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Krapp's Last Tape



Michael Gambon as Krapp in the Gate Theatre production of 'Krapp's Last Tape' by Samuel Beckett. Photo Pat Redmond

by **Patrick Lonergan** Reviewed 29 April

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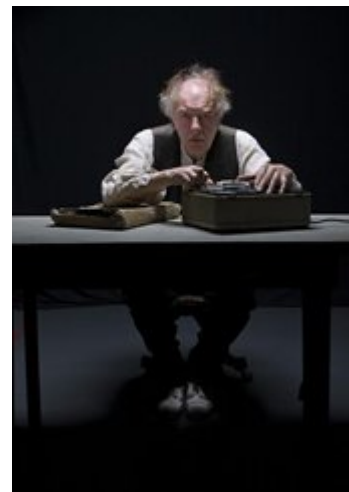
It took Samuel Beckett about three weeks to write *Krapp's Last Tape*. During that time, the play went through seven distinct stages which, according to the scholarship, involved a gradual stripping away of sentimentality: the text retained some realistic qualities, but it also became more surreal and more comical. Perhaps as a result of that textual history, actors playing the role of Krapp often try to avoid evoking too strong an emotional reaction from audiences: we might sympathise with Krapp, but will usually find it difficult to relate to him – and we'll rarely feel inclined to shed tears for him.

Michael Colgan's production of *Krapp* positions itself emphatically against that tradition. It is unashamedly emotional and at times risks being sentimental – but the overall result is to humanise Beckett's protagonist, to give us a production that is both accessible and faithful to the text.

That effect is largely created by Michael Gambon's presentation of Krapp as a much more feeble character than we might expect. As the lights come up, he's lying face down on an empty table. Gradually he rises and, with his white hair sticking out to left and right, his face pale, and his nose reddened (presumably by drink), Krapp looks somewhat like a clown who's been stripped entirely of colour and energy. Gambon's long hands move around his face with a strange mixture of curiosity and bewilderment; he stares into the darkness as if he's trying to gather the strength to carry on.

As he gets to his feet, he seems unsteady. The script calls for his walk to seem

"laborious", but as he moves around the stage, Krapp seems much weaker than that word might imply. As we expect, he slips on a banana skin, but rather than kicking it into the auditorium, he instead flings it, enraged, to the back of the stage – but his arms are so stiff that he finds it difficult to aim. We understand immediately that the force he uses to throw the fruit is generated not by physical strength, but by anger with his own impotence. With the next banana, Gambon delivers a nice visual gag, accidentally throwing away the fruit instead of the skin – but our laughter is quickly mitigated by surprise when we see how long it takes him to bend down to retrieve the fruit, which he then dusts down and eats. In short, the physical infirmity of the character allows the audience to understand why Krapp is unlikely to live to make another tape.



This slows the action down, so that we're almost twenty minutes into the play before the first words are spoken. Gambon delivers his lines in a dry and occasionally cracked voice, and uses a mild inner city Dublin accent, pronouncing the word *spool* so that it sounds a bit like *spew-ell*, for instance. This delivery contrasts with his vocal performance as Krapp's younger self, whose voice is (in keeping with the stage directions) rather pompous: high-pitched and melodic, it has a lightness of tone that emphasises the younger man's complacency. The Irish inflections used for the characterisation of the 69-year-old Krapp is absent for his 39-year-old self, whose accent is more refined – a difference that emphasises how the younger man sought to present an image of himself that the elder one now repudiates.

By far the most surprising moment of the play occurs in Krapp's final monologue, during the making of his 'last tape'. Gambon growls his way through his review of the year that's just concluded, telling of how he sat shivering in the park, how he had an encounter with Fanny the whore, and so on. Suddenly, the speech breaks down, and Gambon emits a pained and painful wail that sounds almost like a gasp for air. And just as suddenly he stops, flinging the tapes and his ledger from the table.



This outburst of emotion is strangely effective. It instantly quietsens the audience: no-one coughs, no-one murmurs, no-one moves. Instead, like Krapp, we listen carefully as the final tape plays – so that as the last words are spoken (about how Krapp wouldn't want his past back), we understand that he has achieved a moment of self-realisation that almost gives him a tragic grandeur.

Gambon's wail reminded me of Lear's three howls for Cordelia: a recognition that speech has become impossible – that words, in fact, have for too long been used to keep emotion at bay. We've seen this effect put to good use in other Beckett plays: *Not I* to an extent; perhaps *Breath*. But in other productions of *Krapp*, the contrast at work is usually that between speech and silence – here it is instead between verbal and non-verbal expression.

Most directors and many actors would resist making Krapp's emotional state – and his impending death – too obvious, perhaps reasoning that audiences can be trusted to work it out for themselves. Yet the decision to emphasise Krapp's emotional frailty and physical fragility is justified by the script. Krapp tells us that he read a page from *Effie Briest* every day, and that it "scalded the eyes out of" him; he's clearly an emotional being, in other words – indeed, he seems to wallow in his own sadness somewhat. This is a feature of his characterisation that we tend not to see presented on stage very often.

As a producer, Colgan has shown us dozens of times before that doing what is apparently easy can sometimes be very risky. It's interesting to see him adopting that approach to direction: this is a version of *Krapp* that many directors would avoid staging for fear of seeming sentimental or superficial. His risk proves enormously worthwhile: this *Krapp* has an intensity – and an integrity – that reveals features of the play we've rarely seen before.

Patrick Lonergan teaches at NUI Galway, and is Director of the Synge Summer School for Irish drama (www.syngesummerschool.org (<http://www.syngesummerschool.org>))

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Krapp's Last Tape by Samuel Beckett

29 April – 15 May, 2010

Produced by [Gate Theatre](#)

In [Gate Theatre](#)

Directed by Michael Colgan

Lighting Design: James McConnell

With: Michael Gambon

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