...The World According to Samuel Beckett...

Samuel Beckett was a poet, critic, novelist, short fiction writer, critic, translator, and dramatist who wrote both in French and English. Classes will focus on his dramatic work via three full length and four short plays. Plays will be considered in reverse chronological order. Beckett’s short plays (Catastrophe, Not I, Footfalls, Play) will be shown in their entirety during classes 1, 2, and 3. Since only excerpts from Happy Days, Endgame, and Waiting for Godot, can be shown (in classes 4, 5, and 6) students are encouraged to read those plays beforehand. The Complete Dramatic Works of Samuel Beckett is available both in paperback and on Kindle and full performances of his long plays are available on YouTube. Also recommended: James Knowlson’s biography of Samuel Beckett, Damned to Fame, Bloomsbury, 2014 (available in paperback and on Kindle).

Class 1: Introduction to Beckett’s life, works, aesthetics and the nature of his revolutionary drama. Since all of the plays viewed in class were converted from stage to film the differences between the two genres will be noted and opposing views by film director Anthony Minghella and reviewer Tom McGurk considered. Class will view Catastrophe, a six minute film version of Beckett’s play. Directed by David Mamet with Harold Pinter and John Gielgud in leading roles, this brief but complex work is perfect for introducing Beckett’s stage, characters, and dramatic strategy. Catastrophe was written in 1982 in support of Czech dissident Vaclav Havel and political versus universal applications will be considered.

Class 2: Place, time, and tempo are three variables that Beckett carefully adjusts for each of his unique stages. Class will view two short contrasting plays: Not I (with Julianne Moore) and Footfalls (with Susan Fitzgerald and Joan O’Hara). Beckett’s relationship to both realistic and absurdist drama will be considered—with Krapp’s Last Tape discussed briefly as the polar opposite to Not I. Beckett will be contrasted with a number of contemporary dramatists, notably Genet, Ionesco, and Pinter.

Class 3: Questions and comments from participants are welcome as always. Continued discussion of Beckett’s experimentation with “the stage” through use of place, time, tempo, set, and allusion to create dramatic metaphors. Although Beckett denied that his work was biographical, his friend, artist Bram Van Velde, said “Beckett never wrote anything he had not lived.” Oblique, but interesting connections between Beckett’s life and his plays will be pointed out. Class will view Beckett’s witty, disturbing (personal?) presentation of “the eternal triangle” via Play (with Alan Rickman, Kristin Scott Thomas, and Juliet Stevenson).

Class 4: Beckett was a champion boxer and cricket player, as well as a diver, tennis player, and motorcycle club daredevil. He was also an avid chess player, classical pianist, and art enthusiast. Consideration of how such diverse and intense experience converge in his plays. Viewing of excerpts from several productions of Happy Days. Discussion will include Beckett’s rejection of naturalism and his attitude towards “meaning.”

Class 5: Viewing of excerpts from Endgame (with Michael Gambon as Hamm and David Thewlis as Clov). Endgame was Beckett’s favorite play and many consider it his best. Is there a connection here to the protracted sickness and death of his brother, Frank? Continued discussion of the highly original strategies Beckett employs to transform individual experience into universal drama. Critics like Jan Kott and Marjorie Garber compare Endgame with Hamlet and King Lear. Instructor will explore those undeniable connections, but argue that Beckett’s favorite dramatist Racine had more structural influence on his plays than Shakespeare.

Class 6: Viewing of excerpts from the 1961 TV version of Waiting for Godot with Zero Mostel, Burgess Meredith, Kurt Kasner, and Alvin Epstein (compared with brief excerpts from the Beckett on Film production). Connection between Godot and Beckett’s experience in the French resistance. Discussion of the history of the revolutionary play that catapulted Beckett towards a Nobel Prize for literature in 1962.

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