

THEATRE REVIEW

Review: *First Love*, directed by JoAnne Akalaitis, performed by Bill Camp. 25 February–1 March 2021, Theatre for a New Audience, New York City. Presented online.

'I associate, rightly or wrongly, my marriage with the death of my father, in time' (Beckett, 2010b, 229). So begins *First Love*, one of the four stories Samuel Beckett wrote in French in late 1946. *Premier amour*, in its original title, had to wait for over two decades for its first publication in 1970, to which Beckett had agreed reluctantly (Knowlson, 1997, 562). While translating this post-war piece to English in January 1973, Beckett described it as 'ancient prose painful to go back on' (Beckett, 2016, 326). Yet, after Patrick Magee presented a reading of the story later that year on BBC Radio 3, Beckett regretted having missed the broadcast, as he went on to receive its 'great accounts from all sides' (346).

What Ruby Cohn identifies as the 'vocal quality' of this 'abbreviated bildungsroman' (2001, 144), established in part by the narrator's rhetorical questions and direct address to the reader, is a key ingredient in the story's suitability for performance. For those of us unable to have listened to Magee's recitation, the Theatre for a New Audience's film adaptation, starring Bill Camp as Beckett's anonymous narrator, offered a fresh opportunity to experience

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this piece through the lens of performance. Directed by JoAnne Akalaitis, whose 1984 production of *Endgame* was notorious for eliciting objections by Beckett, this virtual reimagining of the story, shot entirely on Zoom in a single take but with three laptops, makes effective use of home technology to represent its protagonist's retrospective account of his exile from home at the age of twenty-five.

First Love, of course, is far from a conventional tale of love: it meditates with frisky language and morbid fascination on love's taxonomies, its disfigurations and misidentifications. The story's central character looks back on a botched Oedipal drama, where his domestic attachment to a prostitute – what Julia Kristeva has called 'the impossible coexistence of two incommunicable entities' (1983, 393) – comes to rewrite his attitude toward paternity as both a grieving son and a self-renounced father. Under Akalaitis's direction, Beckett's banished narrator becomes a performance artist with various tricks and techniques up his sleeve. Throughout the film, which presents the text of the story in its entirety, Camp's character is putting on a show for which he has served as a one-man creative team. It is especially clear at the beginning that what he is delivering is, for the most part, a finetuned and memorised story, rather than an improvisatory narration. His pacing and intonation, coupled with the scenic arrangements in place, convey an unmistakable sense of premeditation (Figure 1).

The adaptation features extended scenes where Camp's character, seated and with a headlamp on, stares unblinkingly at and speaks to his laptop camera. Still, Camp's remarkable vocal range never allows things to settle into monotony. With several maps, photographs, and posters jutting out of the walls around him, he says suggestively, 'It's all a muddle in my head, graves and nuptials and the different varieties of motion' (Beckett, 2010b, 232). Beyond his vocal mobility, such varieties assert themselves through his methods of performance. At times, he approaches the camera for added emphasis or plays with its angle, removing a part of his face from the frame, resting his head on the laptop's trackpad, or writing down his epitaph on a piece of paper. The *mise-en-scène* becomes increasingly protean: on different occasions, we see him speaking while looking out the window, lying down and rambling under a table, straining his body on a chair so as to evoke his



Figure 1. Bill Camp in Theatre for a New Audience's *First Love*, courtesy of TFANA, © Peter Cook

'anxiety constipation' (Beckett, 2010b, 232), and baring his belly to imitate the pregnant Anna – the eponymous lover initially named Lulu. Such moments crystallise his sustained attempt to process a questionable past through embodied re-enactment.

Camp's character often utilises his hands in distinct gestures to aid his storytelling. These compulsive repetitions, accompanying words like 'grave', 'heap', and 'bench', and also occurring whenever he reports speech, constitute a sign language with a zany energy. This lexicon of the hands expands further when he uses them to describe, as in a pantomime, how he imagined the residents of his late father's house celebrating his banishment from it. 'All imagination to be sure, I was already on my way, things may have passed quite differently' (Beckett, 2010b, 232–3), he adds, hinting at why his recounting of this moment urged him to absent his face and body from the frame, leaving behind only his hands as expressive, and speculative, tools. Such foregrounding of the hands recurs later on, to even greater effect, when he narrates his exaggerated reorganisation of Anna's flat by using miniature furniture pieces. He tilts the camera down, so that we see only his hands manipulating the doll-house furniture in accordance with his story, as part of which his fingers also take turns standing in for himself and Anna.

Akalaitis seems to have made an effort to situate the story in the collective imaginary of Beckett's dramatic works. It would be difficult to watch this production without growing aware of its allusive parallels with Beckett's plays. There certainly lurks a Krapp within this protagonist, for example: Beckett's description of his tape-recording, '*wearish old man*', with his '*disordered grey hair*', '*unshaven*' face, and '*distinctive intonation*' (Beckett, 2010a, 217), would make for an accurate portrayal of Camp's character, too. The envisioning of his retrospective gaze as a self-recording session and the chiaroscuro prevalent in Jennifer Tipton's lighting design are other key motifs likely borrowed from *Krapp's Last Tape*. In one scene, Camp's character even listens to a recording of his own voice from his phone. *Endgame* is yet another lingering influence: not only do its stepladder and small windows appear in certain shots, but the setting itself is highly reminiscent of the play's sealed refuge. The maze-like, nondescript house in which the man stages the entire performance appears like a site of clausturation, either mandatory or voluntary, which this filmic missive is likely to abandon earlier than its creator.

The kinship of medium also puts *First Love* in a company of resonance with Beckett's television plays. Camp's character is much more loquacious and gamesome than the solitary, restrained figures of *Ghost Trio*, ... *but the clouds* ..., and *Nacht und Träume*, but the cinematographic solipsism that inheres in these works appears to have left an imprint on Akalaitis's direction and Kaye Voyce's set and costume design. Perhaps more overt are the production's nods at the opening moments of *Eh Joe*, where the titular character anxiously looks out the window and opens and closes the door, as does Camp's character at various points. Linda Ben-Zvi reminds us that the narrator of *First Love*, like those of the other stories from 1946, uses his storytelling to meet his need for 'some human contact' (1986, 81). In this, too, the performance of the prose work lends itself to comparison with the television plays' subdued fantasies of companionship.

Ultimately, what gives Akalaitis's adaptive interpretation its real edge are the ways in which the narrator's calculated performance shows its cracks: it becomes increasingly uncertain whether he is performing for an ostensible audience or for himself, and whether a certain phrase or thought may have just occurred to

him, rather than being prepared in advance. If there is a turning point in this respect, it is his recounting of his first encounter with Lulu/Anna. Here, a mixture of spontaneity, hesitation, and reflection enters his delivery, never to leave it, signifying clearly that the imminent account of his 'first love' is harder to tackle than that of his father's death. It is as if his preceding performance, perhaps a mere curtain-raiser, has now opened the floodgates for an unanticipated introspection. Indeed, this may be why he takes refuge in reading out loud from a book – written by whom? – two chunks from this part of the story, rather than narrate them himself. In destabilising the integrity of the man's performance, these scenes of recitation render Akalaitis's production structurally more thought-provoking, even as they threaten to undermine its coherence.

Such fissures that emerge across the production's eighty-minute run amplify the modes of uncertainty and doubt integral to the text of the story, which are initially played down by Camp's rhetorical certitude. Whereas the story itself displays a good dose of epistemic ambivalence, the production softens these wrinkles at first. Nonetheless, the transition to a more self-critical and searching vein of presentation succeeds in capturing the predominant spirit of the work. So much so that, near the end, the inadvertent signs of desperation and torment are all too legible on Camp's face, as though a mask has finally come off, revealing a new layer of candour. The labour cries of Anna, which pursue him into the street as he abandons her, are not audible to us, but it is easy to tell that he hears them to this day, in anguish, his hands clamped on his ears. Even as he recounts having 'played' with these cries at the time, 'on, back, on, back, if that may be called playing' (Beckett, 2010b, 246), what we see is no longer play. No wonder, then, that just as he walks out on Anna and her baby, he walks out on us. He leaves the room, closes the door, and turns off the lights: 'all that matters', after all, 'is that it should cease' (246).

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