

KRIS VERDONCK/A TWO DOGS COMPANY & HET ZUIDELIJK TONEEL

ACT. Johan Leysen plays Beckett

KAAI THEATER

13 > 15/02 20:30 | KAAISTUDIO'S

THEATRE, VIDEO & INSTALLATION | IN ENGLISH (SURTTITLES IN DUTCH & FRENCH)

performance: 75 min

video: 18 min (in loop) 19:30 > 23:00

installation (cont.) 19:30 > 23:00



in English

Beckett is dead but his legacy lives on in the minds of theatremakers, artists, and enthusiasts. His *Stories and Texts for Nothing (1946-1952)* – about an older man and his impossible search for his place in the world – is the basis of *ACT*. This curated Beckett evening presents a surprising mix of forms: a monologue by Johan Leysen; a video interview with scientist Jean Paul Van Bendegem about consciousness and making sense in a senseless world; and an autonomous scenography, a possible landscape for a Beckett text. Through this combination, theatremaker Kris Verdonck explores a fascination that he shares with Beckett, namely the in-between space, the threshold between presence and absence, between life and death. Do we as humans still have a place in the world in which we are not only increasingly being replaced by machines, but which is also evolving towards inhabitability because of our own actions?

- As a director, Kris Verdonck explores the intersections of the visual arts, theatre, performance and architecture. He found beauty in the catastrophic in *Conversations (at the end of the world)* and *Something (out of nothing)*. *ACT* is part of a four-year research into the connections between Beckett's work – in which (the) Nothing occurs – and the secrets of 14th-century Japanese No-theatre.

A BECKETT EVENING

essay by Kristof Van Baarle.

In *ACT*, Kris Verdonck explores various aspects of human existence on the verge of disappearing in the work of Samuel Beckett. *ACT* approaches Beckett in three ways: first, a monologue with Beckett texts, *Texts for nothing*, performed by Johan Leysen. This monologue is accompanied by a new performative installation, *MASS #2*, a possible landscape for a Beckett text. A video lecture by philosopher and mathematician Jean Paul Van Bendegem is the third part of this Beckett evening, and sketches how throughout the history of Western thinking the unity between body, mind and spirit fell apart.

The triptych of theatre, installation and philosophy shows, as in three acts, each time a different facet of the diamond 'Beckett'. They deepen each other's experience: a particular way of performing brings a way of thinking to life and vice versa, a performative landscape zooms in on the underlying world of or perhaps after the actor and offers a more contemplative experience.

Life beyond meaning

In the West, the twentieth century meant not only a peak in the desire for progress, but also the end of the great stories. What is the meaning of our existence if there is no God or other all-encompassing worldview to justify and guide it? What is the human really, who is also capable of such atrocities, as the world wars have shown. With the disappearance of systems that gave meaning to existence - religion, democracy and nation-state, humanism - a kind of displaced man emerged. Lost, thrown in the world, without a story, only the individual and a void remain. In addition, technological developments are increasingly placing mankind on the same level as machines, making the question of what the 'I' still is increasingly difficult. Beckett's oeuvre is a thorough search to grasp this condition. In many of his texts he turned his gaze inward, looking for what the 'I' is, for how thinking works, for what it is like to exist in a world that does not seem to be ours.

The questions Beckett asked himself were as fundamental as they were unanswerable. Why do we do what we do? Why do we think what we think? Are we the same person today as we were yesterday, or ten years ago? Who's the voice speaking in our heads? Can we trust our memories, the stories we tell ourselves? What is our place in the whole? Is there such a thing as a consciousness and what is it? Beckett's work on memory, the inner voice and the desire to understand a meaningless existence is close to important topics in neuroscience, psychology and

philosophy of the past decades. For *ACT*, Kris Verdonck invited mathematician and philosopher Jean Paul Van Bendegem to reflect on Beckett's work in a video lecture. Van Bendegem sketches a trajectory in Western thinking, which evolves towards ever greater abstraction, until, in a certain sense, we think ourselves away.

Samuel Beckett today

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) is one of the most important writers of the twentieth century. He wrote novels, short stories, poems as well as work for theatre, radio and television. With *Waiting for Godot*, he extended the boundaries of what is considered to be theater – beyond the classical story, beyond meaningful actions. The loneliness and depression, but also the absurdity, madness and violence of a meaningless and increasingly high-tech and commercial environment, became central elements in Beckett, especially in the later works. In this sense, he is still an important point of reference when it comes to the current state of being of humanity, thirty years after his death. Beckett's characters – if that is still how one should call them – are in state of deadlock. They are stuck in their reasoning, in their memories, in past decisions, but also: in the cycle of day and night, in the way life runs its course and makes them go on. At the same time they desire to just live a day without the fundamental and paralyzing doubt that haunts them. For Beckett the famous phrase *I think, therefore I am* is a description of the Sisyphean meanderings of his characters as well as of his writing. What do our emotions and desires still mean, now that they have become commodified, and also predictable and manipulable? The vain urge to find meaning and sense, lead to an impasse in which only repetition, attempts, to keep on trying, are what remains.

The minimal theatre forms and the ways in which he reduces the actor to an object, make Beckett a rich source for the work of Kris Verdonck. Beckett's body of work has been accompanying his work for years. *Huminid*, for example, is a seemingly holographic projection of Johan Leysen, based on Beckett's *Lessness*. *IN* was an installation inspired by Company. Since 2018, Verdonck works on a four-year practical and dramaturgical research into the intersections between Beckett and Japanese Noh theatre (supported by KASK). How do they give shape to the relation between the human and the machine, to a state of being between presence and absence? These are central questions throughout all of Verdonck's installations, choreographies and performances.

Stories and texts for nothing

Between 1946 and 1952, Beckett worked on three novellas and thirteen short prose pieces. These were published together as *Stories and Texts for Nothing*. This collection formed the basis for this Beckett evening. The three novellas, *The expelled*, *The calmative* and *The end*, all deal with an older man leaving his usual habitat, looking for a new place for himself. To stay, to live, to exist. In the thirteen-part *Texts for Nothing*, an older man also appears to be the central figure. However, whereas the novellas are about attempts to a movement outwards, the *Texts for No-*

thing turn inwards. The *Texts for Nothing* are a turning point in Beckett's oeuvre: in them, the last remains of a narrative dissolve (no need for a story, it reads in text IV). Beyond any event, in a limbo that seems far from life, thoughts continue. What remains, are beautiful, dark and deep struggles of a writer, a thinker, an eternal doubter that can't go on, and yet goes on. The texts doubt between light and dark, between speaking and remaining silent, between life and death, hope and despair, between looking for and letting go of a story.

In *ACT* Johan Leysen plays five parts from *Texts for Nothing*. The multitude of internal voices in this text material and the desire to finally understand who speaks, who wants, who lives, form the starting point. With Beckett, that also means a battle with the language itself. With what words can we describe that which seems to escape words? *Texts for Nothing* goes back and forth between the abstraction of language and the creative power of words. Language is a kind of prison, we think - incessantly - in words, we cannot escape language and yet it seems incapable of grasping the essence of existence. In an attempt to do so, Beckett pushes language to its limits, while fully realizing that failure is inevitable. The only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something, Beckett wrote in *Watt*. The voice in *Texts for Nothing* finds itself in the twilight zone between existence and disappearance, sometimes it seems as if it is the last human presence on the planet, of an enormous loneliness. The performer in *ACT* also seems to be in a grey zone. The theatre becomes a typical Beckettian, grey in between space, in which the words keep on grind, the ghosts appear and all is on the verge of being swallowed by the dark.

Poetic landscapes

For *ACT*, Kris Verdonck makes a new autonomous performative installation, *MASS #2*. Four poetic landscapes without humans unfold. A graphite-grey mass flows slowly as if it was water. The matter appears light and yet heavy at the same time. And, as if tectonic plates are interacting, the spectator sees mountains and valleys created before their eyes, only to dissolve in the next instant. A living landscape, a cosmic environment, pure matter, geology in a time-lapse.

The performative landscape could be the grey, the void, in which many Beckett characters find themselves. *MASS #2* also brings another layer of Beckett's universe to the fore: that of a (post-) apocalyptic environment, of a life after the end, after destruction. The system continues, landscapes will form and dissolve, long after the last human will have disappeared.

CREDITS

CONCEPT EN REGIE Kris Verdonck | DRAMATURGIE Kristof van Baarle | PERFORMER Johan Leysen | TECHNISCHE COÖRDINATIE Jan Van Gijsel | KOSTUUMS Eefje Wijnings | PRODUCTIE A Two Dogs Company / Het Zuidelijk Toneel | COPRODUCTIE Kaaithheater | MET DE STEUN VAN Tax Shelter stelsel van de Belgische Federale Overheid, Vlaamse Gemeenschap, Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie | MET DANK AAN Jean Paul Van Bendegem, Dirk Van Hulle en Pim Verhulst

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