Beckett in London: Off Into Off-West End

Ikhtisad Ahmed

Paris and New York may lay claim to being supreme in many things artistic, but London reigns as the theatrical capital of the world. A strong structure and sustained interest amongst the citizens who make up its enthusiasts, current and prospective, make it so.

London's Theatreland is comprised of the mainstream West End (commercial theatres), the non-commercial ones such as the Barbican, the Globe, etc., and what is termed as Off-West End - experimental, eclectic, daring to do what the Big Boys won't, containing within it the avant-gardism of Fringe theatre. One of the more solid names in the Off-West End sector is the Royal Court theatre. This venue is known for giving voice to artistically significant projects. And so it transpired that the esteemed Irish actress Lisa Dwan brought to this prestigious theatre three solo plays of Samuel Beckett: *Not I, Footfalls* and *Rockaby* (Beckett's last play). In that order. There is a sense of history here - it was this theatre that saw the production of *Not I* in 1973 (with actor Billie Whitelaw having been extensively coached by Beckett himself), and *Footfalls* in 1976.

I therefore hasten, with lithe steps and blithe heart, to the Royal Court in London weather, colder and bleaker than any Beckettian cosmos. I digress! Hark! The bar bells ring, and the eager crowd hotfoots into the dimly lit space. No sooner are we seated than the lights go out, plunging us into a pitch black darkness, where I cannot be entirely sure that my eyes are open, let alone see the tip of my nose. A deathly silence, heightened by no-one moving or daring to breathe, takes hold. A muttering breaks it. Before we can decipher whether this is a residue of the streets outside, it grows into a distinct female voice emanating from a mouth that has come "out...into this world." We collectively exhale as this mouth, suspended eight feet above the stage, talks at the speed of thought. It is a sound full of angst and fury, of hope and despair, summarising, contradicting, reaffirming life. We hold our breath and try to comprehend, but before we can reach a conclusion, the white noise full of meaning devolves into muttering. As it began, so it ends, barely ten minutes passing in-between.

Just as our nerves begin to settle, a bell tolls and a pair of feet appear stage left. Measured steps see the two move slowly to the other end, then "seven eight nine wheel." A white apparition materialises hazily from these moving feet. The frail female form oscillates, each step deliberate, accounted for. The echoes of the metronomic footfalls in the darkness are the only sounds we hear. When the silence is deafening, the spectral figure stops where the feet appeared and speaks in an unflinching monotone. She wakes her mother up from a deep sleep. The two converse. Their separate voices become gradually indistinguishable as their melancholic discourse meanders aimlessly. Theirs could be but one life, bound by the pain of existence. I feel a churning in the pit of my stomach as each word of their exchange and the ever-echoing footsteps ring loud, for "the motion alone is not enough."

Silent contemplation sans the usual whispering and shifting between scenes fills the brief pause before the final piece begins. A woman in black is being rocked back and forth on a rocking-chair. "More," she says, and a voice speaks to her. "More," she says when it stops, and the ethereal poem continues devilishly. Defying the laws of physics, it gets darker. The woman's still body swings with the chair. It is there "to rock her off." We cannot be sure who is speaking anymore, but those words echo as the darkness thickens, as if they are the last words we will ever hear.

A summary or a premonition. That is how it ends. We sense the seconds tick away into minutes before we can move to bring our hands together in appreciation.

Together, the three playlets comprised a commentary on life, mortality and the withering away that constitutes the journey, defined by loneliness. Unlike Beckett's most famous piece, *Waiting for Godot* (a celebrated performance of which I witnessed Naseeruddin Shah in, at the National Museum stage in Dhaka in 1998) these were originally written in English. This contributes to the distinct rhythm of each. The hour-long performance is an intensely demanding one for Dwan, even with her long experience of Beckett. Here she delivered a compelling performance.

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2014 DSC Prize for South Asian Literature

Waqar Ahmed

Last month, Cyrus Mistry won the prestigious DSC Prize for South Asian Literature for his novel, *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer*. In doing so, he has continued the prize's tradition of selecting little-known and debut authors over heavyweights. The jury for the 2014 prize selected Mr. Mistry over household names like Mohsin Hamid (*How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*) and Nadeem Aslam (*The Blind Man's Garden*). Last year's winner, debut novelist Jeet Thayil (*Narcopolis*), beat out Amitav Ghosh (*River of Smoke*) and Mohammed Hanif (*Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*). The DSC prize has done much to give voice to South Asian writers, especially via the announcements of its long and shortlists. Each year readers are given a sampling of ten to fifteen strong novels—written or translated into English—from the region. Though the English language, taught in schools and spoken by the elites of South Asian countries, remains a literary and educational unifier of sorts, it is time for the DSC Prize to give more exposure to works written in the regional tongues.

Among the entries longlisted this year, two were works in translation from Malayalam (*Book of Destruction* and *Goat Days,* both shortlisted) and another one was from Marathi (*Cobalt Blue*). The longlists from previous years of the prize do not contain more than two or three works in translation. One has to wonder whether there weren't deserving translations from Bengali or Urdu or Sinhala this year. More than likely, there were strong novels written in those languages that have not been translated into English.

It would be difficult to construct a jury of judges literate in every major language of the region. But the DSC, or a similarly resourceful company or organisation, should take steps to sponsor translations of novels into English, because the reality of the literary world for a South Asian remains that recognition and financial rewards still come from works written in English. Perhaps a selection system should be devised such that a novel from each country in South Asia, written in one of the native languages, could be nominated for a lucrative DSC-type award. And one of the rewards for winning could be translation into English. This would be similar to the "Arab Booker" model where the prize not only carries a handsome purse, but also translation into English. The task would be difficult. All Arabic novels are published in classical Arabic and not in any of the regional dialects. As mentioned above, the same is not true for South Asia, where several languages are spoken and studied within any given country. Still, a "native language prize" would give exposure to countries like Burma, Nepal and the Maldives that have not had novelists selected for The DSC Prize's long or shortlists. Such a prize would also celebrate the literary merits of the many languages of South Asia.

Waqar Ahmed's *novel and short story collection are waiting for a publisher. He will review* Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer *in next month's column.*