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Happy Days by Samuel Beckett (review)

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of women in his aria, “Ha più forte sapore.” With Tosca performed by a Black singer, Cavaradossi’s remarks in act 1 about her different kind of beauty takes on additional significance.

The entire evening, I was highly aware of the tension in Austin Opera’s ambitious undertaking: the simultaneous desire to make and experience beautiful art to escape the grim realities of the past year, and the fact that we could not fully escape them, even temporarily; the ability of people to make art in the most difficult of circumstances, and the loss of things we previously took for granted, even something as simple as the ability to watch a live performance indoors rather than livestreamed on a small screen at home. Although I sat through the whole opera in the rain, many audience members left early. The second performance was scheduled for Saturday, but additional severe weather pushed it to Sunday. Audience members at Thursday’s performance were invited to attend again on Sunday or to watch the livestream from home. So I found myself once again in front of my computer, watching a larger-than-life performance on a small screen. This time, the weather cooperated, and the cast and musicians delivered a brilliant performance. Although I could not experience it in person, it appears that Austin Opera’s perseverance finally paid off.

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HAPPY DAYS. By Samuel Beckett. Directed by Trevor Nunn. Anthology Theatre, Riverside Studios, London. June 18, 2021.

Samuel Beckett’s *Happy Days* is, among many other things, a study in contrasts. The play’s juxtapositions of the loquacious Winnie with her taciturn husband, of her frenzied upper limbs with her immured legs, and of her cheery attitude with slippages of despair are part and parcel of its dramatic world. While directing the play in the 1970s, Beckett even wanted the contents of Winnie’s bag to consist of contrasting elements, with her small magnifying-glass supported by a long handle, for example, and her revolver’s short butt paired with a long muzzle. Trevor Nunn’s 2021 London production, starring the acclaimed Beckett performer Lisa Dwan, treated this dramaturgy of disparity as the hinge on which the play’s affective impact turns. Nunn’s staging, which marked the sixtieth anniversary of the play’s premiere, was attuned especially to the contrasts between its two acts, mining and amplifying them in its portrayal of Winnie’s plight as one of radical decay over time.



Lisa Dwan (Winnie) in *Happy Days*.
(Photo: Helen Maybanks.)

Buried up to above her waist in a low mound of earth and scorched grass, the first act’s Winnie was awakened in this production not by the piercing rings of a bell, as the script calls for, but by a series of sonorous gong sounds. This slight dilution of aural disturbance was matched by the visual reticence of Robert Jones’s panoramic scenography, pervaded by a cool palette of beige and brown tones. Where Beckett’s script asks for the illusionism of a “*very pompier trompe-l’oeil backcloth*,” Jones’s gently curving backdrop displayed a more abstract, muted aesthetic. This was, to borrow Winnie’s own words, “perhaps a shade off color,” as the sleek composition did not quite radiate the blazing heat so central to Winnie’s situation. Instead, Nunn’s production found its blaze elsewhere, in Dwan herself: magnetically vivacious, her Winnie of the first act was aflame with an adamance of spirit that managed, for the most part, to restrain her inner turmoil. Dwan’s deft performance foregrounded the frantic dynamism of Winnie’s speech, movements, and affects, with its reduction in the second act cementing the contrastive relation between the play’s two parts.

Dwan’s Winnie contained multitudes, and those multitudes kept her going. At first, this made her even more of a misfit in her cruel environment: she was simply too full of life, too wide-ranging in her inclinations, to be stuck in a mound. Nonetheless, there was also something rather Zen about Dwan’s interpretation, especially in the play’s early moments. Confident and commanding, her Winnie seemed in control of her otherwise intractable situation. Whether tenderly caressing her bag, luxuriating in her half-quotations from literary classics, or berating the uncouth Willie (performed by Simon Wolfe), Winnie found support and strength in her various preoccupations.

Throughout the first act, Dwan’s Irish delivery had an unmistakably rhythmic thrust that intensified the music of Beckett’s writing. At some point,



Lisa Dwan (Winnie) in *Happy Days*. (Photo: Helen Maybanks.)

Winnie remarks of having the feeling that if she were not confined “in this way,” she “would simply float up into the blue.” The same could also be said of Winnie’s speech as voiced by Dwan: for it also exuded the sense of being on the verge of breaking into a hypnotic melody. Because Dwan frequently changed her register, tone, and pace, this demanding quasi-monologue never felt tedious. Her two narrations of the Shower/Cooker story were particularly gripping with their nuanced recreation of external voices and their intimation of the narrated event’s blurring of fact and fiction. When Dwan’s speech became a touch declamatory, one could feel that she was earnestly attempting to leave a vocal imprint on the world and elicit Willie’s attention and response.

Winnie’s upper-body kinetics, a central lifeline for her when we first meet her, evinced an astounding degree of balletic grace in Dwan’s performance. As she manipulated her cherished objects, her ostensibly trivial actions accrued a motional charm of their own, whose ultimate absence in the second act was sorely felt. Still, it was when Winnie deployed her arms and hands independently of her belongings that they stood out as poignantly expressive resources. Whether extending her right arm in an imaginary toast or guiding Willie back into his hole with frantic but patient hand signals, Dwan’s Winnie displayed a virtuoso—because self-preservative—command of whatever had remained of her body.

After the intermission, the audience encountered a Winnie who was not merely buried up to her neck, as expected, but shockingly unrecognizable. Her shriveled face covered in a ghostly white and marked by tear stains, her hair nearly indistinguishable from the scorched grass surrounding it, this Winnie was almost a figure out of Beckett’s late plays *Footfalls* and *Rockaby* (both previously performed by Dwan). So wide was the gulf between the two Winnies in Nunn’s production that the change in act 2 retrospectively threw into relief the true power of the prior act. Haunting and haunted, the second act’s Winnie wore her physical and psychic degeneration on her (submerged) sleeve. Although visually blended in with the landscape, she kept asserting her extant, if increasingly imperiled, humanity with a speech that alternated between the chillingly deadpan and the grotesquely agitated. Especially when she was narrating, with disturbing zest, the post-traumatic tale of Mildred, Dwan’s guttural screams and feverish intonation lay bare a darkness that was contained impressively in the first act.

It was only Willie’s climactic emergence that brought a dash of warmth to Winnie’s stone-like complexion. But even so, the ambiguity of Willie’s motive added a new layer of hesitance and panic to her facial drama. As Tim Mitchell’s muffled

lighting dimmed and darkened toward the play’s final moment, leaving a spotlight on Winnie’s face alone, she became a fully spectral presence detached from her surroundings. The stylized conclusion of Nunn’s staging clearly signified an impending dissolution of life.

With its sustained interest in the play’s internal oppositions, especially that between its two acts, Nunn’s elegant and moving production attested to the structural riches of *Happy Days*. Reframing Winnie’s increasing submersion in the mound as a replacement of brimming life by all-consuming decay, it brought out the symbolic dimensions of Beckett’s play. “[W]hat difficulties here, for the mind,” says Winnie, “to have been always what I am—and so changed from what I was.” This was, ultimately, the credo of both Nunn’s direction and Dwan’s performance, each cannily locked into a trajectory of irreversible change.

MERT DILEK

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MSH ZANBEK (NOT YOUR FAULT). Conceived and devised by Jillian Campana and Dina Amin. Written by Noran Morsi et al. Directed by Nadine Abdel Razek et al. American University in Cairo, Cairo, Egypt. March 22, 2021.

As the world collectively grappled with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Egypt witnessed the birth of a movement combating sexual harassment and assault—an Egyptian #MeToo of sorts. In the summer of 2020, hundreds of young women took to social media to publicly accuse Ahmed Bassam Zaki, a former student at the American University in Cairo (AUC), of sexual assault. AUC became the subject of intense criticism when it was revealed that after several students had filed official reports against him, he was still allowed to enter campus, where he assaulted more women. In the wake of this call for justice, young independent artists wrote and performed *Msh Zambek (Not Your Fault)* at the AUC campus, five short plays about sexual violence against Egyptian women. With its minimalistic nature and the use of the campus as an already-smeared canvas, the defiant nature of the plays rose to the forefront, showing Egyptian women who had been stripped of their agency regaining some semblance of power—if not to change anything, then at least to reclaim their narrative.

There was something both perverse and cathartic about watching this performance at what was es-