

CONOR MCPHERSON'S VIEW OF *ENDGAME* BY SAMUEL BECKETT

Maria Rita Teixeira Silva Köster

Cultura Inglesa, São Paulo

"After Beckett, nothing in the theatre was the same, particularly for Irish playwrights. He gave me license to write about time." – Frank McGuinness (qtd. in Harrington 174)

Abstract:

Conor McPherson (1971) is considered to be one of the most innovative Irish playwrights, with an amazing gift for storytelling. However, he is a screen writer and film director as well. So far, he has written the script of *I Went Down* (1997), *Saltwater* (2001), *The Actors* (2003) and *The Eclipse* (2009); the last three he has also directed. McPherson was responsible for the adaptation of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* for Channel Four's "Beckett on Film" series. This article aims at showing how he transposes Beckett's stage directions of the play *Endgame* to the screen.

Keywords: Conor McPherson, Beckett, stage directions, *Endgame*, humour.

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Frank McGuinness, an internationally successful Irish playwright, states the importance of Samuel Beckett's work to his generation. Beckett is seen as an example of options outside the expectations of Irish Drama's portrayal of the national life at home. Before Beckett, Irish drama often depicted peasant or working-class characters in realistic kitchen settings. Moreover, most Irish plays were based more on text and language rather than movement and image. The first play by Beckett to be performed in Ireland was *Waiting for Godot*, which is considered to be Beckett's most influential work. It was staged in Dublin in 1955 at the Pike Theatre and then transferred to the famous Gate Theatre where it ran for more than a year. The setting in *Godot*, a country road with a tree, was certainly not recognised as a setting of a typical Irish play, and we cannot say that the dialogues between the characters are more important than their "movements" on stage. Like *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett's next major play, *Endgame*, was to be performed at the Pike Theatre as part of the Dublin International Theatre Festival in 1958. However, due to a disagreement with the archbishop of Dublin, Beckett decided to withdraw his play in protest and announced a ban on all his works in Ireland that lasted until 1960.

In 1981, the Irish government founded the Samuel Beckett Centre, at Trinity College, and his works have been consistently presented at the Gate Theatre as well as other theatres in Dublin and other Irish cities. According to Harrington (164), the Irish critic Anthony Roche states that the "ghostly founding father" of contemporary Irish drama is Samuel Beckett. Beckett's plays have certainly influenced the work of other Irish playwrights such as Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Thomas Kilroy, Marina Carr and the internationally recognized playwright-Conor McPherson.

McPherson directed one of Beckett's plays, *Endgame*, for the series "Beckett on Film", on Channel 4, produced by Blue Angel Films. In an interview to the American Professor Gerald C. Wood (77), he comments that when he got the chance to make *Endgame* as a film, he could not change anything because of the Beckett estate. Since Beckett's

death, all rights for performance of his plays are handled by the Beckett estate, currently managed by Edward Beckett, the author's nephew. The estate has a controversial reputation for maintaining firm control over the performance of Beckett's plays and does not grant licences to productions that do not strictly adhere to the writer's stage directions. Conor McPherson was willing to follow Beckett's instructions in filming "a careful, moving, and often humorous rendition of the play." Wood adds that the result is a film that has more McPherson touches than just the emphasis on humour.

The aim of this article is to analyse the film *Endgame* to point out some of McPherson's possible touches. I will compare mainly the stage directions of the play to the film, looking for probable differences and trying to link them, whenever possible, to Conor McPherson's work – plays and films. The main sources of this research will be the film *Endgame*, directed by Conor McPherson for the series "Beckett on Film" on Channel 4, and the play *Endgame*, by Samuel Beckett in the edition published by Faber and Faber in 2006. Firstly, a brief account of Conor McPherson's life and work will be given. Then, I attempt to define stage directions and offer a view of the functions or importance of Beckett's stage directions throughout his plays. Finally, the results of the analysis of the film are presented.

Conor McPherson: Life and Work

Born in Dublin in 1971, Conor McPherson attended University College Dublin- UCD, earning his MA in Philosophy in 1993. As a member of Dramsoc at UCD he began to write and direct his own plays. These first works are still unpublished, and as McPherson affirmed, it was a period in which he tried to imitate the satiric style of American playwrights, such as Arthur Miller and David Mamet (qtd. in Wood 2).

McPherson believes that he found his own voice with the monologue *Rum and Vodka* first performed at UCD in 1992 and

published in 1996. Other published plays include *The Good Thief* (1994), *This Lime Tree Bower* (1995) and *Saint Nicholas* (1997)¹. All of them are monologues and that may explain why, in some theatre reviews, critics state that McPherson has been influenced by Samuel Beckett's style.

One of his most famous plays is *The Weir*, first performed in London in 1997, and in 1998 at the Gate Theatre in Dublin. Then, it was premiered in the United States in 1999. It is a play that involves storytelling, as there are four male characters and a female one in an Irish rural pub telling each other horror stories connected to their own lives. Some of his other successful plays are *Dublin Carol* (2000), *Port Authority* (2001), *Come on Over* (2001), *Shining City* (2004) and *The Seafarer* (2006). Screenplays include *I Went Down* (1997), *Saltwater* (2001) and *The Actors* (2003), the last two also directed by McPherson.

McPherson's film career had actually started three years before *The Weir* was produced. In 1994, the Irish producer Robert Walpole and the director Paddy Breathnach saw McPherson's second monologue, *The Good Thief*, at the Theatre Festival in Dublin. Both of them were very impressed by the playwright's work and within a year contacted him to write the shooting script for *I Went Down* (McPherson). The film became one of the most triumphant Irish independent films, receiving an award for Best New Screenplay at the San Sebastian Film Festival in 1997.

Saltwater (2001), McPherson's debut as a film director, is an adaptation of *This Lime Tree Bower*, his third monologue. When comparing the process of filming *Saltwater* to his adaptation of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, McPherson reveals that he probably prefers working with new work rather than set texts (qtd. in Wood 131) because he has more freedom to rewrite scenes or change lines. He told Wood that he had tried to change a line of *Endgame*, which he thought was more a translation issue: when Clov sees a small boy at the window and Hamm says "More Complications! Not an underplot, I trust". In Conor McPherson's view if Beckett were alive, he would

have agreed to change this for "Not a subplot, I hope". However, Edward Beckett, Beckett's nephew and executor of his estate, said that nothing could be done, as they "couldn't mess with Samuel Beckett's work" (qtd. in Wood 131).

McPherson believes that there is a universality of concern, which is the basic fear of being alone, and Beckett took that to an extreme and made it very formal: "We're alone. Deal with it. Laugh at it. Shout at it." McPherson is a bit gentler: "Yeah, you are alone. I don't know how we are going to deal with it" (qtd. in Wood 141). Both writers share the tragicomic use of stories, ideas and the human face, haunted by loss, isolation and silence.

Defining Stage Directions

J. A. Cuddon defines stage directions as the "notes incorporated in or added to the script of a play to indicate the moment of a character's appearance, character and manner; the style of delivery; the actor's movements; details of location, scenery and effects" (862).

Manfred Pfister distinguishes two layers in the printed text of a play: the primary and secondary text. He places the stage directions in the secondary text, explaining that they refer to either the actor or the visual and acoustic context within which one performs. The stage directions that refer to the actor are instructions related to manner and timing of entrances and exits, physical features, mask and costumes, gesture and mime and the interaction among the characters. On the other hand, the context stage directions give instructions related to setting, lighting, music and sound, special effects and changes of scene or act. However, Pfister points out that stage directions may also be found, implicitly, in the primary text, giving as an example an extract from Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*,² in which a character says to the other, "you're too refined and sensitive, Dooniasha. You dress yourself up like a lady, and you do your hair like one too" (16). Pfister comments that for purists of theatrical form the more powerful the dramatic

dialogue, the more it will convey the suspense, tension and atmosphere, and the less it will entrust to the stage directions.

For Patrice Pavis, stage directions are considered to be a text usually written by the dramatist which is not pronounced by the actors on the stage but helps the reader to understand the way a play should be staged (206). In Portuguese, stage directions can be translated as *indicações cênicas*, *rubricas* or *didascálias*. The last one comes from the Greek word *didaskalia*, meaning instruction or, more precisely, the instructions given by the dramatic poet to the actors showing their respective roles in a play.

Luiz Fernando Ramos draws an extensive panorama of the role of stage directions from the cavemen to contemporary writers, focusing on Samuel Beckett and the utility of looking into stage directions while analysing his plays.

Beckett's Stage Directions

Ramos states that in Beckett's plays, the stage directions are as important as the dialogues, not only for the readers of the literary text but also for the audience. Therefore, it would be incorrect to classify Beckett's stage directions as a secondary text. In his point of view, "stage directions reflect, much more than the dialogues involved, the theatrical project of this author and his specific procedures towards stage physicality" ("Beckett's Stage Directions" 29). Since his first play, *Eleutheria*, to *Catastrophe*, one of the last ones, stage directions are crucial and could not be disregarded by directors who are putting up Beckett's plays on stage. In fact, Beckett's stage directions establish a physical occupation of the stage that if not carried out by directors could jeopardize the understanding of the plot.

Beckett's theatre is a combination of words and physical actions; therefore, both are important to the development of the play. "Stage directions become quite as crucial to the plot's course as the spoken text" (Ramos, "Beckett's Stage Directions" 31). In *Endgame*, for instance,

Clov tells Hamm that he will leave him, but he stays on the stage until the end of the scene. It is in the stage direction that we have this piece of information, and if it were not followed during the performance, it would definitely have altered the idea of having an open ending, without any resolution as in the well-made plays.

According to Ramos ("Beckett's Stage Directions" 32), when Beckett wrote *Catastrophe*, with thirty-five years of experience in theatrical practice behind him, he was fully aware of the need to determine the movement of each actor, as well as the actor's speech, so that the performance could have the effect that he expected it to have in the audience. Ramos observes that there is some sort of flexibility in the stage directions of Beckett's first works and such flexibility tends to disappear as he starts to stage his own plays. His stage directions went under a process of auto-sophistication becoming more and more detailed, working as a control and operational instrument to guarantee the stage physicality he might have had in mind.

Anna McMullan, in an article analysing Beckett as a director, comments on his "resistance to productions of his plays which depart from the precise stage directions indicated in the texts" (196). She gives an example of a dispute between Beckett and Robert Brustein of the American Repertory Theatre that ended up in court, because Beckett did not accept their production of *Endgame*, saying that it had ignored his stage directions. According to Beckett, the American Repertory Theatre production was a complete parody of his play because his *Endgame* required an empty room and two small windows.

Conor McPherson during an interview³ mentions that he felt that *Endgame* was very filmic because it is set in a room, one location. And he adds, "I discussed with Edward Beckett [the executor of Beckett's estate] that I would need to somehow situate this room. They seem to be beside the sea in this room, with two windows. This could be an attic. And he said: yeah, it could be. That gave us the freedom to set it in an attic. Once we had that, I could see it as a film".

Let us now observe the stage directions of *Endgame* to see how McPherson transposes them to the screen.

Stage Directions in *Endgame*: Play and Film

Hopefully, the film will demystify Beckett's reputation for being hard going. I just wanted to make sure it was funny, because, if it was funny, it could be understood. It's a comedy, a bittersweet comedy. (McPherson, "Endgame")

Endgame was written in French in 1957. Hamm, who is blind and unable to walk, and Clov, Hamm's servant, occupy "a bare interior". Nagg and Nell, Hamm's parents, are in ashbins in a corner, and sometimes pop up to talk. Clov looks out of the two small windows with a telescope. The world outside seems dead and grey. Daily rituals are performed *ad nauseam*. "Why this farce, day after day?" asks Nell. Hamm and Clov have both "had enough". They repeatedly discuss whether or not Clov will leave, and why he stays. Hamm asks Clov to kill him, but he will not. However, Nell dies. Finally, Clov says he is leaving once again and returns "dressed for the road", but he stands watching Hamm until the "curtain falls". This is the synopsis of the film directed by Conor McPherson, starring Michael Gambon (Hamm) and David Thewlis (Clov), with Charles Simon (Nagg) and Jean Andreson (Nell). The director of photography was Donal Gilligan, with costume design by Consolata Boyle and set design by Clodagh Conroy. The editor was Mary Finlay.

Beckett's bare interior space is imagined as an attic, with two small windows, one on the left and the other on the right, both high up at the back of the room. In the centre of the room, Hamm, covered with a dirty white sheet, is sitting in an old red armchair with wheels. The two ashbins are also covered with a similar sheet. The walls are painted in dark grey from the ceiling to the middle and in an old faded red, from middle to the floor. The window curtains are also reddish and they

seem to be filthy. It is interesting to notice that this room reminds the nearly empty stages of McPherson's first monologues. In Beckett's stage directions there is a picture hanging near the door with its face to the wall. However, we can only notice such a picture in the film when Clov, coming with the alarm clock, tries to put it up in the picture's place. Moreover, instead of the door we can see stairs with four or five steps, leading to the kitchen–Clov's exit.

The film starts with the camera focusing on one of the windows; the curtains are not completely drawn and we can see light coming from the outside. It is also possible to hear the sea as background sound. Then, there is a slow zooming out to Clov's face profile. His face is not very red as in Beckett's play but it seems to be a bit dirty with some scars, a bigger one on his upper lip. Clov is motionless by the stairs; he is wearing striped pyjamas, black slippers and a checked dressing gown. Beckett does not describe Clov's clothes so precisely at the beginning, only at the end of the play when he enters "dressed for the road", but he gives us a full description of Hamm's clothes, which is closely followed by McPherson.

Clov's movements before he starts to talk are pretty similar to the movements described in the stage directions. There are only small differences: for instance, he takes four instead of six steps towards the window on the right and he places the sheet that is taken from the ashbins on the floor before uncovering Hamm. Hamm's first speech and movements also follow Beckett's instructions. Nevertheless, it seems that there are not so many pauses. In fact, in the interview to Channel 4, Conor McPherson mentioned that the dynamic of a film is much faster than a play on the stage. He explains that in the theatre, actors have to project their voices so they have to pause after each line, sounding artificial and unreal now and then. However, on film actors can talk at an ordinary volume, the conversation is more natural without so many pauses: "Whenever there was a stage direction for a pause, I didn't tend to be too reverent about that. I didn't tend to be too reverent about that. I didn't want to have very long pauses—I thought that a pause can be a tiny beat, a tiny breath. So we kept it lively."

Michael Worton sees the pauses in the play as crucial (75). They are silences of inadequacy when the characters cannot find the words they need; silences of repression, when they are surprised by the attitude of their interlocutor; and silences of anticipation when they are waiting for the answer of the other that will give them a temporary sense of existence. Another role for the pauses is to leave the reader/spectator space and time to explore the blank spaces between the words and therefore fill them creatively in order to establish possible individual meanings, or lack of meaning. In the film, it is the camera that chooses for us, spectators, what we focus on.

Apart from the absence of pauses, McPherson also adds a remarkable aspect to Clov's role. Each time Clov exits in the film, he comes back wearing a different item of clothing. When Hamm whistles for the first time, Clov comes to the room wearing a grey woollen cardigan over his pyjamas instead of his dressing gown. Later on, after Nagg tells his story about the tailor, Clov comes back wearing black trousers, the top of his pyjamas and suspenders beneath the cardigan. When Hamm finishes his story about the man and the hungry child, he whistles to Clov who enters with a striped shirt, a dark grey waistcoat and smart black leather shoes. Then, when Clov exits to kill the rat in the kitchen, Hamm delivers a long speech whistling to Clov at the end. This time Clov comes in wearing a black tie. At the end, Clov is wearing a full-length dark grey coat, a Panama hat and a raincoat is over his arm. He is also holding a large brown bag with a big black umbrella strapped on it. McPherson might have wanted to create a sense that something is changing for Clov throughout the story. Little by little he seems to be summing up courage to leave Hamm. Yet, we still do not know whether he leaves Hamm or not, because he remains inside the room until the very end of the film.

Another feature added to Clov's character is related to his inability to walk. During the first scenes he walks with difficulty, but he is able to go downstairs to his kitchen, to go up and down the ladder, and when he is trying to have an idea, the camera shows his feet pacing to and fro.

As the film goes on, his difficulty at walking seems to increase. He comes to the room with his hand on his back as if he is in pain—maybe backache and after taking Hamm for a walk, he leans against the back of his armchair. There is also a moment, when Clov is checking if Nagg wants to listen to Hamm's story, in which, instead of straightening up his body as suggested on Beckett's instructions, he remains in the same position till the end of the scene.

Nagg's and Nell's faces are very white as described in the stage directions, and both of them have got the same sort of make up, dark purplish eye shadow and some lipstick to contrast with the off colour of their faces. Nagg's nightcap and Nell's lace cap seem to have been white one day and now they are grey due to dirtiness. According to Beckett's direction Clov is still on the stage when Nagg appears for the first time asking for his "pap". However, in the film we do not see Nagg until Clov leaves the stage. Then, Hamm whistles for Clov who informs in a very low voice, as if whispering to Hamm, that there is no more pap, no more nature. A bit further, there is another difference before we first meet Nell. Nagg knocks only once, instead of twice, on the lid of her bin. Moreover, during the time Nagg is telling his story, the camera is first on Hamm and then on Nell, who listens attentively. In a play, we have full view of the stage all the time and it is the spectator who chooses where to focus.

Hamm cannot walk and asks Clov to take him for "a little turn. Not too fast! Right round the world!" Clov goes behind the armchair and pushes it; in this scene, the camera shows Hamm's feet moving excitedly on the air as if he were a child who is taking a walk on a stroller. It seems a pretty odd movement for someone who cannot walk properly, and I believe that Beckett would not have accepted such movement. In the same scene, we can notice another difference. When Hamm is near the wall, he is not able to apply his ears against it, and so he only touches the wall with his hands. These movements might have been McPherson's idea, because he mentioned during the interview already cited that they "had to be lively and inventive

with the camera to create humour and pathos and keep surprising the audience".

In the play there is a bit of slapstick comedy, humour based on physical actions such as people falling over or hitting each other. Clov losing his balance on the ladder and dropping the telescope and Hamm's toy dog are examples of such comedy. McPherson's aim was to bring out most of the comedy in the film; therefore, he introduces other movements. Taking the flea scene as an example, before telling Hamm that he has a flea, Clov scratches his belly with only one finger at first, then with two or three, until he drops the telescope and begins to scratch himself with both hands. Moreover, the toy dog in the film makes an odd noise which was not present in Beckett's instructions. And when Hamm wants to touch the dog that is on the floor, Clov does not help him by taking his hand as suggested in the play, but he tries to place the dog nearer Hamm's hand, as if they are playing hide and seek. A third example would be when Clov taps his own knee while laughing at Hamm's story about the guy who had been offered a job as a gardener. These alterations in the characters movements add a certain type of humour to the scenes, an awkward unnatural humour; after all, in Nell's words, "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness."

The focus on the human face is what indicates more of McPherson's tastes as a filmmaker. As in his own film, *Saltwater*, the camera goes from one character to the other and we, as viewers, are invited to observe their faces and reactions. When Hamm is telling his story, for instance, we can see Nagg nodding, and when Nagg is talking about his love for Turkish delight, which is also over in the play, the camera first focuses on Hamm and Clov facing each other and then, on Clov's sad face. Sometimes one character is speaking but the close up is on another character's profile. In one of the scenes that Hamm asks Clov to take a look at the earth or the sea, Clov is wondering if he is crazy—"Sometimes I wonder if I'm in my right mind." However, we cannot see him nor the movements he is supposed to do in the play, because the camera is focused on Hamm's face reacting to Clov's despair. Moreover, after

Clov informs Hamm that there is no pain killer left, Hamm screams, "What'll I do?" but we are able to observe Clov's happy face and his sarcastic smile. Violence and humour are also an odd pair throughout the film. Hamm grabs Clov's arm violently while enlightening him about the mad painter and Clov reacts by rubbing his injured arm in a comic way. It seems that with the camera movements, McPherson reinforces the mismatch between words and actions presented in Beckett's play.

Finally, it is also worth pointing out the way lighting is used in the film. Beckett only mentions grey light at the beginning of his stage directions. McPherson varies the intensity of the light throughout the story. When the camera shows the whole room there is a darker illumination. But when the focus is on the characters and/or their faces, lights are brighter. However, during the scene that Clov takes Hamm to the window and Hamm mentions he can feel a ray of sunshine on his face, the room gets even darker. At the end, when Hamm covers his face with his large blood-stained handkerchief, the camera is on him, and then it goes backwards, focusing on the alarm clock that is ticking on top of Nagg's ashbin, and slowly the lights start to fade to total darkness.

Conclusion

Conor McPherson has certainly tried to obey Beckett's stage directions closely. However, during the analysis of his *Endgame* it was possible to notice some of his personal touches. The setting, the characters' costumes, their reactions to what was being said either through movement or facial expressions, lighting and above all, the movement of the camera, are some features that were observed as being different. By choosing to focus on a certain element, McPherson also shares us his own view on Beckett's *Endgame*, a play he believes to be perfect.

Beckett's plays, and *Endgame* in particular, are almost like a template of the perfect play. It has a nice beginning, it introduces the characters in an very good way, it gives you just enough information all the time to keep you going, and just when we think that something is just beginning to maybe dip or drag a little bit, he introduces a mad new element which fires it all up again.⁴

Last but not least, it is important to mention that McPherson is known for possessing an "amazing gift for storytelling" (Wood). Storytelling definitely plays an important role for the *Endgame* characters; Nagg tells a joke about a tailor, Nagg and Nell are always reminiscing their past, when they got engaged and the day they crashed, and Clov unwillingly listens to Hamm's peculiar story day after day. Actually, Hamm spends his time telling a story that like the play is endless, and it is Clov who "reads" for him through the telescope the "stage directions" of a deprived outside world. No matter how "precise" Clov's impressions are, they do not create only one possible image for all of us. Beckett's stage directions for *Endgame* also give room for more than one image, and in the film Conor McPherson presents his own perspective of the play.

Notes

1. The dates in the parenthesis refer to the year these plays were first performed.
2. In an interview included in McPherson, Conor, dir. "Endgame". By Samuel Beckett. *Beckett on Film*. BBC, London, 2001. Television.
3. "McPherson on Beckett", Beckett on Film (*Endgame*), www.channel4.com
4. See interview mentioned in 2.

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