

Interview with Lisa Dwan (Winnie) on *Happy Days*, Riverside Studios, London, Summer 2021 by Mert Dilek

Mert Dilek [MD]: What's the story of how this production of *Happy Days* came into being? What occasioned the choice of the play and your collaboration with Trevor Nunn?

Lisa Dwan: [LD]: Well, my work with Beckett is part of a kind of trajectory. I was first cast in *Not I* very young. Then came *Footfalls* and *Rockaby*. At one point I said to Billie Whitelaw, 'Oh God, I'd love you to direct me in *Happy Days*, but I'm far too young'. And she said, 'I really don't think you are. Beckett wanted somebody young and vivacious and buxom and trapped in their life'. I said this to Walter Asmus after we finished the Beckett trilogy, and he said, 'I think you should wait'. So then I said to Edward Beckett: 'Jesus Christ, what do I do next? Wait until I'm 50 or 60 to play *Happy Days*?'. He said: 'Lisa, why don't you take a look at some of the prose texts?' That's what spurred me to investigate *Texts for Nothing* and turn that into a one-woman production as a sort of holding place before *Happy Days*. And then I also did *Ill Seen Ill Said*.

Then there was a very weird circumstance involving General David Petraeus, who is a five-star-decorated general, and who led the surge to Baghdad, Iraq. Somehow he had watched *Not I* and sent me a message saying, 'Save for the rush for Baghdad, *Not I* was the most intense thing I've ever experienced'. Occasionally, our paths would cross in New York at various kinds of events. But I never thought anything about it until I got a message from him introducing me to Sir Trevor Nunn. What had happened is that Trevor and he were at a dinner together. They were sat next to one another, and he asked Trevor what he was most excited about doing next. Trevor mentioned Beckett, and he said, 'Oh, Beckett, well, then you should meet Lisa Dwan'. Trevor hadn't heard of Lisa Dwan. Next thing, we were connected.

So, Trevor and I had a coffee in London. He was, in particular, quite driven to do *Krapp's Last Tape*, but was hoping to do a trilogy of Becketts. He suggested *Happy Days*, and I said: 'To be honest with you, *Happy Days* is a full-length play. It's not going to fit as a trilogy with anything. And also, I think it should wait until next year because it's the 60th anniversary. But what would work very well with *Krapp's Last Tape*, I think, is *Eh Joe*, particularly because of the story of the woman and the haunting.' And then he had the idea to do *The Old Tune*. I had actually never seen that before. And so, they all worked quite well together. We had one day of rehearsal for *Eh Joe*, and then Trevor and I went into a studio and made the recording. It was all so quick. It was just great. Then we said that we'd like to do *Happy Days* together.

In between, he came to see my version of *Antigone* in Dublin that Colm Tóibín had written for me. When it came to filming that in Riverside Studios, I asked Trevor to direct it with me. Meanwhile, because of the pandemic, the dates kept shifting with *Happy Days*, but both of us were utterly

committed to it. And I began the arduous task of learning it. I felt that I had reached that stage in my life where I was just a few years shy of what age Billie Whitelaw was as Winnie, and older, indeed, than Joan Plowright, whom Beckett had initially in mind for this role. But she had turned it down because she was pregnant.



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MD: How did the process of preparation unfold then?

LD: So, I was learning the part, and on Christmas Day I discovered that I was pregnant. I first thought, 'Oh no!' And then I thought, 'Well, actually, that's perfect'. There's no better role to be pregnant in. What are the risks? I get too hot? Well, I just had to make sure that they used more LED lights than Source Fours and kept me cool. And the biggest risk, of course, was the brain fog of learning such an arduous role. I have a very good memory. But I knew that it would be the most compromised it has ever been, because of the pregnancy, because of all the red cells needed elsewhere in the body. So, I thought, 'Well, I'll just have to work harder'.

And that's what I did. I basically ran the play every day and started learning it at home via Zoom, getting ready. When I went into rehearsals with Trevor, I knew every word. I was totally off. In a way, I had found my own way in. That's not to say that Trevor didn't have an extraordinary contribution, because he did. But I had arrived in rehearsal pretty much fully formed.

MD: How did his direction colour your take on the play afterwards?

LD: Trevor always had the idea that he wanted the second act to be very different. He wanted a huge gap in time. I think, in retrospect, he's done a fantastic job. I really think it works. I have never seen that difference done so dramatically before. And the truth is that, when you look at Beckett's notes and stage directions, that's exactly what he wanted. He wanted the deathly white face.

But I was nervous about it. Because I had only ever seen the second act performed as if it were a day later, except she's buried up to her neck. Maybe a little dishevelment but not something so gravely different. And I really began to trust Trevor. I've worked with lots of directors, but never with anyone this good. He's phenomenal on text. He has an inherent musicality about him. He knows where to

place the stresses, and he knows how to give an actor, particularly a smart actor, a very good note. He doesn't give you too many notes. He doesn't give you vague notes. He gives you extremely precise, useful tools that you can take up every night to climb that mountain.

Yes, I had all the text in my head. Yes, I had all the locations of those voices in my head. They were mine. But Trevor would almost stand, looking at the mountain with me, and going, 'Well, if you put your foot here, and if you put the stress *here*, and if you reach for *that*, and if you do *this...*'. It's almost like a coach showing you how to scale this enormous mountain. As a result, I've never felt so held in a production before. He's formidably intelligent. But you need someone like that with that text. Especially with all the references in it.

And there were things we discovered about the play that, quite frankly, I don't think any other academic has. You know, Willie's regiment in the army, the whole indication of the location Borough Green... No one asked about the military base there. I even emailed Reading University: Have you thought about this? Did you know that Browning was actually a gun that was given to military, that it was an old military gun? The spats would indicate which regiment he was in. Borough Green was near Sevenoaks where there was a military base. Beckett specified a Battle of Britain moustache. None of the little crumbs Beckett leaves there is for nothing. There's always something underneath. I have enough experience with Beckett to know that I always have to go digging. Because you will always find something. Nothing's just there for a quick plaster, to make it sound good. Everything has a purpose.

MD: You memorized the text by yourself before going into rehearsals, but what about the movements? How and when did they come into your preparation for the part?

LD: Almost immediately. For my birthday present in November, my boyfriend bought me a black bag, a gun, a parasol, a lipstick, a toothbrush, a looking glass, and a hat. Every prop. I went through the play page by page and solidified everything: the choreography and the language. Because you can't separate them. It's a dance, and I had to make sure that the poses were being fleshed out, including the business of how she was avoiding saying something by doing something. That all had to work hand in hand. So, it was very slow. I was literally taking it at half a page a day. Because I had time. Also, for somebody like me, who's dyslexic, it's a very complicated page to look at, between all the stage directions and my lines. I knew I needed to be liberated from the text straight away.

MD: So how would you characterize your experience of learning this strict regimen of speech coupled with partial action? Has it differed from conventional memorization?

LD: Initially, as you learn as it, it's regimented. It's topsoil memory; it feels a bit robotic. But now I'm so liberated from that. Because it's so engrained, I find deeper meaning in the movement every time. And then there's just so much space to go deeper with all of that: deeper with the voices, deeper with the pauses, deeper with the movements. It sinks into the earth, into your earthiness, and becomes normal. Now I'm just really, really, really enjoying myself. I didn't have that much rehearsal in the mound before we opened. I also didn't really get to play with the actual props. Now that I'm enjoying myself in that space, I feel that the work can just get deeper and deeper, and I could go on playing this for ages.

I toured the Beckett Trilogy for years, and I was psychologically and emotionally and physically ravaged by that. I was going to a dark place of trauma every single night, and it really took its toll. But this piece is just such a celebration of life. The earth is consuming Winnie, but she's impossible to extinguish fully. I get fired up and excited about that portrayal of life, setting fire to that life every night. That's particularly poignant, given the time we've gone through. But on a personal level, to be seven-and-a-half-months pregnant, and to have my little baby kicking away under the mound throughout, is very grounding and deeply inspiring.

MD: Has the first-hand experience of inhabiting the mound shaped your take on the character in any way?

LD: Not really, because I was already rehearsing via Zoom. I was trained to be at a table, sat down. I couldn't move, and my props were in front of me. So, Zoom was a perfect training for a role like this. The difference arises when you're under the lights, and the whole world around you disappears because the lights are glaring in your eyes. You can see just the little bit around you. So, it's just you and the text and the need to go on. And filling the void between the bell for waking and the bell for sleep. That's when you can flesh out the role spiritually and psychologically. That's when things are different: under the lights.

MD: One could argue that Beckett took something from Winnie to each of her female characters in the late plays, in terms of the chronology of his writing. But you are making the reverse journey, coming from them to Winnie. Do you feel that you've brought something from them to this character?

LD: Absolutely. When she talks very fast—as in 'Bless you Willie I do appreciate your goodness I know what an effort it costs you'—it feels very *Not I*. It's like a nervous banter, and I straightaway went into the *Not I* gear there. Then there's *Footfalls* in a line that really stings: 'to put it mildly'. On these occasions, I know the orientation of the voices. I know the musicality. I know the instrument Beckett was hearing in that moment. And I apply that knowledge. So, absolutely, my earlier work has informed this, particularly in the second act. Of course, there are other influences, as well: my personal background, including every Irish woman I've ever known. For example, Michael Hartnett has this beautiful poem called 'Death of an Irishwoman', where a line goes: 'She was a child's purse, full of useless things'. That, too, really stuck in my head throughout.

MD: You are used to being solo on stage when performing Beckett. What's your take on Willie's presence in the play?

LD: What I love about the motif, or the image, of Willie is that one wonders, is Winnie a figment of Willie's imagination, or is Willie a figment of Winnie's imagination? Because when she says, 'Do you know what I dream sometimes?', she almost conjures his arrival, as a dream. Some people who are imbedded in long-term relationships often talk about a partner one can't recognize from the outside. They extol the virtues outsiders can't see. People tell themselves all sorts of fallacies about all sorts of relationships they're in. There's something so brilliant about Willie's invisibility: it betrays Winnie's optimism.



(<https://beckettcirclemembers.files.wordpress.com/2021/11/suggested-lisa-dwan-winnie.-credit-helen-maybanks.-094.jpg>).

MD: How has sharing that space with someone else modulated your performance, after rehearsing mostly by yourself?

LD: There are not many roles like this for women. It's not very often that men will give you the space. And I was very anxious about Willie, whoever he might be: Is he going to be milking his few lines for every single word? Is he going to give me the space? Is he going to be making a racket behind me? How will a male ego cope with a female lead with such a huge role? Who could you possibly find that's male and generous enough to just give me the play?

Up until this point, I've never met a male who hasn't somehow tried to sabotage my performance on stage in some way, or compete with me, or behave appallingly. So, I was preparing myself by just making sure that no matter what Willie did, I was going to be OK. I was preparing myself for someone to not cooperate. What I didn't expect was somebody as sensitive and as generous and as thoughtful and as engaged and as passionate and as brilliant as Simon Wolfe. Given the fact that I've never experienced this sort of behaviour from a male before, I'm extremely grateful to Simon. It's obviously the least we should expect, but I've never experienced it. I just want to acknowledge that he has been a lifesaver on the mound.

When we rehearsed the play together, I could see his movements, and it was very informative. But when we got into the set, it turned out that he couldn't move at all. He was lying in a kind of coffin back there. But because we had rehearsed it previously, I still had that in my sensory memory. And even though he can't move, he's been extremely generous. He's still making movements that trigger those memories for me. So, I find him just wonderful company. The whole thing has been very affirming to me. I appreciate him deeply for recognizing that this is a gargantuan role. It's very difficult. And he does all he can every night to be not only professional, but deeply supportive.

MD: In the past, you referred to the cost of working in and with Beckett's mind. I wonder if there is anything that Winnie has cost you, besides liberating you, as you've mentioned.

LD: No, I can't feel it at the moment. People say to me after the second act: 'How are you? You must be really ravaged; you must find it so hard to go to that place of despair.' The truth is that there's only one point in the play where I get concerned, which is a very, very dark story about Mildred, featuring

screams. Here I'm concerned for my baby. So, during this part in the play, I grab my belly and massage it. My stage manager can see me underneath, massaging my belly to try and reassure the baby that the screams will be short-lived, and that it's OK.

And I find that with Winnie, I feel bolstered by her ultimately indomitable spirit. Winnie is the ultimate optimist, and she ekes out joy and enthusiasm and learning and creativity and comfort and solidarity out of every single thing she can feast her eyes on. Also, I'm bolstered by the light force kicking away from underneath me. And I feel very supported by a very, very professional production. Maybe bolstered by my own experience, too: maybe I know my limits now. I'm forty-three, and I'm not so riddled with self-doubt. I know when I could rip my skin off and give Beckett the real wounds. But I also know how to be disciplined about that, and not make it into some sort of emotional outpouring that I can't stop. I use those opportunities particularly if I have something very fresh and hurtful that will work, something to which I can give a job in that moment in the performance. I give it the job, and I consider that a gift. It's the extra little burst of juice for that line, which can make it fizz. And I let it go then.

I am very aware as a leading lady that I have a responsibility to the production, to Trevor, and to the audience. This can't be some sort of indulgence. There has to be a form to it. So, I'm disciplined in how I use these sorts of emotional vulnerabilities, which are never too far away from me anyway. One reason for this is that I do feel very held by Trevor's notes and direction and intelligence. Another is that *Happy Days* is Beckett's stab at a comedy. Despite the darkness—which is necessary in Beckett and necessary for me as well—this play is ultimately a celebration of humanity, a celebration of virtues that I deeply admire, like defiance and resilience. In all its murkiness and earthiness and discomfort, it's ultimately a celebration of life. So it is an honour to get up on that stage.

MD: Has adding your voice to the work become easier over time?

LD: Initially, Billie Whitelaw was very good at helping me find my own way into Beckett. She didn't want to perpetuate a museum-style way of performing him. She wanted to liberate me, wanted me to bring my own nervous system and tap into my own landscape. She told me that this was the only way. And so did Walter, to a certain extent. But he was very, very, very reverential. And I admired that deeply about him. But I found out that that reverence cost Walter a great deal. Still, he came on a journey with me that was very much mine. I had already solidified *Not I* by the time we met. And then, of course, I was a bizarre age to be playing *Rockaby*. So it would have been a caricature if I had tried to create a museum piece. I had to find my own version of it.

It was particularly during *Texts for Nothing* that I felt that I was glad not to have Beckett's famous, bird-like glare standing over me in the room. Because I would have been intimidated to try to be a parrot for his creations, like Billie was. This way, I had to go the long way around, in order to eyeball him. There was a point when I really felt I was eyeballing him. I know that sounds really arrogant. But he's just a man. He's just an artist. He happens to be a genius, but I felt that I could eyeball where he was coming from and try to meet it with tools of my own. I remain grateful that I've immersed myself enough in Billie, Walter Asmus, the Beckett estate, and the academic resources. But I also come from his landscape. I do recognize his psychological weather very well. I have the same love and loathing of home that he has. I know exile. I know his creatures. I know the things that haunt him intimately. And then I bring in my own flavour to that.

MD: Do you know what's next for you in your Beckett journey?

LD: I have no idea. My life is about to change. I wouldn't mind directing a bit of Beckett at this stage. But we'll see... My next big production is a baby girl that's due just a couple of weeks after I finish my last performance, unless she decides to make an early stage debut.

Editor's note: readers can also find James Baxter's review of the Riverside Studios Happy Days production in this issue.

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