ionesco's plays which initiated the Czech absurdist heyday of the 1960s: *Rhinoceros*, 1960, at the Divadlo E. F. Buriana (E. F. Burian Theatre); *Dellirium for Two*, 1963, at the Divadlo Jiřího Wolker (Jiří Wolker Theatre); *Exit*

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run. See (šle) [Špale, M.]. Pouze jednou: tři Nebeští v jeden den [Only once: Three Nebeský's productions in One Day]. In *Mladá fronta Dnes*, 2002, Vol. 13, Issue 16, p. D/6, January 19, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> The term "interrupted context" is inspired by a Canadian historian, political scientist and slavist Harold Gordon Skilling's book *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution*, which examines the reform processes that took place in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, and which were drastically interrupted by the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968. This invasion – in addition to its many societal traumatic consequences that have its repercussions up to this day – had an impact on the staging or rather non-staging of Samuel Beckett's plays which I discuss later in this study. SKILLING, H. G. *Czechoslovakia's Interrupted Revolution*. Princeton : Princeton UP, 1976.

<sup>6</sup> DAY, B. *Trial by Theatre: Reports on Czech Drama*. Praha : Karolinum, 2019, p. 161.

*the King*, 1964, at the E. F. Burian Theatre; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, 1963, at the Divadlo S. K. Neumanna (S. K. Neumann Theatre). Triple-bill of *Bald Soprano*, *Tenant*, and *The Lesson* staged by Václav Hudeček opened at the Theatre on the Balustrade the day before the Czech premiere of *Waiting for Godot*. It was actually Hudeček, who ran "Sunday afternoon readings at the ABC Theatre (Divadlo ABC) to introduce authors of the Absurd."<sup>7</sup>

(2) The theatre of the absurd, especially Ionesco and Beckett, was gradually emerging in the Czech territory during the 1950s. In his 1983 grateful letter to Samuel Beckett, Václav Havel expressed his indebtedness to his work: "Dear Samuel Beckett, during the dark fifties when I was 16 or 18 of age, in a country where there were virtually no cultural or other contacts with the outside world, luckily, I had the opportunity to read 'Waiting for Godot.' Later, of course I read all your plays (...) from the first you have been for me a deity in the heavens of spirit. I have been immensely influenced by you as a human being, and in a way as a writer, too. (...) Even today, after several decades, when I am perhaps older than you were at the time of 'Godot,' I cannot but feel the consequences of my coming across your work."<sup>8</sup>

(3) It was Václav Havel with his *The Garden Party* (premiered 13 December 1963, directed by Otomar Krejča, set design by Josef Svoboda), who introduced the specific Central or Eastern European version of theatre of the absurd for Czech spectators. By saying that, however, we need to add that *The Garden Party* did not come out of nowhere. The play is a syncretic work, in which Havel, originally and for his own purposes, intertwined two of his major influences – Ionesco and Beckett – for Czech settings. The destruction or deconstruction of language reduced to mechanically repeated, bureaucratic phrases or bloc patterns, which demonstrate the decomposition of language as the tragedy of identity and humanity, resulting in the reification of a man, refers to Ionesco. Some reviewers saw an explicit link between *The Garden Party* and the French playwright, calling the play "the first Czech anti-drama" or "Ionesco-like political farce."<sup>9</sup> However, the connection with Beckett passed unnoticed. It was Veronika Ambros, who aptly discussed Havel's first full-length play in terms of a "poetics of absence,"<sup>10</sup> which she explicitly linked to Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. From this perspective, Beckett and his famous play had already haunted Czech stage a year before the production of *Waiting for Godot*.

On the other hand, Václav Havel's work has its own character, independent of the foreign context. His early playwriting, preceded by his experimental, visual poetry, which was literally playing with and dismantling language (see his collected graphic poems *Anticodes*), was directly influenced by Ivan Vyskočil, actor, playwright and director, and Jan Grossman, literary critique, dramaturge and director of the Theatre on the Balustrade. For Vyskočil, absurdity and nonsense were an inherent part of his

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>8</sup> BECKETT, S. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Vol. IV.: 1966–1989*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016, p. 612.

<sup>9</sup> UHLÍŘOVÁ, E. České antidrama [Czech Antidrama]. In *Divadelní noviny*, 1963, Vol 7, Issue 10, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> AMBROS, V. Poetika absence v *Zahradní slavnosti* Václava Havla [Poetics of Absence in Václav Havel's *Garden Party*]. In *Divadelní revue*, 2015, Vol. 26, Issue 1, pp. 109–114.

plays and so-called text-appeals. Eva Uhlířová wrote in her above-quoted review of *The Garden Party*: “Havel’s play is an excellent completion of structural, as well as linguistic strategies of the ‘theatre of the absurd,’ discovered for the Czech theatre by Vyskočil without any external, today already known predecessors.”<sup>11</sup> Jan Grossman approached the poetics of the absurd as a dramaturge and director in relation to his and Havel’s concept of the theatre of appeal, for which Peter Brook in his *Empty Space* found a close-fitting term “the rough theatre,”<sup>12</sup> and in the centre of which lies something what Havel called “the act of existential awakening.”<sup>13</sup> For Jan Grossman, the theatre of the absurd is virtually an embodiment of the theatre of appeal, its necessary and logical aesthetic, as well as political format (see his essay on *The Garden Party*, which closes with the subchapter “Appeal of Theatre of the Absurd”).<sup>14</sup>

(4) The roots of absurdity in the Czech territory go back – as Jan Grossman asserts in the very same essay – to Jaroslav Hašek and Franz Kafka. Grossman, after mentioning Alfred Jarry, argues: “(...) the principles of theatre of the absurd could be found not only there they claimed themselves as the movement and programme. The production of absurdity is e.g. an ultimate effect of *The Fateful Adventures of Good Soldier Švejk*.” Kafka is for Grossman “the classic of absurd realism.”<sup>15</sup>

In the same year, Jan Grossman wrote his seminal essay *Kafka’s Theatricality?* (1964) in which he elaborated on the issue of Kafka’s writing in terms of theatre of the absurd: “The dynamic structure of Kafka’s novels has the quality which the theatre of the absurd intentionally emphasizes: it is an appeal, a provocative call for dialogue. Theatre of the absurd is – like Kafka – analytical, if you want, coldly diagnostic. It doesn’t provide the solution. (...)”<sup>16</sup> At the very end of the essay, Grossman related Kafka’s theatricality to Brecht and Beckett and concluded with assertion that the Prague-German novelist was “the classic of theatre of the absurd.”<sup>17</sup>

(5) The ensemble of the Theatre on the Balustrade, which was founded in 1958, gradually developed over the course of the first six years of existence along with the distinctive dramaturgical and directorial conception of an overall theatrical practice which was capable adequately, i.e. by theatrical means, tackle the issues corresponding to that of theatre of the absurd. Hence, the production of Beckett and Ionesco’s plays met a collective artistically mature enough, who was able to render the yet-canonical plays of the absurd not as an information but as a vital piece of their theatrical vision. As one of the reviewers summarized: “Fifteen years separate us from the Paris premieres of these plays (1950–1953). At first glance, the Prague productions could therefore seem like a short, considerably delayed lecture on the

11 UHLÍŘOVÁ, E. *České antidrama* [Czech Antidrama], p. 3.

12 BROOK, P. *The Empty Space*. New York : Touchstone, 1996, p. 83.

13 HAVEL, V. *Václav Havel o divadle* [Václav Havel on Theatre]. Praha : Knihovna Václava Havla (Václav Havel Library), 2012, p. 62.

14 GROSSMAN, J. *Mezi literaturou a divadlem II* [Between Literature and Theatre II]. Praha : Torst, 2013, p. 1152.

15 Ibid., p. 1150.

16 Ibid., p. 1176.

17 Ibid., p. 1191.

origins and foundations of drama of the absurd. However, it is not hard to realize that Alfred Jarry's *King Ubu* and Václav Havel's *The Garden Party*, which are excellently played at the Theatre on the Balustrade, make it clear that Eugene Ionesco and Samuel Beckett do not appear on this stage either by chance or as an academic retrospective."<sup>18</sup>

### TRACING THE CONTEXT

Since 1964, Samuel Beckett's plays have received over forty stage productions in the former Czechoslovakia and then Czech Republic. The play by Beckett most frequently staged has been *Waiting for Godot* (staged 15 times), including the current Národní divadlo Brno production, which opened in February 2023 (National Theatre Brno, premiered 24 February). *Godot* is followed by *Krapp's Last Tape* with eight productions, then *Endgame* with six productions and *Happy Days* with three productions. There are several productions, which consist of two or more of Beckett's short plays. Statistics, however dry, reveal some interesting facts, which could be worth attention.

(1) Between 1960–1970, there were essentially only three productions of plays by Beckett:

(a) the above-mentioned production by Václav Hudeček and Ladislav Fialka of *Waiting for Godot* and *Act without Words*;

(b) *Krapp's Last Tape*, presented as part of the composed programme at the Literary Café Viola in 1965 (2 December);

(c) 1970 production of *Waiting for Godot*, staged by Alois Hajda at the Státní divadlo Brno (State Theatre Brno).

Václav Hudeček's production in particular was considered "a historical theatre event to which we will be returning many times."<sup>19</sup> Another reviewer saw the Balustrade performance as "remarkable, challenging without cheap effects but with a precise disclosure of architecture of the text."<sup>20</sup> Zdeněk Hořínek, Czech theatre scholar and dramaturge, in his thorough contextual analysis argued: "The performance of *Waiting for Godot* is free of any tinge of historicity, it interprets Beckett's text in its undiminished poignancy and urgency."<sup>21</sup>

If Zdeněk Hořínek underscored without any reserve the critical and unsettling topicality of *Godot* for the Czechoslovak socialist context, unmasking "our own little Godots, onto which we project our illusions,"<sup>22</sup> the reception of Brno, post-1968 production was rather careful, mentioning Beckett's contagious pessimism,

<sup>18</sup> OPAVSKÝ, J. Ionesco a Beckett po patnácti letech [Ionesco and Beckett after Fifteen Years]. In *Rudé právo*, 1965, Vol. 45, Issue 19, p. 3, 19 January 1965.

<sup>19</sup> ČERNÝ, J. Beckettovo Čekání na Godota [Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*]. In *Lidová demokracie*, 1964, Vol. 20, Issue 305, p. 3, 22 December 1964.

<sup>20</sup> (zd). Dva večery absurdního divadla [Two Evenings of the Theatre of the Absurd]. In *Mladá fronta*, 1965, Vol. 21, Issue 3, p. 4, 4 January 1965.

<sup>21</sup> HOŘÍNEK, Z. Zastavení na zábradlí [Stopover at the Balustrade]. In *Divadlo*, 1965, Vol. 16, Issue 10, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.



Samuel Beckett: *Waiting for Godot*. Theatre on the Balustrade, premiered on 18 December 1964. Direction Václav Hudeček. From left Jan Libíček (Estragon), Ivan Palec (Lucky), Václav Sloup (Vladimir). Photo by Jaroslav Krejčí. Arts and Theatre Institute Archive, Prague.

even anti-Marxism but stressing, at the same time “his artistic eminence and uniqueness.”<sup>23</sup> This “either or” discursive strategy representing the play as a product of “Western philosophy and social praxis”<sup>24</sup> on one hand and, on the other, asserting its universality, permeates all the extant reviews. Some reviewers appreciated the production but simultaneously (or strategically) approached the text as a document of the foregone avant-garde movement. It was, however, the voice of Karel Bundálek, Brno-based theatre reviewer and pedagogue, who not only announced, but discursively reinforced and legitimized the official standpoint of emerging normalization: “*Waiting for Godot* captures in a theatrically constrained form the atmosphere of the dehumanized society of the capitalist world (...). The State Theatre Brno included *Waiting for Godot* in the repertoire not for its vital dramaturgical value, but rather as an example of contemporary movements in the Western playwriting (...).”<sup>25</sup>

(2) Between 1971 and 1989, Beckett and Ionesco departed from the repertoire of Czech theatres. Ionesco and Beckett’s return occurred after the Velvet Revolution in 1990. Theatre of the Absurd, a theatre that challenges and causes intellectual discomfort by posing questions without simple solutions was for the period of normalisation objectionable. An internal document from 1973, found in the Archive of National Theatre Prague, clearly expressed the new approach to any subversive artistic achievement as follows: “One of the difficult tasks is to come to terms with the survivals of old ways of thinking that are complexly and often unexpectedly projected into one’s psyche. These are the various forms of petty bourgeois morality, opinions and value rankings that manifest themselves in a revised form as programmatic nihilism, scepticism, illusions, feelings of frustration and permanent absurdity. The danger of exploiting some of these negative phenomena on a broadly social scale on the ideological basis of sectarianism, nationalism, chauvinism, racism and fascism must be particularly emphasised.”<sup>26</sup>

(3) If the 1989 Velvet Revolution re-discovered, for obvious reasons, Václav Havel as a national playwright with 20 productions in 1990, and 15 in the following four years, the re-emergence of Beckett on the Czech stages in the 1990–95 period was rather lukewarm and unconvincing. Symptomatic example is Otomar Krejča’s 1991 adaptation of *Waiting for Godot* at his re-opened Divadlo za branou II (Theatre beyond the Gate II). The Prague production was Krejča’s third return to *Waiting for Godot*. He first adapted it for the stage in Salzburg in 1970 and then in France, where it premiered in Avignon in 1978, and two years later it was revived at the Bouffes du Nord theatre in Paris, where it received a number of revivals in the 1980s. Alena Urbanová, one of the reviewers who assessed the Czechoslovak 1964 premiere, responded to

23 (vpa) [PAZOUREK, V.]. Dočkali jsme se Godota [Godot Finally Arrived]. In *Svobodné slovo*, 1970, Vol. 26, Issue 254, p. 4, 26 October 1970.

24 Ibid.

25 BUNDÁLEK, K. Beckettova klauniáda [Beckett’s Clownery]. In *Rovnost*, 1970, Vol. 85, Issue 255, p. 5, 27 October 1970.

26 LEXA, J. Základní ideově-estetické cíle dramaturgie činohry ND [Basic Ideo-Aesthetic Objectives of National Theatre Dramaturgy]. In *Pracovní aktiv k ideologickým otázkám práce činohry Národního divadla* [A Working Group on Ideological Issues of the National Theatre Drama]. National Theatre Archive, folder No. V100, 1973, p. 12.



Samuel  
Beckett: *Waiting for  
Godot*. State Theatre  
Brno, premiered  
on 10 October 1970.  
Direction Alois Hajda.  
From left Josef Husník  
(Estragon), Josef Štefl  
(Lucky), Milan Vágner  
(Vladimir), Vladimír  
Dufek (Pozzo). Photo by  
Rafael Sedláček. Arts  
and Theatre Institute  
Archive, Prague.



the performance in her eloquently titled review “Godot behind the Glass.” Although Urbanová valued Otomar Krejča’s “immaculate work,”<sup>27</sup> her overall impression was as follows: “But this perfectly balanced scene is sealed within itself. It doesn’t appeal, it doesn’t provoke, it doesn’t invoke the viewer’s participation – it doesn’t need it. There is a glass wall between the auditorium and the stage. It is clear and thin – but it is cold. It is, however, very difficult to detect the gaps in such a performance, from where gusts of academic coldness penetrate the auditorium. After all, it is not good enough to accuse a director of directing too well, or of directing too much.”<sup>28</sup> The only positive message of the production, Alena Urbanová concludes her article, is that it might stimulate “young artists who want to do different theatre and revolt against academism.”<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup> URBANOVÁ, A. Godot za sklem [Godot behind the Glass]. In *Scéna*, 1992, Vol. 17, Issue 3, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



Samuel Beckett: *Endgame*. Theatre Comedy, premiered on 6 June 1996. Direction Jan Nebeský. From left David Prachař (Clow), Miloslav Mejzlík (Hamm). Photo archive of Bohdan Holomíček.

For Paul Trensky, the major problem of the production was Otomar Krejča's approach that "accentuated philosophical elements at the expense of comic substructure."<sup>30</sup> As a result, "the audience almost does not react to even the most comic parts. Not ones does there occur a spontaneous burst of laughter. (...) Deprived of comedy, Godot is impoverished not only dramatically, but also intellectually."<sup>31</sup>

Otomar Krejča, whose ties to the Czech environment had been disrupted during the 1970s and 1980s, at least from a theatrical point of view, and his production of *Godot* were an evidence of the interrupted context and discontinuity mentioned in the introduction. *The Waiting for Godot*, staged on a laser-like, aseptically clean stage illuminated by a blinding surgical white light that carved out the white circle in which the play unfolded, became in his performance in a sense a perfect, yet archival object, a museum piece detached from the spectator by an imagined glass. Krejča's production was summed up in the words of reviewer Dana Tučková, who wrote in her review of another 1990 production of Beckett's *Godot*: "Playing Beckett today in the Czech Republic is not, I think, difficult only because of the *interrupted continuity* (italics by the author) of philosophical thought – on the theatre and in general. The same problem is uncultivated modern acting, which requires, in addition to

<sup>30</sup> TRENSKY, P. Beckett a Ionesco [Beckett and Ionesco]. In *Svět a divadlo*, 1992, Vol. 2, Issue, 4, p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

the participation of the alert mind, the art of balancing between the grotesque and the tragic.”<sup>32</sup>

(4) Beckett’s other plays, such as *Endgame* and *Happy Days* appeared on the Czech stage for the first time belatedly in 1996 and 1997, almost 40 years from their world premieres.

### OUT OF CONTEXT: JAN NEBESKÝ’S *ENDGAME* AS A JOURNEY TO SALVATION

The director Jan Nebeský (1953) is a unique phenomenon of the Czech theatre of last four decades. Some reject his productions because of their eccentric evasiveness and certain impenetrable, non-communicative inwardness or closeness, which excludes rather than invites. Others respect and admire them for the very same reasons, finding in them a special, difficult to grasp message or revelation to which they feel invited to participate. Both viewpoints are relevant as Jan Nebeský’s work allows or even provokes them with its sense of paradoxical, hermetic porosity. As Marie Reslová wrote: “Nebeský’s productions are a complex, intuitive network of personal and literary inspirations and associations which are hard to understand.”<sup>33</sup> His productions are puzzles in both senses of the word – a riddle but also an inter-textual patchwork, which he interweaves from texts and other visual or material images, actions, objects, etc. His work – speaking in terms of visual art – is close to conceptualism: he approaches a theatre production as a specific art of installation, a ready-made to certain extent. Even though his productions are at times accused of egocentrism or self-centrism, he paradoxically and deliberately – as a conceptualist – dissociates, eliminates, silences himself from his work, leaving it open for a play of interpretations and associations.

This could be a possible link between him and Beckett, who also deliberately intended to obscure his presence in his work. The words of Jan Grossman, with which he expressed the position of the author’s subject in absurdist plays could belong to both: “(...) the author has ‘disappeared’ behind his story and his actors.”<sup>34</sup> The vacant space of the sublimated authorial subject leaves behind a crack that causes interpretive vertigo, an uncertainty that can be frightening, repulsive, and at the same time immensely appealing and challenging, like a revelation that is never a recipe. Beckett was in his plays quite uncompromising in this self-destructive strategy, leaving any message or revelation outside of his work.

What is far more significant, however, is that Jan Nebeský – even though he may share some strategies with the playwrights of the absurd – can hardly be included in Martin Esslin’s family of the theatre of the absurd. First, his theatre is not about the absence of meaning but about the rhizomatic plethora or surplus of meanings, which he provokes with the accentuated materiality of his performances. Second, Jan Nebeský’s theatre also seems to be an occasion for drastic inquiries, by means of

32 TUČKOVÁ, D. Tak jdeme? – Jdem [Shall we go? – Let’s go]. In *Svobodné slovo*, 1990, Vol. 46, Issue 119, 25 May 1990, p. 4.

33 RESLOVÁ, M. Mlčení Jana Nebeského [Silence of Jan Nebeský]. In *Svět a divadlo*, 1997, Vol. 8, Issue 4, p. 41.

34 GROSSMAN, J. *Mezi literaturou a divadlem II* [Between Literature and Theatre II], p. 1159.

which he challenges, interprets or dissects the selected textual material to address difficult issues. Nonetheless, despite the awareness of impermanence and under its pressure, he obsessively seeks to find or offer a message, a revelation, even though it might manifest, as it does, the very impermanence. The point is, however, that he articulates it and by doing so, he or his subject at times as a hidden messenger emerges in the difficult network of his work to offer more than an X-ray image of “modern humanity in a ‘state of crisis,’”<sup>35</sup> unlike the absurdist playwrights.<sup>36</sup>

To clarify this in practice: before *Endgame* Jan Nebeský had staged August Strindberg’s *The Ghost Sonata* (1995) which he interspersed with various textual fragments, including from William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, ancient Egyptian incantations, etc. This textual meandering, producing a textual matrix – for some undoubtedly a chaotic, auto-referential labyrinth with no beginning and end – climaxed at a certain point with the long citation from T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, part 3 from *East Coker* (see the motto of this essay), which reflected upon and recapitulated the existential journey painstakingly present in Strindberg’s variation. Through apparently foreign material Jan Nebeský presented himself and at the same time made himself absent while unsettling the structural and semantic coherence of both the play and the production.

The same applies to his 1994 *Hamlet* in which he literally took issue with the character of Hamlet, challenging him by textual fragments ranging from the ancient Greek tragedies to the writings of St. Thérèse of Lisieux or ancient Mesopotamian poetry. Nebeský’s *Hamlet* turned into a psychoanalytic dissection, or a Jungian exploration of the Hamlet’s situation rendered as the archetypal situation of a man who, through Hamlet’s mouth, addressed a fundamental ontological question to which he (Hamlet as well as Jan Nebeský) tried vehemently to find an answer. The production, which undermined the textual unity of William Shakespeare’s text, as well as Hamlet’s gender identity (Hamlet appeared in female clothing in some parts of the play) and in which the ghost of the murdered father spoke through the body of his son, was a performative act that stripped man down to his ontological essence. “Disjointed, loose and irrational,”<sup>37</sup> Nebeský’s stage meditations suggest that Beckett’s *Endgame* entered an utterly new context, significantly different from the 1960s and the early 1990s.

The most succinct way to characterize Nebeský’s approach to Beckett’s *Endgame* is to compare it to Theodor W. Adorno’s 1958 essay *Trying to Understand Endgame*. Nebeský quoted Adorno’s essay in the production booklet as its motto: “Nature, from which the imprisoned figures are cut off, would be as good as non-existent; what remains of it would only prolong the torment. No amount of weeping melts the armor; only that face remains on which the tears have dried up.”<sup>38</sup>

35 HVÍŽDALA, K. – HAVEL, V. *Disturbing the Peace*. New York: Knopf, 1990, p. 53.

36 Compare V. Havel’s account of the absurd theatre: “Absurd theatre does not offer us consolation or hope. It merely reminds us of how we are living: without hope. And that is the essence of its warning.” *Ibid.*, p. 54.

37 LUKEŠ, M. Houby, nebo houba Hamlet? [Sponges or a Sponge Hamlet?]. In *Divadelní noviny*, 1994, Vol. 3, Issue 21, p. 5.

38 ADORNO, T. W. *Trying to Understand Endgame*. In *New German Critique*, 1982, Vol. 10, Issue 26, pp. 123, 126.



Samuel Beckett: *Endgame*. Theatre Comedy, premiered on 6 June 1996. Direction Jan Nebeský. Miloslav Mejzlík (Hamm) and David Prachař (Clov). Photo by Bohdan Holomíček. Arts and Theatre Institute Archive, Prague.

The production booklet could function in a way as the above-mentioned strategy by means of which Nebeský navigated both himself and the spectator through his production; however, this navigation was rather non-instrumental and scattered, quoting fragments from the Bible, Dante, William Shakespeare, Arnold Geulinx or Simone Weil.

Unlike the program or previous productions or many others in the future, Nebeský did not add almost no extra-textual piece to Beckett's play: "Unlike in his previous productions, director Jan Nebeský does not indulge in eccentric variations and sticks quite faithfully to both the text and the 'natural reading' of Beckett's text."<sup>39</sup> The disintegrated, deformed world of the *Endgame*, presented as a ready-made installation in motion, seemed to be self-sufficient. Nebeský focused on the theatrical accentuation of Beckett's "post-mortem examination."<sup>40</sup> The bare interior with the audience trapped with the actors on the stage became a hermetic, sterile chamber with white walls and brownish linoleum on the floor, next to which was a darkened auditorium with empty seats: "The viewer doesn't know what kind of world he is watching. He is sitting on a stage. In front of him is a white, as if closed room with one ordinary lamp that illuminates everything. To the right, the stage is open to

<sup>39</sup> MIKULKA, V. Beckettovské vypouštění umyvadla se špinavou vodou [Beckettian Draining a Sink of Dirty Water]. In *Telegraf*, 1996, Vol. 5, Issue 138, p. 11, 13 June 1996.

<sup>40</sup> ADORNO, T. W. Trying to Understand *Endgame*, p. 136.



Samuel Beckett: *Endgame*. Theatre Comedy, premiered on 6 June 1996. Direction Jan Nebeský. From left David Prachař (Clov), Miloslav Mejzlík (Hamm). Photo by Bohdan Holomíček. Arts and Theatre Institute Archive, Prague.

a deserted auditorium. The unpleasant emptiness assaults the spectator and keeps him throughout the play in an uncomfortable, suffocating atmosphere.”<sup>41</sup> Except for a phone, which never rang, a grapnel and a chair, there was virtually nothing on the stage. Hamm and Clov, human remains, wrapped in bandages like Egyptian mummies,<sup>42</sup> faces smeared with red as if they were open wounds, burns or rashes, flaking chunks of flesh after a nuclear disaster. Clov mechanically crossed the room in an awkward, limp manner, Hamm with his legs covered in the bandage as if in the cocoon imprisoned to the chair, Nag and Nell buried underneath the floor, in the pit, only their heads appear as they speak. *Endgame* pours itself out not as a process which is progressing towards the end, but as “the phase of completed reification of the world, which leaves no remainder of what was not made by humans; it is permanent catastrophe.”<sup>43</sup> The sarcophagus room, phone, grapnel, human, wall, plush

<sup>41</sup> HULEC, V. V Divadle Komédie se existencialisticky čaruje [Existentialist Magic at the Comedy Theatre]. In *Mladá fronta*, 1996, Vol. 7, Issue 138, p. 19, 13 June 1996.

<sup>42</sup> David Prachař, who played Clov, mentioned in an interview that director Nebeský “came up with a book about mummies and photographs of human remains found buried in the mud somewhere,” which inspired the characters. Two of the photographs were reprinted in the production program. See RESLOVÁ, M. Divadlo je podezřelá činnost: rozhovor s Davidem Prachařem [Theatre is an Obscure Activity: Interview with David Prachař]. In *Svět a divadlo*, 1996, Vol. 7, Issue 3, p. 34.

<sup>43</sup> ADORNO, T. W. Trying to Understand *Endgame*, pp. 122–123.



Samuel Beckett: *Endgame*. Theatre Comedy, premiered on 6 June 1996. Direction Jan Nebeský. From left David Prachař (Clov), Miloslav Mejzlík (Hamm). Photo by Bohdan Holomíček. Arts and Theatre Institute Archive, Prague.

dog – all are the same, without hierarchy, “a pile of ruins”<sup>44</sup> intimidating with its geometric precision.

At the very end of the production, however, the precise flow of Beckett’s play was interrupted by an extraneous textual fragment. As if Nebeský had returned to the previous production of *Ghost Sonata*, namely the monologue from Eliot’s *East Coker* which spoke, among other things, about “the faith and the love and the hope in the waiting.”<sup>45</sup> In *Endgame*, Clov dressed and prepared to depart, cleansed his bloodied face with the sheet he then wrapped around his waist as a skirt. Subsequently, he started his final monologue with the words from *Song of Solomon*, pronounced apparently by a woman (the gender is explicitly expressed in Czech):

- 1 All night long on my bed  
I looked for the one my heart loves;  
I looked for him but did not find him.
- 2 I will get up now and go about the city,  
through its streets and squares;  
I will search for the one my heart loves.  
So I looked for him but did not find him.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>45</sup> ELIOT, T. S. *Four Quartets*, p. 183.



Samuel Beckett: *Endgame*. Theatre Comedy, premiered on 6 June 1996. Direction Jan Nebeský. From left David Prachař (Clov), Miloslav Mejzlík (Hamm). Photo by Bohdan Holomíček. Arts and Theatre Institute Archive, Prague.

**3** The watchmen found me  
as they made their rounds in the city.  
“Have you seen the one my heart loves?”  
**4** Scarcely had I passed them  
when I found the one my heart loves.<sup>46</sup>

Clov then continued smoothly without interruption with Beckett’s lines: “They said to me, that’s love, yes, yes, not a doubt, now you see how – How easy it is. They said to me, That’s friendship, yes, yes, no question, you’ve found it...”<sup>47</sup> The biblical citation, which interestingly and organically communicated with Beckett’s text, came like a sunbeam which pierced through and flooded the Beckett’s world of unidentified catastrophe as a merciful gift of possible metaphysical suspension or postponement of the end in divine permanence. As if the production, unobtrusively and non-instrumentally, was about this very revelation, painfully carved out of Beckett. As if at the very end, Nebeský inverted Eliot’s words from the opening of *East Coker*, “in my beginning is my end,” into “in my end is my beginning” turning Beckett’s terrifying vision of the end of man into a meditation or phenomenological exploration of

<sup>46</sup> *Song of Solomon* (3:1). Bible – New International Version. [online]. [cit. 14 April 2024]. Available at: <https://biblehub.com/niv/songs/3.htm>.

<sup>47</sup> BECKETT, S. *Endgame*. New York: Grove Press, 1958, p. 80.





Samuel Beckett: *Endgame*. Theatre Comedy, premiered on 6 June 1996. Direction Jan Nebeský. From left David Prachař (Clov), Miloslav Mejzlík (Hamm). Photo by Bohdan Holomíček. Arts and Theatre Institute Archive, Prague.

the possibility of salvation staged on the last remnants of humanity. As if beyond or in the pile of ruins, there was still an uneasy reconciliation or grace. Beckett's *Endgame* thus became, in the hands of Nebeský, not a drastic vision of hopelessness and despair, but a painful mystical journey towards salvation.

## CONCLUSION

Samuel Beckett wrote his play *Endgame* in 1957 in French. Soon after, it was translated from French into Czech by the poet Jiří Kolář who published it in the journal *Světová literatura* in 1963. Unlike *Waiting for Godot*, which was staged several times between 1964 and 1970 on smaller and larger Czech stages, *Endgame* had to wait until 1996 for its Czech premiere. Beckett's text was taken up by the Czech director Jan Nebeský. Nebeský's production was thus created with a significant time gap from the period of the text's creation, as well as from the period in which plays by so-called absurdist playwrights were a literary and theatrical movement and a fashionable, albeit alternative phenomenon. In this sense, Nebeský's *Endgame* was created out of its context while opening new contexts. The production was part of a larger whole, a mystical trilogy in which the director and his team explored man's complex journey to God or salvation through the physical, performative act of sacrifice. With his radical recontextualisation of *Endgame*, Nebeský was exploring what could be called Beckett's negative or apophatic theology. Guided by a reading of Theodor

W. Adorno's essay on Beckett's play and with the help of biblical references (*Song of Solomon*), Nebeský was discovering hidden places in Beckett's text. In the present essay, I intended to trace two lines related to Nebeský's recontextualization of *Endgame*. The first examined the historical context of the staging of Beckett's plays in the Czech environment before 1996, including its absence during the period of the so-called normalization (1970s and 1980s), as well as the early post-revolutionary attempts at the rehabilitation of a lost, interrupted tradition to which Nebeský's staging implicitly responded, or rather, entirely ignored it. The second line, then, traced the production itself in the context of Nebeský's poetics, which occurs in a complex internal dialogue between the director and himself to which the audience is invited as silent witnesses of his personal meditation.

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