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"Laughing Matters in the Theatre of Samuel Beckett and Edward Albee"

Linda Ben-Zvi

Beckett

- 1 The American humorist E. B. White famously remarked, "Analyzing laughter is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies" (qtd. in Kantor 2008, 8). Henri Bergson, in his preface to *Le Rire* offered a similar, if extended and more elegant warning: "We shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing. However trivial it may be, we shall treat it with the respect due to life." In Bergson's study, "the frog" lives, as he explains, to "throw light for us on the way that human imagination works" (62). In modern theatre, Samuel Beckett takes up this challenge of analyzing laughter. In his novel *Watt*, the large part of which was written while he was in hiding in Roussillon, France during WWII, his character Arsene describes three types of laughter in definitions that, themselves, invite laughter:

The bitter, the hollow and—Haw! Haw!—the mirthless. The bitter laugh laughs at that which is good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. Not good! Not true! Well, well. But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh, down the snout—Haw!—so. It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs—silence please—at that which is unhappy (48).

- 2 The philosopher Simon Critchley uses this quotation as the epigraph for his study *On Humour* claiming that Beckett's humor-provoking laughter finally brings "elevation and liberation, the lucidity of consolation" (Critchley 111). But since Beckett's people are lucid, they are aware that their laughter and jokes do little to change their plights or elevate and elucidate their conditions. The best that laughter can provide characters in a Beckett story, novel, or play is a way to pass time, militate for the moment against boredom, and provide some relief from the awareness of the human condition, which

Vladimir, near the end of *Waiting for Godot*, describes so powerfully and succinctly: "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries" (58). This is an awareness that he and his companion Estragon have from the beginning of the play, as one of their earliest dialogues indicates:

Vladimir: Suppose we repented.

Estragon: Repented what?

Vladimir Oh [...] (*He reflects.*) We wouldn't have to go into the details.

Estragon: Our being born?

Vladimir breaks into a hearty laugh which he immediately stifles, his hand pressed to his pubis, his face contorted.

Vladimir: One daren't even laugh any more.

Estragon: Dreadful privation.

Vladimir: Merely smile. (*He smiles suddenly ear to ear, keeps smiling, ceases as suddenly.*)

It's not the same thing. Nothing to be done. (59)

- 3 Vladimir's laugh is provoked by the awareness that it is being born that condemns them to a life of suffering about which there is "nothing to be done," a refrain that runs through the play. Even laughter, in such a world, is brief and physically painful, given the frailty of the human body.

- 4 In *Endgame*, Hamm reminds Clov of the same plight: "Use your head, can't you, use your head, you're on earth, there's no cure for that!" (53). Or as Nell, the wise soul of *Endgame*, explains to her husband Nagg:

Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that.... Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more (18-19).

- 5 Beckett, ever the sly manipulator of language and form, chooses his words carefully. In Vladimir's speech, the word "lingeringly," with its four syllables, aurally lingers, stretching out human life and its pain, while in Nell's speech, Beckett first equates laughter with unhappiness, then repeats "we laugh, we laugh," implying routine and habit, and then adds the phrase "with a will," indicating and intensifying the resolute, determined, highly self-aware nature of such laughs. Even "in the beginning"—that phrase opening *Genesis*—Beckett's characters know that while "laughing wild amid severest woe" (Beckett 25), as Winnie quotes in *Happy Days*, the plight of being human remains, since as the speaker in Beckett's 1979 *A Piece of Monologue* announces in the beginning of that play: "Birth was the death of him" (70), and just as Clov proclaims in the beginning of *Endgame* twenty-two years earlier:

Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished.

(*Pause.*)

Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap (1).

- 6 Finished in the beginning, but such awareness too terrible to accept, Clov verbally speaks his way back from the void, qualifying "finished" with "nearly" and "must be," until the word and its meaning weaken and dissipate allowing him and Beckett to get on with the business of the play: adding more grains to make that little heap that is never finished. The reference to grains is from the Greek philosopher Zeno, who posed the question—called by Beckett "a logical jest" (qtd. in Ackerley and Gontarski 2004, 661)—about when individual grains can be said to make "a heap," a thing that might "mount up to a life," a chronicle one could complete, or a self one could embrace. In

Endgame the grains are only those physical routines that keep Hamm and Clov going: a turn around their cell, an extended joke, "the dialogue." "Don't we laugh" is a question running through the play, with laughter, when it occurs, such as Nagg's forced laughter at his own stale tailor joke, his and Nell's hearty laugh about "When we crashed on our tandem and lost our shanks" (16), or Nagg and Hamm's equally hearty laugh when Hamm swears "on My honor" to give his father a sugar plum if he will listen to his story, both knowing full well there are no more sugarplums (50).

- 7 *Endgame*, which Beckett described to his American director Alan Schneider as "rather difficult and elliptic, mostly depending on the power of the text to claw, more inhuman than *Waiting for Godot*" (qtd. in Harmon 11), does allow and provoke the audience into some laughter, even when the characters try and fail repeatedly to sustain their own. For instance, a third of the way through the play, Clov fixes his telescope on the audience and reports to Hamm:

I see [...] a multitude [...] in transports [...] of joy.

(Pause.)

That's what I call a magnifier.

(He lowers the telescope, turns towards Hamm.)

Well? Don't we laugh?

Hamm (after reflection):

I don't.

Clov (after reflection): Nor I (29).

- 8 At this point, the audience usually laughs, albeit briefly and self-consciously, since they slowly become aware that they have been exposed and co-opted into the play, a meta-theatrical touch that suggests that they, too, are like Beckett's poor players strutting and fretting, signifying nothing but their persistence to go on with the show that is finished from the beginning but never seems to end.
- 9 If as Hamm says, "The end is in the beginning and yet you go on" (69), that would seem to leave little wiggle room both for the characters and the playwright to provide moments of laughter in the play, but "lessness" never bothered Beckett, since he has other theatrical and performative tricks up his sleeve besides traditional stage language and form. For example, before Clov speaks his first word, Beckett has him go through a protracted, silent vaudeville skit. With "stiff, staggering walk" and ladder prop, he first attempts to survey the exterior of his stage/world emitting two brief laughs, and then inspects the interior of the two ashbins containing Nagg and Nell, Hamm's parents, eliciting two other brief laughs. Thus the first sounds of the play are laughter, their sounds preceding language. When Clov finally speaks after what, in some heavy-handed productions, can seem like an interminable wait—just as Krapp's even more extended vaudeville turn with his banana and tapes beginning *Krapp's Last Tape*, can also feel deadly if directed by someone with little sense of comedic timing—Clov's first word "finished" has a double, laugh-provoking edge: pointing to the end of the attenuated vaudeville routine and the beginning of the even more attenuated routines and habits of what Hélène Cixous, in *Zero's Neighbor*—her paeon to Beckett—calls "the Sam Beckett circus" (43).
- 10 Although laughter may be a sign of unhappiness in Beckett's plays and fiction, it has another function, perhaps less apparent. It becomes a way to point to, and overcome, the limits of language, about which Beckett, from his early years, was keenly aware and struggled to address. In Paris between 1929-30, as an exchange student at the Ecole normale supérieure, doing advance work in French literature in preparation for an

academic career at his alma mater, Trinity College, Dublin; and again when he moved to Paris permanently in 1937, Beckett, like a coterie of others, assisted the nearly blind James Joyce to gather materials for possible inclusion in the encyclopedic "Work in Progress," which became *Finnegans Wake*. It was Joyce who requested that Beckett skim through the 3-volume, 2,200 page, study *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* published in 1902 by the Austrian philosopher and former drama critic Fritz Mauthner, in which the nominalist view of language was presented. While Beckett did not need Mauthner to fuel his linguistic skepticism, he did find in Mauthner a model and a method. By placing language at the heart of the *Critique*, subsuming under it all knowledge, and then systematically denying its basic efficacy, Mauthner illustrates the possibility of using language to indict itself, something Beckett would later attempt.

- 11 Mauthner concludes his exhaustive study with the realization that for all his efforts, the only pure critique of language would be one done without words—in laughter or silence. "Basically speaking," he writes, "pure critique is merely articulated laughter. Each laughter is critique, the best critique [...] and the danger of this book, the daring aspect of this attempt, lies in merely having put an articulated text to this laughter" (qtd. in Ben-Zvi 1980, 197). In *Kraft*, a novel he wrote two years later, Mauthner puts his conclusion in more vernacular form: "The first philosopher, the last redeemer of mankind, will laugh, and he will keep his trap shut; he will laugh infectiously, and he will teach his fellow men to keep their traps shut like himself, and to open [them] only for laughter and eating" (qtd. in Ben-Zvi 1980,197).
- 12 In "Yellow," the penultimate story of *More Pricks than Kicks*, Beckett's 1934 fiction collection, his anti-hero Belacqua Shuah, who threaded through the stories, is in hospital awaiting an operation and weighing which philosopher is more relevant to his situation: Democritus the laughing philosopher or Heraclitus the weeping philosopher. "Was it to be laughter or tears? It came to the same thing in the end, but which was it to be now," he thinks (163). Democritus wins and ushers in other funny men to the story: Grock, the famous Swedish Clown, who mimicked human failure, and Bim and Bom, two Russian clowns of the 1920s and 30s, who also briefly make an appearance in early drafts of *Godot* and *Endgame*; feature in the later fiction *How It Is*; and appear along with Bam and Bem as a euphonious quartet of torturers and tortured, turn and turn about, in Beckett's last play *What Where*. Belacqua, himself is something of a clown, a sad clown, the name derived from a figure in Dante's *Purgatory IV* who sits exhausted, his legs splayed, his head down, "a voice behind a big block of stone" (Cixous 2010, 25). He is the prototype of the exhausted, the name Deleuze chose to describe Beckett's televisual figures, but one that could apply to most of his fictional and dramatic characters as well. They are exhausted comics still trying to get a laugh. It is not surprising, therefore, that in playwright Jean Anouilh's 1953 review of the first performance of *Godot* summarized it simply as "The music-hall sketch of Pascal's *Pensées* as played by the Fratellini clowns" (qtd. in Cohn 13).
- 13 That Democritus and Heraclitus are paired with popular clowns points to Beckett's great erudition as well as his great love for popular entertainment, particularly music hall, vaudeville, comedy performances, and film. While still an undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin he frequented the Abbey theatre, seeing the plays of Yeats and, more significantly, J. M. Synge, another Irish Francophile who had lived in Paris, written in French, but returned to Ireland and embraced, in his short life, the rural language cadences and stories of the Aran islanders, which Synge's first audiences

didn't understand or find the ironic humor in relation to themselves, but Beckett greatly admired and did. Beckett also went frequently to see films, particularly those of Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, and Buster Keaton, who would star in Beckett's only film entitled *Film*, a virtually silent black and white homage to Beckett's early love of physical comedy without words. Chaplin's oversized shoes and bowler hat can be seen in *Godot*, his exaggerated walk in *Endgame*, while Laurel and Hardy's banana-peel routine opens *Krapp's Last Tape* and the Marx Brothers' physical and verbal slapstick, including the juggling of three hats for two heads and the comic juggling of names, are in *Godot*, their repetitive physical actions, shaping Clov's ladder skit in *Endgame*, and their way of undermining verbal verities—such as when Groucho calls for a seal to stamp a contract and Harpo appears carrying a live seal—creating the same anarchic and comic violence in Beckett's works that destroy and dissipate fixed forms and meaning of language.

- 14 Some of these comedic routines can also be found in Beckett's first foray into drama, which was not, as some assume, *Godot*, nor was it the 1947 jettisoned, and until 1995 unpublished, *Eleutheria*, but rather an unfinished work begun in 1937 and abandoned in 1942 entitled *Human Wishes*, after Samuel Johnson's 18th century poem "The Vanity of Human Wishes." In preparation for his play, Beckett—still the scholar—filled three notebooks with all available material about Johnson, particularly works describing his idiosyncrasies and maladies of mind and body, some of which Beckett also suffered, as well as material on Johnson's benefactors, housemates, 18th century writers, even his cat Hodge. Unsurprisingly, the play sank under the weight of such voluminous and irrelevant research; and Beckett was only able to produce one very short opening scene, reprinted in Ruby Cohn's edited *Disjecta* (155-66). Even though aborted, *Human Wishes* remains a nascent version of the verbal and physical comedy of *Godot*: its inane conversations spoken while waiting, long silences implying subtexts never articulated; self-reflexive attention to language and theatre achieved by the use of repeated sounds and words; and, even—in the first scene of this first Beckett play—laughter, subdued and limited to two 'Ha's' and two wonderfully laugh-provoking stage directions. The first describes Johnson's cat ("sleeping—if possible"). The second is related to a common vaudeville gag: introducing a man Beckett describes as "slightly, respectably, even reluctantly drunk"—imagine an actor trying to play that—who enters unannounced, crosses the stage unsteadily, then emits a single hiccup of such force he is almost thrown off his feet, and leaves never having spoken a word.
- 15 This vaudevillian drunk scene in Beckett's first attempt at theatre shows his facility with laughter-producing physical comedy divorced from language. But as Bill Irwin, a great physical comic himself, at home in several Beckett plays¹ warns, such physical comedy is comedy under peril since "a physical comedian writes his fate on his own body—he can't send it back for a revision if the laugh doesn't come" (qtd. in Kantor and Maslon 13). Yet, the risk has not hindered some of the 20th century's best physical comics who have performed in *Waiting for Godot*, including Bert Lahr, Zero Mostel, Max Wall, and Robin Williams.
- 16 The performance of physical comics in *Godot* raises the question of how much comedy the play can bear and still be faithful to the subtitle Beckett gave it: "a tragicomedy in two acts." For example, in the 1988 New York Lincoln Center production, directed by Mike Nichols, himself a comic, with Steve Martin as Vladimir and Robin Williams as Estragon, laughter was so pervasive, the actors at times playing so broadly to the

audience's expectations and familiarity with these comic stars, that it nearly swamped the darker tones and overshadowed those silences so central in a Beckett play, marking, as they do, the awareness that the tragedy of human existence can only be averted for a moment by laughter. And yet Nichols at least tried to be more or less faithful to the general requirements of the play. Many directors today, since Beckett's death, see his plays as outlines for their own interpretations, invariably seeking laughs and pushing silences aside. One of the most egregious cases is Peter Brook's *Fragments*, a bill of three short Beckett plays including *Rough for Theatre I*, *Come and Go*, and *Rockaby*, first staged in Paris at Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, in which Beckett's most beautiful and touching brief play *Come and Go*, written for three ghost-like women, is performed by a woman and two men in drag, to an hysterically-laughing audience, who must have wondered what had made them think Beckett was a serious, profound playwright; and *Rockaby*, which Beckett indicates is performed by a woman in a rocker, lit in place as the play begins, and shown listening to the recorded words in her head and emitting four times the word "More," as the automatic rocking—which provides the rhythm for the text—seems stop, now is performed by a woman who enters the stage, sits in a hard-backed chair, and recites the text to the audience. Thus the entire play is robbed of its aural and visual power.

- 17 This struggle between laughter and tragedy, of course, is an old battle in theatre. One has only to think of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, which the playwright assumed was comic, and Stanislavski directed as tragic. The power of a Chekhov play, like a Beckett play, is in blending the two, as for example in *The Cherry Orchard*, in the last scene, when after a pause, which seems to conclude the play, the old servant Firs enters the now-abandoned and locked house, forgotten by the others who will not return until spring. Is the moment tragic or comic? In a well-directed and acted version, the audience feels both, just as they do in an equally well-directed and acted *Godot*. That balancing act is what makes Beckett's plays, for all their seeming brevity, so difficult to direct and to act, and for similar reasons makes Chekhov's plays so difficult to perform. Too somber, too silent, too few laughs lose Beckett's Irish, and comic, vaudevillian flair, while a laugh-riot *Godot*, a choice more and more directors make to draw audiences, is equally a distortion, making it a comedy, like the advertisement of the American premiere of *Godot* in Miami, billed as "the laugh hit of two continents." At the same time, taking one's cues from Beckett's own direction can be the theatrical death, about which Artaud warned, turning them into "Masterpieces." To take apart and remake his plays as directors like Brook find the necessity to do, should, therefore, not be censored but at the least should indicate in their playbills that what is being staged is not what the playwright wrote, but rather 'based on' the author's play or is an interpretation. Yet in today's world, where presidents, at least in America, make policy and proclamations, and even threats of war with tweets, more and more audiences seek quick laughs, the more the better, dislike pain, the less the better, and want to be entertained, like they are on TV; so it is now not 'fake news' to report that *Godot* and many other Beckett plays are often staged as comedy, since, as Pozzo and Beckett well knew, "That's how it is on this bitch of an earth" (25).

Albee

- 18 If Beckett is assumed in recent years to be more the laugh-provoking rather than the life-despairing playwright, Edward Albee has always been assumed to be, following his own description, a serious social critic, presenting an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values, condemning complacency, cruelty, emasculation, and vacuity, and taking a stand against "the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen" (qtd. in Bottoms 28). Yet, with equal assertiveness, he has also claimed that his plays are funny. "Any writer without a sense of humor is suspect," he believed. That was one of the two problems he had with Eugene O'Neill: "No sense of humor and he couldn't write" (qtd. in Kolin 149). Aside from that, he thought him a marvelous playwright. And that is why he found Chekhov a better writer than Ibsen, "because I hate any play that is humorless" (Albee 2005, 277). Those familiar with Albee's theatre may be as surprised by his claim that his works are laugh-provoking, perhaps as surprised as Jessica Tandy, the star of the American premiere of his *A Delicate Balance*, who ran backstage after the first act and told Albee in horror: "Edward, they're laughing out there," to which he replied: "Yes, because it's funny. Get back onstage" (277). Albee always reminded actors, often to their surprise: "Don't forget the laughs and slapstick so essential to the success of any of my plays," and explained to interviewers: "Who says tragedy isn't funny? Look at the Republican Party" (qtd. in Rocamora). Had he not died two months before the American election, he would most likely have changed that to "Look at Trump." That's the kind of tragic/ funny Albee loved and used. When he died, many theatre people paying tribute to him mentioned the humor in his play. Tracy Letts, George in a 2012 revival of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, and a playwright himself, declared that there was no serious American playwright funnier.
- 19 That humor should have been so important to Albee can be explained in part from the fact that vaudeville and comedy routines were the family business. Edward Albee II, the playwright's grandfather and namesake, made his fortune as the head of the largest vaudeville chain in America at the turn of the century, overseeing more than 2,000 theatres. Even though by 1928, when Albee was adopted, vaudeville had begun to disappear, overtaken by radio and talking films, it still played a significant role in the young Albee's childhood. By age six he had already been taken by a nanny to see Jimmy Durante perform on Broadway, and at home had met the famous comedy pair Olson and Johnson, Ed Wynn, and Bert Lahr. His long-time companion in later years, William Flanagan, recalled how the "cavortings of Bobby Clark or Bert Lahr would send Albee into helpless laughter." Flanagan assumed that the "henpecking female" in *The American Dream* was "kith and kin to the Eternal Harridan that so relentlessly dogged the exacerbated footsteps of W.C. Fields and Groucho Marx" (qtd. in Amacher 37).
- 20 Although Albee turned his back on his adoptive home at age twenty, detesting his parents' pretentiousness, coldness, and prejudice against Blacks, Jews, and Homosexuals (of which he was one), and did not return until his adoptive mother—the composite model of all three characters in his play *Three Tall Women*—was ill and alone, he was shaped by his early experiences. Critical studies have repeatedly focused on his use of the themes of the adopted son, the unwanted or fantasy child, the dysfunctional family, as well as the upper-class milieu and its moral and spiritual bankruptcy. Overlooked has been vaudeville, the source of his family's fortune and reputation, and a

defining force during the playwright's formative years, which provides the laughter in many of his plays. In the same way that Eugene O'Neill, while creating a new American dramatic form, never totally escaped his early exposure to melodrama—deny it as he might—and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the play which his actor father James owned and starred in more than 6,000 times, hovered in the wings of more than one O'Neill play, it is possible to detect elements of vaudeville, both its forms and content, embedded to a greater or lesser degree in numerous Albee plays throughout his career. For example: Jerry's quick-paced dialogue and extended standup monologue in *The Zoo Story*; Martha and George's "bits about the kid," an act honed by long years of practice, she playing the emasculating wife to his henpecked husband—a typical vaudevillian routine—as well as their verbal routines, songs, sight gags and vaudeville props in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Albee's best known play; Claire's glass-balancing, accordion-playing routines, inebriated monologues, and Tobias' "story of the cat," in *A Delicate Balance*, his best play; Man's repeated entrances and exits and Woman's double-takes in *Marriage Play*; She and He's song and dance routines, storytelling, and audience baiting in *The Play about the Baby*, and another She and He's vaudeville routines in *Counting the Ways*. This last play Albee actually gave the subtitle "A Vaudeville," after the failure of the 1976 British National Theatre premiere, when the forty-minute chamber piece was staged in the cavernous Olivier theatre, and allowed to expand to seventy minutes, filled with what Albee called "slow moving leaden sentimentality, punctuated occasionally by slow motion attempts at humor" (qtd. in Gussow 296). Vaudeville it was not.

- 21 Unlike Beckett's physical humor, Albee more often resorts to language-based comedy, played out as word games and comic routines often about grammar, with one character correcting the usage of another, usually at a critical time in the play, when there is the threat of a character revealing inner feelings. For instance, in *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia*, after Martin has confided to his friend Ross about his love for Sylvia, Ross responds, "You mean the goat who you're fucking?" His words elicit a pained response from Martin: "Don't say that. It's whom" (23).
- 22 In Beckett's plays audiences are primed to laugh, when they see two clown-like tramps with bowler hats, funny shoes, and mismatched clothes in *Godot*, or two men, one with a stiff, staggering walk who cannot sit down, the other with a red face (at least in the original text and performances) and sunglasses who cannot get up in *Endgame*, or a woman, chirping while sinking into a mound under a blazing sun in *Happy Days*. Unlike them, the characters in Albee plays tend to look, if not always act, like the audience at an Albee play: middle-aged, mostly middle and upper-middle class, white, well dressed, probably literate, and if not happy with their lives, at least satisfied. There is Peter in *Zoo Story*, Albee's first protagonist, a conservative, middle-class family man, a creature of habit, sitting in Central Park reading his paper each Sunday, hoping not to be disturbed; George, a middle-aged History Professor and Martha, his somewhat older wife in *Virginia Woolf*, entertaining younger faculty guests late into the night; or Agnes and Tobias in *A Delicate Balance*, a wealthy, refined, upper middle-class, older couple, taking after dinner drinks with the wife's alcoholic sister. We are not prepared for them to make us laugh at first sight. Unlike Beckett's characters, whom we watch perform on barren roads, in a cell, a mound, or indeterminate space, Albee's people, with the exception of the giant green lizard-couple in *Seascape*, live in realistically looking living rooms: academic grunge in *Virginia Woolf*; beautifully homes, emerging from the pages of *House Beautiful*, or *Architectural Digest*, in *A Delicate Balance*, and even

more so in *The Goat, or Who is Sylvia*, whose set is so aesthetically perfect, that I heard audience members groan in horror, not when the wife discovers that her husband's love is a goat, but when she reacts by destroying the beautiful objects in their home. And yet, this is Albee's point. Once he has settled his audience down to watch these-all-too-familiar people in their all-too-familiar or all-too-desirable and desired homes, he pulls the proverbial rug out, a trick that George Bernard Shaw credited Ibsen with doing: getting his audiences to side with the people he will soon expose either as charlatans or weak and flawed individuals.

- 23 Like Beckett, Albee shares the belief that, as Vladimir says in *Godot*, "habit is a great deadener" (58), an idea Beckett first expressed in his 1930 monograph *Proust*, in which he defined habit, as "a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability" (7-8). And should habit slip its grasp and allow for "[t]he suffering of being: that is, the free play of every faculty" (9), individuals quickly create a "new habit that will empty the mystery of its threat-and also of its beauty" (11). It is hard to think of a more apt description of what occurs in most of Albee's plays: people are so sunk into their habits that they do not even recognize them as habits or routines, and so afraid when an occasion creates a moment of freedom and change that they cannot not grasp it. Such a moment happens at the end of *Virginia Woolf*, when George adlibs instead of playing the familiar routine about their son, sundering habit, and by so doing offers the possibility that change might be possible for the couple if they have the courage to take it. Albee introduces a more overt means of getting his characters to break out of their carefully structured lives in *A Delicate Balance*, in which Agnes and Tobias' domestic lives are threatened by the arrival of their best friends of 40 years, who announce they can no longer stay at home because they are frightened—of what they do not say—and have come to them, whom they know will take them in. However, for Tobias their open-ended presence threatens his delicately-balanced world, his sense of self and his definition of friendship. But rather than seize the opportunity for change and self-awareness, Tobias retreats at the thought of losing the safety he finds in his habitual life, aided and abetted by Agnes, the guardian of the status quo. At the end of the play Agnes has the last word, as she had the first. As the sun rises and the unwanted friends leave, she says to Tobias:

Poor Edna and Harry.

(*Sigh.*)

Well, they're safely gone [...] and we'll all forget [...] quite soon.

(*Pause.*)

Come now; we can begin the day (122).

- 24 It is striking how closely Agnes' words echo those of another woman, stuck in habits, and just as Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days* repeats, "What I find most astonishing," Agnes echoes the phrase four times in her opening speeches and again near her closing words; but whereas Winnie's "astonishment" is tempered by her awareness of her desperate situation and her own resiliency to not be broken by it and to laugh, while she can, and go on, Agnes' astonishment is a mark of her lack of awareness that anything is wrong in her life, at least anything she can't fix. While Beckett's people know they're unhappy Albee's people think, like Agnes, that they are, or at least, content and secure. Albee, a self-proclaimed optimist, wants to undermine their illusion and push his characters and his audiences "back out there" (Bottoms, 2005, 244), and to have them reclaim their lives, though he has no illusions that they will do

so. "There's the ability, yes. The willingness, no" (245). His vaudevillian gags, surprising turns, unexpected entrances and exits, extended monologues, crossover dialogues, word games, ribald repartee, props used for shocking or humorous effects, presentational acting style, snappy, breezy delivery, and rapid pacing are his attempts to shake his characters loose from their moorings and, even more so, to shake his audiences from their complacent, habitual lives, so that at the end of his plays, they may think about, as he says, more than where they parked their car.

- 25 Albee's shock approach is similar to what Henry Jenkins describes in *What Made Pistachio Nuts?*, a study of vaudeville, in which he describes a 1930s film scene in which two "somber minded" United States Senators, after others leave their room, drop their realistic pose and suddenly begin slapping each other, kicking, wrestling, engaging in fragmented strings of clichés, comic patter, quick-fire questions including "What makes pistachio nuts?," culminating their performance by executing a pair of back flips. Once the others return, the elegantly-clad Senators stand, brush themselves off, and assume their sartorial airs and their parts. As Jenkins explains, "the sketch was not simply a digression from the central narrative; rather, it challenged the further development of the causal event chain" (Jenkins, 1992, 2-3). In other words, realism was sundered, the realistic comedic conventions became more elastic and porous than a simple definition of the form usually allows.
- 26 Antonin Artaud, in a note praising the Marx Brothers' films, made a similar observation about the subversive power of anarchistic comic acts in otherwise traditional, realistic settings, arguing that these events comprise a kind of exercise of intellectual freedom in which the unconscious of each of the characters, repressed by conventions and habits, avenges itself and us at the same time.
- 27 Such humor, he argued, can lead "toward a kind of boiling anarchy, an essential disintegration of the real by poetry," culminating in "the powerful anxiety which their total effect ultimately projects into the mind" (Artaud 240-42). Some of the same observations might be made concerning Albee's tendency to inject exploding comedy routines into his otherwise recognizable family dramas, momentarily shaking the realism of the scenes and creating the type of "powerful anxiety" to which Artaud refers. "I agree with Artaud that sometimes we should literally draw blood. I am very fond of doing that because voyeurism in the theater lets people off the hook," Albee has said (qtd. in Roudané 12).
- 28 Albee has no back-flipping Senators in his plays, but he does have knockdown fights, giant talking lizards, singing professors, dramatic divas, disappearing babies, parasol-sprouting guns, telegram swallows, yodelers, accordion players, and enough puns, plays on words, grammatical confusions, and jokes to supply a comic vaudevillian enough material to more than fill a "two-a-day" schedule. These physical and verbal acts, usually executed in realistic settings and performed by recognizable types, create the same unsettling, disorienting, and explosive effect that Jenkins describes as the vaudeville aesthetic: dissolving or calling into question the carefully delineated world of the play, rendering it strange and disturbing. And while audiences usually laugh when George responds to Martha's question about what he did with the telegram announcing their son's death with "I ate it," or when he shoots her with a toy gun that emits a flower not a bullet, the result of such laughter on the part of the audience, and occasionally the characters, is to question how long such familiar "bits" can sustain them and if they can go on without them. And, while his characters may shun change,

as they usually do, it is Albee's hope that the audiences may be moved to change after watching his plays. That is Edward Albee's American Dream.

- 29 Samuel Beckett too recognizes that "habit is a great deadener" as he writes in *Godot*, but that it extends far beyond those social and psychological constructions revealed in Albee's plays to the very nature of life itself: "Breathing is habit. Life is habit.... Habit then is the generic term for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual," he writes in *Proust*. And "when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being," that is "the free play of every faculty" (8-9) it doesn't last; new habits are inevitably constructed. What remains is laughter, a reminder not of lost possibilities but of the awareness that there is "Nothing to be done" but go on.

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NOTES

1. Irwin played Lucky in a NY 1988 production and Vladimir in a 2009 NY production of *Godot*, did a one-man show *On Beckett*, and, as George in a revival of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, won a Tony award for his performance.

ABSTRACTS

"Laughing Matters" because laughing is important, vital, and necessary to our lives and the world in which we live; it is serious and difficult, often painful to create and to sustain. Beckettian laughter is physical humor, emanating from the laughable materiality of the human body, its physiology, fragility, and ultimate decay, so often a locus for humor, and described so ribaldly in Beckett's fiction. The essay also includes a section describing the way in which Albee elicits laughter in his plays, which tends to be language-based rather than physical humor.

Rire est important car le rire est vital et nécessaire à nos vies et nos sociétés mais il est difficile et parfois même douloureux de faire rire et de maintenir cet état. Le rire beckettien est physique, il émane de la matérialité du langage du corps, sa physiologie, sa fragilité et sa fin ultime, une fin qui est si souvent traitée avec humour et grivoiserie dans les pièces de Beckett. L'essay reviendra également sur les pièces d'Albee et sa façon de susciter le rire par les jeux verbaux plutôt que par la physicalité du langage.

INDEX

Keywords: laughter, humor, language, skeptical nominalism, performance, vaudeville, silent movies, Samuel Beckett, Edward Albee

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