

Krapp's Last Tape

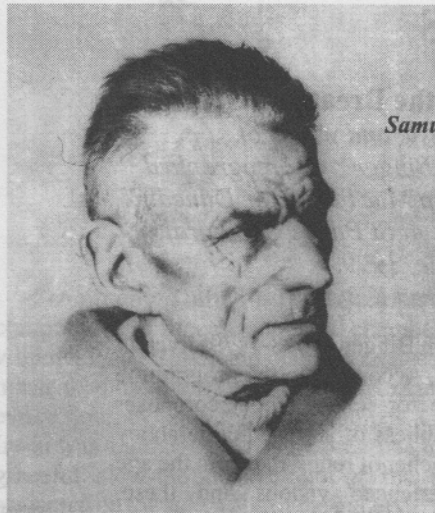
by Samuel Beckett, directed by Peter Falkenberg and performed by Alan Brunton, for Free Theatre, at the University Theatre.

Reviewed by Elizabeth O'Connor

One of the most celebrated of Beckett's plays was here given a Falkenberg twist, springing from the play's initial stage direction, "a late evening in the future". The opening banana and bottle business was extended around the playing of video footage of the younger Krapp's days, his "farewell to love" and the occasion of his mother's death. We watched Krapp watching the younger Krapp on a (presumably Baltic) shore with Effie, in a punt and holding a ball for a dog in a park at the moment of observing the blinds let down for his just-dead mother. Those in the audience who knew the play well would eventually have realised they were watching scenes to be referred to on a sound tape; though this anticipation destroyed the logic of Krapp's later search and selection process. Those who didn't were simply baffled.

The neat banana skin metaphor for the crappiness of life was made laboriously explicit by filming and replay of the exact moment when Krapp stepped and slipped on the carapace of his obsession. Even Krapp's retreats backstage for liquid refreshment were underlined visually with clever lighting which cast the shadow of Krapp drinking onto the stage wall.

Publicity for the production made much of the fascination which the reel-to-reel tape recorder held for Beckett at the time he wrote the play. It is true that Beckett embraced the technologies of film and radio as they came along, and that much of his work includes a preoccupation with the observer and the observed. These facts do not justify the arbitrary insertion of film into Krapp's story. Whether it was done to bring the story "up to date" or to supply specific images of Krapp's past for those audience members deficient in imagination was not clear. The video footage was intrusive and unnecessary. The opening sequence dragged interminably. There was a palpable sense of relief in the audience when Krapp ditched the video monitor and brought out an authentic looking reel-to-reel tape machine.



Samuel Beckett

A. Alvarez described Beckett's typical protagonist as "a hero crucified between learning and clownishness". Krapp is one of the most completely and expansively drawn of these. He has the "spavined gait" which distinguished many of Beckett's heroes. He is trapped in cycles of habit and suffering from which neither past eloquence nor present fumbings can free him. But in contrast to many of Beckett's figures, his past is defined and has specific content. Through the mechanism of the tapes (recorded each year on his birthday), that past is brought into vivid and ironic juxtaposition with the decrepid present.

Though the very agile and physically clever Alan Brunton seemed to go too far in obtuse clumsiness, though his hair-whitening powder flew about the theatre and choked the audience, though the recorded voice of the forward-looking 39-year-old Krapp did not present a robust enough contrast to the dragging utterances of the 69-year-old, though a photographer scurried irritatingly round the edges of the stage, these minor matters did not prevent the play from shining through. Brunton's extraordinary voice made perfect sense of Krapp's fascination with language. Watching his Krapp listen in a trance of loss to his own past went some considerable way to compensate for the tedium with which the evening began.

After replaying the lyrical and unforgettable description of lovers lying in a moving punt, old Krapp heard his younger self brashly declare that he wouldn't want his best years back. Brunton stared motionlessly into blackness as the tape hissed to its end, the lights came down in the slowest fade possible and the audience sat in as close to perfect stillness as you'll get in this hyperactive age, with the after-image of Krapp's staring eyes printed indelibly on their own retinas. The spare elegance of the writing, Beckett's searing vision and Brunton's focused intensity combined here to make compelling and bleak theatre.

- E J^oC