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Title	All that Fall by Samuel Beckett, Pan Pan Theatre Company
Author(s)	Loneragan, Patrick
Publication Date	2011
Publication Information	Loneragan, Patrick. (2011). All that Fall by Samuel Beckett, Pan Pan Theatre Company. Irish Theatre Magazine Online.
Publisher	Irish Theatre Magazine
Link to publisher's version	http://itmarchive.ie
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/6663

Downloaded 2024-03-13T07:11:58Z

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All That Fall



The recording of 'All That Fall', a radio play by Samuel Beckett, presented by Pan Pan Theatre Company. Photo: Ros Kavanagh

by **Patrick Lonergan** Reviewed 23 August

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The first thing to say about Pan Pan's performance of Beckett's 1956 radio play is this: if you're planning on going to it, please don't read this review – it would be a shame to spoil the surprise that awaits you.

And perhaps the second important point is how refreshing (and unusual) it is to be surprised by an Irish production of a play by Beckett – a writer whose works are usually treated so reverentially that they're in danger of becoming museum pieces. While this is a very faithful rendition of the play, Pan Pan provide an experience that is genuinely different from anything you'll have encountered in the theatre before.

Under Gavin Quinn's direction, the company also provides an excellent performance of the play – perhaps even an exemplary one. *All That Fall* is one of Beckett's most explicitly Irish works, giving us a recognisable Dublin setting, several allusions to Synge (especially *Well of the Saints*), and a number of wryly mischievous statements about the death of the Irish language, partition, and other Irish controversies. So it's rewarding to hear the play being performed by a fine Irish cast, each of whom seems particularly well suited to his or her role. It makes sense, for instance, that David Pearse would play Mr Slocum, a character whose growing exasperation is signalled by Pearse's rapid movement up and down the vocal scale – just as John Kavanagh seems an obvious

choice for Mr Barrell, a man who (as his name suggests) should have a voice that is both sonorous and authoritative. Similarly, as Dan Rooney, Andrew Bennett gives a characteristically nuanced performance, drawing out each of his words as if the act of utterance is itself distasteful to him.

Other casting choices are more surprising. The depth of Phelim Drew's voice in the role of Christy makes that character seem rather more sinister than he might appear on the page – which heightens the sense of dread that lingers from the performance's first minutes. Likewise, Judith Roddy's full-bodied and melodic performance as Miss Fitt makes that character seem much more threatening than I'd imagined her. As happens in many of the best Beckett productions, such decisions about performance do not so much alter the play's meaning as excavate meanings that hadn't seemed immediately obvious.

That blend of the expected and the innovative is a major feature of the play's central performance, by Áine Ní Mhuirí as Maddy Rooney. Maddy is one of Beckett's most likeable characters, mostly because of the contrast between her description of herself and her actions. Maddy asserts that her life has ceased to have value and meaning, yet the features of her personality that she denies – her sexual desire, her sense of humour, perhaps even her sense of optimism – often burst forth unexpectedly. Ní Mhuirí shows that Maddy has been wearied and cowed by her life, but she leaves enough energy in her performance to indicate the character's residual depth.

These vocal performances are complemented by Jimmy Eadie's sound design, which reveals clearly that Beckett imagined his play not just as a text but as a score, with each sound having several potential meanings. So, for example, the noise of Maddy's feet dragging along the path is represented vividly and realistically – but in a way that also sounds hauntingly like the troubled breathing of a body close to death.

All of this is very accomplished and admirable, but the surprise – and the real pleasure – of this production lies in the design by Aedín Cosgrove. As we enter the Project Space, we're confronted not with a conventional performance area but with a room full of rocking-chairs. On the wall to the right of the entrance, there's an enormous bank of lights, which flood the auditorium with a soft yellow and gold haze; on the left a smaller cluster of blue lights soften that mood. To sit between the two sets of lights creates the impression of occupying a space somewhere between an intense and interrogative sunlight and a comforting moonlight – and indeed as the performance progresses, the lights seem to shift us gradually from day to night. We also have dozens of individual lights hanging from the ceiling, each of which is positioned a few feet above the chairs. When the room is lit only by these individual lights, the impression created is that we're surrounded by stars, floating in the cosmos.

What Pan Pan have done, then, is to create a space that is almost entirely free of sensory distractions, allowing us to listen to the play with a profound concentration. That technique allows for a better appreciation of the text, but it also imposes upon the audience many of the sensations that are described by Maddy and the other characters: a sense of blindness, a feeling of isolation despite being surrounded by others, perhaps even a sense of abandonment in space. So we're not just passively receiving *All That Fall* but actively experiencing it. This is a terrific enactment of Pan Pan's core principle that the audience must collaborate in the creation of a performance's meaning.

But it's also a surprisingly intense experience in its own right, a reminder that our daily lives are so often filled with noise, clutter, and a million pointless distractions – even in the theatre. And it's a reminder too of how our attitude to presence has changed in recent years: how we can occupy a space with others, but not really be there because we're on a mobile phone or tweeting or checking emails. This production of *All That Fall* brings us back to Beckett, and allows us to appreciate his play in a setting that seems almost purified. But by stripping away everything except the relationship between the play and its audience, Pan Pan achieve something even more valuable: they bring us back to ourselves, and thus to each other.

Patrick Lonergan lectures at NUI Galway. His most recent book is Synge and His Influences.

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All That Fall by Pan Pan Theatre Company

23 August - 2 September, 2011

Produced by [Pan Pan Theatre Company](#)

In [Project Arts Centre](#)

Directed by Gavin Quinn

Designed by Aedín Cosgrove

Sound Design by James Eadie

Performed by Andrew Bennett, Phelim Drew, John Kavanagh, Nell Klemencic, Áine Ní Mhuirí, Robbie O'Connor, Joey O'Sullivan, David Pearse, Daniel Reardon, Judith Roddy.

Video

All That Fall, by Samuel Beckett ...



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