

The Beckett Circle

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How It Is (Part 2), Gare St Lazare Ireland, The Everyman, Cork, Ireland

A co-production with The Coronet Theatre London in association with The Everyman

Directed and Designed by Judy Hegarty Lovett

Text performed by Conor Lovett & Stephen Dillane

September 4th 2019

Review by Sheila Mannix

Judy Hegarty joined the original Gare St Lazare Players in Paris in 1991. Her direction of Conor Lovett in *Molloy* in London in 1996 marked the founding of Gare St Lazare Ireland, “the unparalleled Beckett champions”, in the words of *The New York Times*. Since then, they have collaborated on sixteen Beckett pieces. This production was the sequel to *How It Is (Part 1)*, nominated for Best Production and Best Actor at *The Irish Times* Theatre Awards 2019.

Beckett’s nod to the epic, *How It Is* (1964; *Comment C’est*, the original French version, appeared in 1961) is a novel with a tripartite structure concerning a man, of some kind, pulling himself through mud and darkness, while telling “scraps of an enormous tale as heard so murmured to this mud which is told to me”. This tale is of a relentless cycle of torture, punctuated by memories of “life above in the light”. At one point it is suggested that the account is being listened to by a witness, and that it is being written in a ledger by a scribe. It may well be significant that at the time of writing *How It Is*, Beckett was listening to radio reports of the use of torture by the French army in Algeria, and reading Roger Casement’s account of colonial atrocities in the Congo and the Putumayo rubber industry.^[1]

Gare St Lazare Ireland held a *How It Is* Symposium in June 2019, at which they presented a ‘Work in Progress Performance’ of *Part 2* by Conor Lovett and Stephen Dillane. This performance emphasised two subjects of the novel, the act of composition and language itself. The halting style of delivery focused the listener’s attention on the process of decision-making; the sifting of material from old notebooks, memories, what there is to hand; the satire on ratiocination; the use of anacoluthon, parentheses, chiasmus; the text’s logic of *hysteron proteron*; its “little blurts of midget grammar”. In particular, it illuminated the plurality of voices in *How It Is* and validated Gare St Lazare Ireland’s decision to adapt the novel for the stage. The Everyman production was an altogether darker beast: at The Everyman, violence was emphatically the subject.



Stephen Dillane (Photo: Clare Keogh)

How It Is (Part 1) was a two-hander, performed by Lovett and Dillane. For *How It Is (Part 2)* they were joined by tenor Mark Padmore who played the non-speaking role of "witness". Spectacularly, this trio were joined on stage by the Irish Gamelan Orchestra along with Nick Roth on saxophone/flutes and Claudia Schwab on violin. This pairing of Beckett with a gamelan orchestra might sound counterintuitive, but homages to gamelan music are to be found in works by a number of avant-garde composers contemporary with Beckett (Messiaen, Boulez, Satie and Cage), and there is a precedent in Beckett's original script for *Quadret I & II* (1981), in which one of the four figure's moves are accompanied by a Javanese gong.

On entering the theatre, we were directed to the balcony and were told the performance would last two hours and ten minutes without an interval. I wondered about the lack of an interval, but I didn't notice any distractions during the entire performance: the actors commanded total silence and total attention. Perhaps their proximity played a part. The Everyman is a small Victorian theatre, and its size had been further reduced for the production: over the existing stage and orchestra pit a new stage had been constructed which reached the edge of the balcony. The audience sat in the centre balcony aisle. The side seats were used by the actors at various points, an excellent decision on the part of director and designer Hegarty Lovett. The stage was filled with the traditionally crafted instruments of the gamelan orchestra: an impressive sight, particularly the large gongs. Grey street railings lined the back and sides of the stage. At the rear of the stage they enclosed another smaller stage with a ramp leading from it, calling to mind the deck and gangway of a ship (perhaps corresponding to the line "up the gangways between decks with the emigrants"?). Industrial chic it was not. The railings were the type found in parks, schools and playgrounds: functional, drab and suffocating, they made the space look like a cage.

The play opened with Mark Padmore's rendition of the Schubert song, *Der Leiermann*, from the *Winterreise* cycle, foreshadowing the singing of the torture victim, Pim: "he's singing a lied in the original". The song was extremely effective in establishing a melancholic tone. The lighting was low-key, with a spotlight on Padmore's face, and the stage itself in shadows. This was to be the signature lighting throughout, inducing a heightened attention. When the gamelan orchestra and cohorts

began to play – a solo on violin, followed by drums, xylophones, gongs and tenor saxophone – the overall impression was of an assault on the senses.

Lovett and Dillane spoke alternately, addressing the audience in storyteller mode. I got the impression that Lovett was playing the role of tormentor and Dillane his victim, Pim, although this wasn't, of course, strictly the case. Dillane kicked off his first monologue with a wry, sardonic tone which he retained throughout, eliciting laughter from the audience with a riff about his nails, and lines like, "I'm subject to these whims". Lovett's monologues had a bullish, declarative style which suited the delivery of lines like, "I dig my nails into his armpit thump on skull", "sadism pure and simple", "I claw his left hand to the bone", "take the opener in my right hand move it down along the spine and drive it into the arse not the hole not such a fool the cheek a cheek he cries I withdraw it thump on skull the cries cease it's mechanical". Padmore, meanwhile, moved around the stage, rested against the railings, and looked on as they spoke. To me he was a shadowy but benign presence: a darker imagination might have detected a voyeuristic predator.

Hegarty Lovett demanded a lot of her actors. There was a physical aspect to their performance which must have been a form of torture in itself. She had them enact lines like "kneeling arse on heels hands on ground splayed like feet very clear picture thighs aching the arse rises the head drops touches the straw", and on many occasions Dillane, in particular, had to hold poses resembling yoga *asanas* for lengthy periods. She also had him write some of his lines in the air with his index finger, an action he performed with neurotic, maniacal energy.

Just over three quarters of the way through, a shocking disjunction occurred which spun the performance into overdrive. Given the point at which it happened, I can appreciate Hegarty Lovett's rationale for it: "can't take any more". All of a sudden, the orchestra produced a cacophony of dissonance I described in my notebook as *wail, danger/wail, emergency music*. What followed was a frenetic, highly melodramatic sequence. Smoke filled the stage, the lights went blue. Lovett and Dillane ran around the auditorium like demented sprites. Padmore walked up the ramp at the rear of the stage with his hands over his ears. Lovett banged a xylophone and then banged the railings. Someone cried "help". The atmosphere was distinctly Gothic: I thought of Frankenstein's ship in the ice, a friend thought of *Nosferatu*. The music and madness finally ended with a line from Lovett: "the thing stops".

The play ended with an aural and visual *tour de force*. Lovett kneeled between two gongs at the back of the stage and delivered a series of lines articulated as questions with emphatic "yes" and "no" answers. A source text that is "unbroken no paragraphs no commas not a second for reflection" must be one of the hardest things to adapt as a stage play. The way the stanzas were broken up, the pacing, the rhythm, the delivery of the lines throughout, was superb: a testament to the vision of the director and the skill of the actors.

Fittingly, the production had an aura of relentlessness. Every time you heard the refrain "end of part two" and thought it was going to end, it carried on. The torment just went *on and on*. The line "it still can end it must end only a third to go" got a good laugh. A poet I met in the foyer afterwards called it "the never-ending play". I left feeling totally misanthropic, hating humankind, and hating the audience, in particular, for laughing at every "thump" of poor Pim's skull. My friend said, "It's a release of tension". But in *How It Is*, none of us are left off the hook: "each one of us is at the same time Bom and Pim tormentor and tormented". In their staging of *How It Is (Part 2)* Gare St Lazare Ireland didn't pull any punches: they were imaginative, radical, rigorous, and uncompromising.

Sheila Mannix is a poet and fiction writer with an interest in avant-garde poetics and experimental fiction. She lives in Cork.

[1] See Patrick Bixby, "The Ethno-Politics of Homo-ness: Beckett's *How It Is* and Casenment's *Black*

Diaries", *Irish Studies Review* 20.3, 2012, 243-61.

Masthead image: Mark Padmore, Stephen Dillane and Conor Lovett (Photo: Clare Keogh).

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