

## To Go Down Singing: Stage Directions and Presence in Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*

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### *Abstract*

Do we have the liberty to do what we want to with Beckett's texts? Perhaps the answer is yes—the text, after all, will still be there in its original glory after all its different productions are long forgotten. Nevertheless, I would argue that Beckett limits our freedom to create our own version of the play, and that for instance *Happy Days* is a work of art where theatrical space and objects, movements and sounds, as defined by Beckett, are as important as the play's verbal language. Only when these limitations are respected, I suggest, can we, as spectators, really benefit from the play. My comparison between Winnie in *Happy Days* and another literary figure, Mary Poppins, underlines the strangeness of the everyday objects in Winnie's bag, and gives the seemingly everyday objects of Beckett's stage directions a magical aura, and shows how vital stage directions in the text and on stage is to the readers' and spectators' experience of Beckett's play.

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Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*<sup>1</sup> opens with lengthy stage directions, which present Winnie, one of the two characters of the play stuck in a mound of earth in the centre of the stage.

Expanse of scorched grass rising centre to low mound. Gentle slopes down to front and either side of stage. Back an abrupt fall to stage level. Maximum of simplicity and symmetry.

Blazing light.

Very pompier trompe-l'oeil backcloth to represent unbroken plain and sky receding to meet in far distance.

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<sup>1</sup> *Happy Days* is a play in two acts, originally written in English, completed in 1961 and translated into French by the author in 1962. The first production was at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York in 1961.

Embedded up to above her waist in exact centre of mound, WINNIE. About fifty, well-preserved, blonde for preference, plump, arms and shoulders bare, low bodice, big bosom, pearl necklace. She is discovered sleeping, her arms on the ground before her, her head on her arms. Beside her on ground to her left a capacious black bag, shopping variety, and to her right a collapsible collapsed parasol, beak of handle emerging from sheath[...] (16).<sup>2</sup>

In the first act, when only Winnie's arms are free, the mound permits her very little movement. In the second act, when she is buried up to the neck, she cannot move at all. Much of the text of *Happy Days* consists of different kinds of stage directions. Gestures, objects, sounds and light, Winnie's pauses and silences all combine with her words and the song from *The Merry Widow* to create an immediate impact on readers and spectators alike.

The experience of a text is, of course, very different from that of a performance, but both readers and spectators can have a bodily and emotional experience, which I will call an experience of presence. The nature of the theatrical text is dual, in that it can function either as a book addressed to a reader, or as a script that will disappear in the staging of the play, in the here and now. While readers conjure up images in their imagination, spectators will experience the impact of what they see on stage. Whether or not they are integrated into the performance, the stage directions form a part of the literary text. In recent years, however, there

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<sup>2</sup> Etendue d'herbe brûlée s'enflant au centre en petit mamelon. Pentes douces à gauche et à droite et côté avant-scène. Derrière, une chute plus abrupte au niveau de la scène. Maximum de simplicité et de symétrie.

Lumière aveuglante.

Une toile de fond en trompe-l'oeil très pompier représente la fuite et la rencontre au loin d'un ciel sans nuages et d'une plaine dénudée.

Enterrée jusqu'au-dessus de la taille dans le mamelon, au centre précis de celui-ci, WINNIE. La cinquantaine, de beaux restes, blonde de préférence, grassouillette, bras et épaules nus, corsage très décolleté, poitrine plantureuse, collier de perles.

Samuel Beckett. 1978. *Happy Days. A Bilingual Edition with an Afterword and Notes by James Knowlson*. London: Faber and Faber, pp. 17.

All subsequent quotations from *Happy Days* are from this edition.

has been a tendency to regard stage directions as actively obstructing creative stagings.

*Can we do what we like with Beckett's text?*

When I first read *Happy Days*, as a student I did not understand much of it. But later, when I realised what Winnie was experiencing, perpetually confronted as she is with the possibility of her own annihilation, my relationship to her became almost physical. She became a part of my life, alongside other literary characters created by great authors. My particular interest in the stage directions of the play arose from a Norwegian Television production of the play. Norwegians have a long tradition of mimetic theatre inspired by Ibsen, where each scene is deemed to convey a recognizable reality, and where we are supposed to look into the lives of real people. In this televised version, the spectators were presented with a beach complete with high reeds and with a young Winnie stuck in a sand dune, which looked like it could have been transported from one of the beaches in the south east of Norway. Instead of focusing on Winnie's discomfort, this staging of the play allowed for the spectators' minds to drift away and indulge in topographic musings. A subsequent staging, at the Trøndelag Teater in Trondheim, featured five different Winnies, of different shapes and ages, their bodies, and later on, their heads, protruding from a large cardboard mound. At least in this production, the director was not trying to place her Winnie in a realistic landscape. But here the audience was nevertheless distracted by the huge construction, by all the different bodies and faces and by the varying talents of the five actresses.

Do we have the liberty to do what we want to with Beckett's text? Perhaps the answer is yes – the text, after all, will still be there in its original glory after all its different productions are long forgotten. In the meantime, directors will set aside original stage directions in the interest of creating something new, actors will tend to improvise, and the spectators will dream their own dreams. Nevertheless, I would argue that Beckett limits our freedom to create our own version of the play, and that *Happy Days* is a work of art where theatrical space and objects, movements and sounds, as defined by Beckett, are as important as the

play's verbal language. Only when these limitations are respected, I suggest, can we, as spectators, really benefit from the play.

According to Fintan O'Toole's review of a 2008 production of *Happy Days* featured in *The Irish Times*, the kind of respect both producer and actor accorded to the play exploited "the possible rewards of confinement".<sup>3</sup> Despite this, O'Toole underlined the need for new productions of the play to be creative. This particular production, which "banishe[d] any romance that a fictional wasteland might have,"<sup>4</sup> is lauded for its complexity – in stark contrast, he says, to Beckett text's "own demand for simplicity and symmetry." However, I suggest that the assumption that Beckett's stage directions demand "simplicity" are misguided, a point I will illustrate later with reference to the ambiguities inherent in his directions for the design of the stage backcloth.

O'Toole mentions that Deborah Warner, the director of this particular production of *Happy Days* and the actress, Fiona Shaw had a disagreement with the Beckett estate over the 1994 production of *Footfalls*: "[...] because it departed too radically from [Beckett's] text and stage directions". For O'Toole, their production of *Happy Days* is a half-way house:

[...] a fruitful compromise between, on the one hand, the Beckett estate, and its genuine need to safeguard a great writer's legacy and, on the other, the need of the theatre artist like Shaw and Warner to be creators rather than mere interpreters. The point is not that there is no tension between one imperative and the other but that the tension can be, as it is here, genuinely creative.<sup>5</sup>

Beckett's original set makes us focus on Winnie, just as this production seems to have done.<sup>6</sup> Beckett considered Winnie's role to be a very

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<sup>3</sup> Fintan O'Toole. 11.10.2008. "Revealing new details in a stunning production of "Happy Days" ", *Irish Times*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/2008season/happy-days.html>

difficult one.. “[...] without adequate actress it hasn’t a hope in hell”.<sup>7</sup> But Winnie is so important to O’Toole that he completely forgets about Willie, and ends of presenting this production as more of a soliloquy than as the thwarted dialogue of a couple – and, this, in itself, represents a radically different take on the play. However, Willie cannot be discounted – his function as Winnie’s (and our) mirror is indispensable to the experience of the play.

*“Pompier”, a laughable earnest bad imitation*

In her discussion of Beckett’s reworking of his plays, Rosemary Poutney remarks that he “customarily moves from a concrete approach to a subject in the early drafts of a play, towards a more abstract and ambiguous expression”, describing this “vaguening” as “an integral part of his dramatic vision”.<sup>8</sup> In other words, as the stage directions go through the different stages of Beckett’s writing process, they, like the subject of the play itself, become vaguer and thus, more ambiguous.

In *Happy Days* there is a tension between the realism of the dry grass on the earth mound, and Beckett’s insistence that the set of *Happy Days* should be characterised by a lack of authenticity. The unbroken plain and the sky receding into the far distance could well have suggested a natural landscape, but since the backcloth is garishly painted, “[v]ery pompier trompe-l’oeil”, the scene is obviously not supposed to create the illusion of a real space. The backcloth could also well have conveyed a feeling of infinite space to the audience, but it reminds us that we are, in fact, in a theatre. The scene also recalls the make-believe and the realism typical of backgrounds of early twentieth century photographs and their representation of happy days.

The backcloth – “very pompier” – is obviously pointing to itself as a painting and connoting a certain cultural setting. The word “pompier”, associated with bad taste, also recalls a certain style of painting favoured

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<sup>7</sup> Letter to Alan Schneider. 13.07.1961. In: Maurice Harmon, ed. 1998. *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press p.85.

<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Pountney. 1988. *Theatre of Shadows: Samuel Beckett’s Drama 1956-1976*. Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, p.xi.

by the French bourgeoisie at the end of the nineteenth century. Like the classic “trompe-l’oeil” painting, it is a form of “make-believe”. “What should characterise whole [sic] scene, sky and earth”, Beckett wrote, “is a pathetic unsuccessful realism, the kind of tawdriness you get in a 3rd rate musical or pantomime, *that* quality of *pompier*, laughable earnest bad imitation”.<sup>9</sup> This kind of tawdriness evokes an unsuccessful effort to make something appear beautiful, which results in the creation of a ridiculous sham-like production. Beckett’s focus on the earnestness of the effort suggests, however, that someone has done his or her best, even if that best is laughable. This in itself recalls Winnie’s earnest, but often comical efforts to stave off her panic, when trapped in the mound with very little to hold on to. We are talking here of a 3<sup>rd</sup> rate set, which looks as if someone has rather helplessly tried to get a certain effect without succeeding, and the result is so “bad” that it is funny. The words “very pompier” ensure that Winnie is provided with a background that corresponds with “the beautiful restes” of her still voluptuous body. Her blonde hair, her plumpness, her big bosom and the way she is dressed, with “arms and shoulders bare”, together make a play on her sexuality and suggest a certain vulgarity, which again is in keeping with the “very pompier trompe-l’oeil” backcloth.

Winnie is a middle aged lady who has seen her best days but is nevertheless “well preserved”. In the French version, Beckett translates this as “de beaux restes”, beautiful remains, which is perhaps a rather harsher description. But Winnie is well preserved, perhaps even attractive. But she has nobody on stage to seduce because her husband, Willie, who is in the hole behind the mound, rarely responds to her repeated efforts to attract his attention. She is, however, entirely dependent on him for the purposes of carrying on her conversation.

*Presence as a meaningful concept?*

In post-structuralism, the key concept of presence refers back to the most fundamental fallacy in our Western tradition of rationality; namely that

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<sup>9</sup> Letter to Alan Schneider. 17.08 1961. In: Maurice Harmon. *Op.cit.*, p.94.

knowledge is the unmediated presence of meaning to our consciousness. Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body-subject, which I will draw on in my discussion of presence, asserts that the concrete interpretation of the world has an experience of a bodily presence as its foundation<sup>10</sup>. The concept of bodily presence is not used here to describe a return to nature, but to erase the line between body and mind, movement and concept, natural and artificial signs. When concepts like "presence", "event", "now" and "il-y-a" appear in the writings of Jacques Derrida or Hélène Cixous, they refer to an intersection between body and understanding, between being concretely situated and being bound by the chains of interpretation. As such, these concepts challenge the post-modern relativism that has been formed through the linguistic web of discourse. This concept endeavours to thematise and explore the concept of presence without replacing the insights post-modernism has provided us.

The idea of a non-metaphysical presence is, as we have seen, related to the reflection about the relationship between the body and the formation of meaning. The concept of the "body-subject" positions subjectivity outside of the abstract consciousness, and thus refers to an alternative concept of presence which is related to our experience of our bodies, of our perceptions, movements and desires. This concept of presence is useful for understanding how the "effects of presence" function in literature, or, in other words, how literature as text can simulate experiences that the reader perceives as physical, perceptible and emotional. This interplay between text and reader partly functions in such a way as to make the reader experience the text in a physical way.

In theatre criticism, where presence is also a central concept, it has been used to convey the whole of the aesthetical experience.<sup>11</sup> One way of using this concept, following on from Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, would be to view the impact of the play in terms of two elements which come into play simultaneously. On one hand, the play affects our senses directly as a "presence", and on the other hand, as readers or spectators, we also respond to it with the interpretative action of producing meaning.

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<sup>10</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty [1945] 1976. *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard.

<sup>11</sup> Cormack Power. 2008. *Presence in Play. A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre*, Amsterdam: Rodopi.

In his book *Production of Presence. What meaning cannot convey* (2004) Gumbrecht describes how the effect of an aesthetical object on an audience oscillates between the production of presence and the production of meaning. The production of presence speaks directly to our senses, to our bodies, implying a sensibility to what we experience, and this experience is immediate. At the same time, as readers and spectators, we tend to impose coherence and to look for meaning.

Is Gumbrecht's understanding of "presence" useful for a discussion of the stage directions of *Happy Days*? What I think is important in theatre are the ways in which an aesthetical experience can speak to our bodies, our unconscious and our imagination, and the fact that the production of meaning goes on at different levels and thus also participates in the experience of presence. So my definition of presence would be the immediate experience and impact of characters, words and objects on the spectator or reader, to which the production of meaning contributes. Beckett's own words with respect to *Not I* may help elucidate what I mean by this: "I am not unduly concerned with intelligibility. I hope the piece may work on the nerves of the audience not on its intellect".<sup>12</sup> This "work on the nerves of the audience" is close to what I mean with the word "presence". In the case of *Happy Days*, then, the stage directions in *Happy Days* participate in creating my experience of presence.

Beckett's opening stage directions enable us as readers to learn a lot about Winnie and her situation, but, when the curtain goes up, we as spectators are surprised, even bewildered, by the woman in the mound. All actors on a stage create a "presence", a sensory impact on the audience, and this is particularly so with Winnie in that she is only half visible in the first act and is left with only her head above ground in the second. Her husband is also mostly invisible, lying, as he is, behind the mound, but as soon as we realize that he is Winnie's interlocutor, he too has a presence. The fact that she can speak and thus keep panic at bay, depends on his presence, on the fact that he is there and can hear her. We

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<sup>12</sup> Martha Fehsenfeld, "From the Perspective of an Actress/Critic Rehearsal Diary of the 1979 Royal Court Theatre, London production". In: Katherine H. Burkman, ed. 1987. *Myth and Ritual in the plays of Samuel Beckett*, London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, p.54.



imagine him as being complementary to Winnie as his name, Willie (which also hints at the sexual relationship between them) suggests .

Winnie, fighting for her sanity and trying to survive, keeps repeating that she is happy. It is as if her verbal confirmation of happiness can itself serve to create and maintain a sense of happiness. This is a magical use of words: whatever you say, will come to pass. Hers is a play of hide-and-seek, she is both happy and anxious. It is impossible for the audience to know exactly how much Winnie understands of what is happening to her. She certainly does not ask many questions. When she sinks into the ground, and in the second act becomes completely helpless with only her head above the ground, her predicament is still not explained.

In her *Rehearsal Diary* which refers to the 1979 London production of *Happy Days* (which Beckett was involved in), Martha Fehsenfeld quotes the man himself: “Strangeness”, Beckett informs us, “was the necessary condition of the play – of Winnie’s plight in the play.”<sup>13</sup> Beckett is also quoted in the context of other rehearsals which took place in Berlin: “In this play you have the combination of the strange and the practical, the mysterious and the factual. This is the crux of both the comedy and the tragedy in it”.<sup>14</sup> Any effort to render Winnie’s situation less mysterious and more realistic is, I argue, misjudged. “Strange thing”, Winnie says about her fragments of memories, “time like this, drifts up into the mind. (Pause.) Strange? (Pause.) No, here all is strange” (56).

*Time as eternal present, loop or degradation*

In the beginning of the play half of Winnie’s body is protected by the mound; the rest of it is tortured by the burning light. Winnie’s apparently happy words stand in stark contrast to the situation she is in. She is trapped in a mound and controlled by a bell, an unexplained external

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Alfred Hübner. 1976. *Samuel Beckett inszeniert Glückliche Tage, Probenprotokoll*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag. Quoted by: Martha Fehsenfeld, “From the Perspective of an Actress/Critic: *Ritual Patterns in Beckett’s Happy Days*. *Op.cit.*, p.54.

force, which rings to indicate that she is allowed to sleep and then again to indicate that she must wake up again. The bell also prevents her from closing her eyes when she is not supposed to. Apart from conveying an increasing sense of general degradation, her situation recalls Dante's descriptions of Hell. Winnie seems stuck in an eternal present in a hellish heat, while she is trying to convince herself that she is experiencing "another happy day" (24). But there is a lot more going on in the play than the presentation of Winnie's eternal present. While the shadows of Hell do not change, Winnie's life is characterised by a slow and painful degradation which must at one point end in death.

The stage directions are focused on the pauses and silences in Winnie's speech, pauses that confront the audience with linear time passing, albeit very slowly. Time is indeed passing. At the start of Act I she takes a last sip of medicine before throwing away her red medicine bottle, her toothbrush has hardly any hairs left, and her lipstick is "[...] running out" (24), even her pearl necklace is described by Beckett as being "more thread than pearls".<sup>15</sup> And there are surprises to come. The revolver which is brought out of the bag is not an everyday item, like the other items in the bag – it speaks to her and to us of death and the end of suffering – and when a live ant complete with an egg crosses Winnie's universe, she screams with delight at this sign of life: "An emmet!" (40). This is a small, but not insignificant indication that life goes on independently of her.

Between the first and the second acts, Winnie is engulfed in the mound. In the drawings Beckett produced to explain the stage directions, it is clear that the mound itself has not changed, it is only that Winnie has disappeared into it.<sup>16</sup> While this is of course a forceful image of slow and painful death, the drawings show that the mound with Winnie's small head on top is supposed to resemble a breast with a nipple.<sup>17</sup> Mother Earth will soon be ready to swallow the whole of her. As in classical theatre, time moves on between acts, but whereas in classical plays, the new act will update audiences of the often gruesome events which have taken place during the interval, in the case of *Happy Days*, we do not

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Pountney. *Op.cit.*, p.185.

<sup>16</sup> Letter to Alan Schneider. 13.07.1961. *Op.cit.*, pp.86-88.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

find out why this has happened to Winnie, or how much time that has passed in between.

She is the same Winnie in the two acts, but her body is changing. The stage directions as well as her own words indicate that her gums are bleeding and that her eyesight is increasingly affected. The blazing light is translated by Beckett as “Lumière aveuglante”, “blinding light” in French, which means that it is not only hot, it is the kind of light which makes it difficult to keep one’s eyes open. Actually, Winnie says that she’s going blind. Is the light preventing her from seeing something that she is not supposed to see, or is there something that she does not want to see?

Even if indications of time passing belong to a vocabulary that no longer makes sense, she does think of a future that could lead to the oblivion of the present she is experiencing: “And should one day the earth cover my breasts, then I shall never have seen my breasts, no one ever seen my breasts” (50). This future might also release her: “[...] the happy day to come when flesh melts at so many degrees and the night of the moon has so many hundred hours” (28).

Winnie also opens up new spacio-temporal zones for the audience, when she quotes bits and pieces of her classics, from Aristotle, the Bible, Shakespeare and the Enlightenment with Milton, alongside fragments from her own more recent past and a childhood that could be her own. But the even more fragmentary state of her memories points to the fact that she is losing whatever the past contained for her.

Another way in which the relation to time is problematised in the play is by means of the strange contrast between time passing and time standing still. Winnie has periods when she sleeps and other periods when she is awake. Winnie can only go through her routine once in between her periods of sleep, so she must take care to make it last. We understand that hers are repetitive actions, that Winnie is doing the same things over and over again to make time pass. And when the parasol burns up, it is back again in its original form in the second act. Both the stage directions and Winnie’s words confront us with a painful way of living time, time passes in a loop, every action is repeated – as time slowly moves on.

The play is actually confronting us with a very complex presentation of the axis of time and space. The five different Winnies on the stage at Trøndelag Teater, whom I have already mentioned, all of different ages

and different shapes, gave the curious impression of a life span, and at the same time of nothing happening. If the production wanted to present Winnie's life as a still life, it succeeded, but the point is, as I have shown, that her life evolves, and for the worst.

*Who could cope with that and go down singing*

In an interview with Brenda Bruce, Beckett elaborates on Winnie's situation as follows:

Well I thought that the most dreadful thing that could happen to anybody, would be not to be allowed to sleep so that just as you're dropping off there's a "Dong" and you'd have to keep awake; you're sinking into the ground alive and it's full of ants; and the sun is shining endlessly day and night and there's not a tree... there's no shade nothing, and that bell wakes you up all the time and all you've got is a little parcel of things to see you through life.<sup>18</sup>

Beckett seems to be exploring the worst possible situation any human being could find himself in, namely to be stuck with next to nothing to "see you through life". He follows on: "And I thought who would cope with that and go down singing, only a woman".<sup>19</sup> In a benevolent, ironic way Beckett is painting the portrait of a heroine who is confronted with "the most dreadful thing that could happen to anybody", and whom we must respect for her courage. But I cannot help thinking that Beckett's exploration of Winnie's reactions to the torture inflicted on her, resembles the child's testing out of the reactions of an insect which has its body torn apart, limb by limb.

When Winnie goes through her daily ceremonious routines, while the backcloth points to the irreality of the fiction and the reality of the theatre, her bag and the objects inside it are elements that we recognise from our daily life, which contribute to conveying Winnie as a fellow human being. She starts the day with her morning rituals, just as we do. We can recognise Winnie's routine handling of the objects in her bag as

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Brenda Bruce. 7.04.1994. In: James Knowlson, 1996. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*. London: Bloomsbury, p.501.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

she gets them out, just as we can recognise her as a middle-aged woman. But there is a discrepancy between the apparent realism of these objects and her strange situation, and the bag's contents seem to be one of the conditions of her survival, as is the presence of Willie.

Winnie manipulates her bag and her things just as she manipulates her words. In his interpretations of dreams, Freud establishes an association between a woman's bag and her sexual organs. We could say that a woman's bag emphasises her femininity. Fictional female characters, such as the Moumin mother and Mary Poppins have demonstrated the significance of the figure of the bag. I suggest that a comparison of Beckett's Winnie to Travers' Mary Poppins with reference to the use of the bag figure, can enhance our experience of presence.<sup>20</sup>

Winnie and her big bag, by a funny coincidence, becomes a strange inversion of Mary Poppins, a well-known figure of children's fiction. Beckett's description of the play as "the combination of the strange and the practical, the mysterious and the factual"<sup>21</sup> could well be a description of both texts. To the children she is looking after, Mary Poppins is "[r]ather like a wooden Dutch doll",<sup>22</sup> which makes her very different from Winnie. She is also younger and far from vulgar. But they both seem timeless, though in different ways, Mary Poppins remains unchanged while the children she is looking after, grow up, Winnie changes only imperceptibly in a setting that does not change.

<sup>20</sup> Knowlson and Pilling have a passage in their book *Frescoes of the Skull* about the similarities they find between Robinson Crusoe and Winnie: Several features of this bleak world seem to have been inspired by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. [...] In the finished play, Winnie prays to God (in the first act) and shades herself from the fierce heat of the sun [...] She also utilizes her possessions with a resourcefulness, economy and care that is worthy of Defoe's frugal hero. Moreover, Winnie's frequent recourse to the phrase "great mercies" or "tender mercies" echoes Crusoe's own expressions of pious gratitude [...]

James Knowlson, John Pilling. 1979. *Frescoes of the Skull. The Later Prose and Dramas of Samuel Beckett*. London: John Calder, pp.94-95.

<sup>21</sup> Alfred Hübner. 1976. *Samuel Beckett inszeniert Glückliche Tage, Probenprotokoll von Alfred Hübner*. *Op.cit.*

<sup>22</sup> P.L.Travers. 1947. *Mary Poppins*. London: The Albatross, p.14.

Mary Poppins has a big bag which contains all the objects which she needs for her daily life as a nanny, and to the children the bag seems bottomless. Winnie hopes that her bag contains unknown treasures: “The depths in particular, who knows what treasures” (44). At first Mary Poppins’ bag appears to be empty, but she nevertheless removes a whole range of objects from it:

[...] a starched white apron [...] a large cake of Sunlight Soap, a tooth-brush, a packet of hairpins, a bottle of scent, a small folding arm-chair and a box of throat-lozenges [...] a large bottle.<sup>23</sup>

The contents of Mary Poppins’ bag do not bear the marks of time passing, while, by contrast, Winnie’s toothbrush is, as we have seen, loosing its hairs, and she empties her red medicine bottle and throws it away. Mary Poppins’ medicine bottle is filled with “a dark crimson fluid”<sup>24</sup> which never runs out. As she continues to unpack her bag, she finds: “[...] seven flannel night-gowns, four cotton ones, a pair of boots, a set of dominos, two bathing-caps and a postcard-album”.<sup>25</sup> The interest for postcards is something she has in common with Willie, though her postcards, unlike Willie’s card, are surely not pornographic. Like Winnie, Mary Poppins has a man in her life, The Match-Man, and as they venture on an outing into one of his pictures on the pavement, he is given a straw hat and clothes befitting a day at the sea-side, just like the boater Winnie’s Willie puts on at one moment.

While Mary Poppins is noted for unpacking her bag, the emphasis, in Winnie’s case, as the stage directions indicate, is on of her careful handling of her things:

(Pause. She turns to the bag, rummages in it without moving it from its place, brings out toothbrush, rummages again, brings out flat tube of toothpaste, turns back front, unscrews cap of tube, lays cap on the ground, squeezes with difficulty small blob of paste on brush, holds tube in one hand and brushes teeth with other”[...] ) (18).

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p.18.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p.20.

Mary Poppins has an umbrella, with a long handle and with a parrot's head as its beak. The wind takes her and her umbrella wherever she likes, always towards new and challenging adventures. As for Winnie, she has a parasol, where the handle is "en bec-de cane" (17), a duck's beak, (this is new in the French translation), which she uses as a weapon, hitting Willie's head twice. Winnie's parasol has a "handle of surprising length" (22) and is magical because it can burn up and then reappear as good as new. However, Winnie, unlike Mary Poppins, can only dream of flying away from her mound: "[...] yes, the feeling more and more that if I were not held – (*gesture*) – in this way, I would simply float up into the blue (46). As Beckett said to Martha Fehsenfeld: "Think of her as a bird with oil on her feathers".<sup>26</sup> So according to Beckett, it seems that Winnie once had a past when she felt free.

Whatever Mary Poppins fancies, she can make happen. Winnie tries to use her objects and her words to forget reality, but does not always succeed. They both use their imagination and a positive thinking to cope with their problems, even though Mary Poppins always succeeds and Winnie never does. Nevertheless, both characters are strong and courageous and have only themselves to rely on, and, as such, they create a strong experience of presence for spectators and readers alike. Of course, *Mary Poppins* is a fairy tale for children, and the disappearance of Mary Poppins at the end of the story does not point towards death, unlike Winnie's slow disintegration and disappearance of Winnie. Despite these differences, it seems to me that Mary Poppins has participated in giving the seemingly everyday objects of Beckett's stage directions an even stronger magical aura. The limitations imposed by Beckett have not prevented me from acceding to new and surprising insights into the play. On the contrary, they have emphasised the strangeness of the set.

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<sup>26</sup>Martha Fehsenfeld. *Op.cit.* p.50.

*What's it meant to mean?*

At the start of the second act, the stage directions state: "Scene as before", but even the little space which Winnie is given in the first act, is reduced in the second act. Nothing else seems to have happened on the scene, but now Winnie is

[...] embedded up to neck, hat on head, eyes closed. Her head, which she can no longer turn, nor bow, nor raise, faces front motionless throughout act. Movements of eyes as indicated.

Bag and parasol as before. Revolver conspicuous to her right on mound.

Long pause.

Bell rings loudly. She opens eyes at once. Bell stops. She gazes front. Long pause (64).

This is when, as Beckett states, "[...] the dark moves in".<sup>27</sup> Winnie does not smile any more, neither does she pray, and only words are left to help pass the time. She is on the brink of despair: What if Willie were not there to listen any longer? And what would happen if the words were to disappear? If we see the play through clichés about the human condition, and establish reductive equations between aging and immobility, degradation and death, then we lose the focus on Winnie and Willie, and we vastly impoverish our experience of the play. Beckett lets Winnie herself comment on the human nature, and her clichés function as ironic hints on the part of the playwright to his public: "One does it all. (*Pause.*) All one can. (*Pause.*) 'Tis only human. (*Pause.*) Human nature. [...]. Natural weakness" ( 32). She is also delighted by the "way man adapts himself. (*Pause.*) To changing conditions" (48).

Still, our experience of the text or the play is always a translation, which may well leave the original text and the presence of concrete objects and the two characters in Beckett's text far behind. As readers or spectators, we can for example simply imagine that Winnie is an old lady who is physically and psychologically diminished or we can think of the two actors as any old couple with very little in common, but who hang onto each other nevertheless. It is vital to keep focused on and to react to

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p.54



Winnie's and Willie's presence on the scene and not to lose ourselves in abstractions.

Beckett also mocks us when we wonder what it all "means", like the Showers or the Cookers as they pass by the mound. Winnie talks about them as follows:

What's she doing he says – What's the idea? he says – stuck up to her diddies in the bleeding ground – coarse fellow – What does it mean? he says – What's it meant to mean? – and so on – lot more stuff like that – usual drivel - (56).

When I was teaching Beckett, my young students just could not get their heads round *Happy Days*, apart from a middle-aged lady in the group who spoke the words we had all been hoping to hear: "But this is me. I always stoop into my handbag when I'm waiting for something to happen". The students could now open up to Winnie. And from that point onwards, they could begin to imagine the anguish and the panic that are constantly threatening her. What will happen when she cannot manipulate the objects in the bag and when she has lost the power to speak and when Willie is not there any more, and there is nothing left between her and silence, loneliness and possible death? When we realize that we too could be stuck in the present without memories, without anything to make the time pass, then we can partake in her anguish, just as we can laugh at the different ways she tries to fight it off.

Right from the beginning, the presence of the revolver evokes the possibility of death for both of Winnie and Willie. In the second act, when Winnie has sunk so far down in the mound that she can only move her eyes, and the revolver is on the mound beside her head, she can no longer use it. She is now dependent on Willie, who makes his apparition, "dressed" as Beckett puts it, "to kill", in the sense that he is all dressed up. The reader may also associate this statement with the fact that he could now potentially kill Winnie and liberate her. This stage direction is left out in Beckett's French translation. Actually, there is more dramatic tension in not knowing why Willie turns up in the end or why he tries to climb up on the mound. Does Willie want to kiss Winnie or to kill her or do both? We will never know, but the effect of the presence of both husband and wife, face to face, and Willie's feeble cry of "Win" combined with Winnie's song unfailingly provoke a strong emotional response in us.

With reference to a number of stagings of *Happy Days*, I have argued that when Beckett's stage directions are adhered to, the "presence" of the performance is largely enhanced. These stage directions not only describe what the stage should look like, but also indicate in detail how the two actors should use movement, words and pauses. Time, as both the stage directions and Winnie's words reveal, plays an important role in creating a tension between the eternal present and the imperceptible passing of time, between life and death. The comparison with another literary figure, Mary Poppins, underlines the strangeness of the everyday objects in Winnie's bag. Beckett's "work on the nerves of the audience"<sup>28</sup> corresponds with what I have chosen to call "presence", which, as I have argued, is not only dependent on the actors' presence, but also on the impact of the stage directions in the text and on stage.

We know from the different performances that were staged in Beckett's lifetime and from the Beckett Estate that he considered his stage directions to be of utmost importance. In *Happy Days* Beckett reduces the distance between the literary text and the stage directions, in such a way as to make the whole text of the play a literary work. Any director who ignores the stage directions, which, as I have argued, are intrinsic to the play, will produce a lesser, or at least a different, play. The limitations imposed by Beckett on the production of the through the stage directions, are, as I have shown, there to contribute towards a more profound experience for its readers and spectators. The stage directions are not an impediment to a creative performance of the play, as some recent productions have assumed. On the contrary, they are vital to the readers' and spectators' experience of presence.

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