they were mobile and sometimes delivered lines off-book. Frequently, the actors delivered their lines to the audiences in the manner of a reading; other times the actors created intimate moments between characters. The Dance of the Seven Veils, as performed by Marisa Tomei, was profoundly theatrical and arresting. She instantly switched from a formed by Marisa Tomei, was profoundly theatrical and arresting. She instantly switched from a

In that one dance, Tomei dramatized the dialectical relation between actor and character, allowing the audience to see how the actor’s personal agenda and politics emerge in the creation of her art. Moments before the dance, with her script in hand, Tomei established her own status as an actor distinct from the character she presented. This bifurcation was strategically subverted during the emotional dance, when Salome made eye contact with Herod, and then reestablished, when the actress suddenly, very glaringly condemned the audience— the voyeurs— with a conscious stare. In the process, the audience was allowed to see multiple characters— Wilde’s Salome, Parson’s Salome, Tomei’s Salome, the historical Salome, and Marisa Tomei—all conflated into one body. The fluid boundaries between actor and character in this production allowed for a social commentary on the objectified woman and the power and powerlessness that voyeurism bestows on her. After that decisive glance, Wilde’s Salome was changed forever.

In Parson’s production, it became easy to see how Wilde presented his characters as actors in their own right, potential beasts of hierarchical sabotage and indeterminacy. Like Patrick Dupond’s Salome in his ballet, who “was not a boy or a girl but in between,” Tomei, Al Pacino, and the rest of the talented cast were not actors or characters but “in between.” The audience experienced a metaphoric puppet show, with the stage and all of its devices, and many of its intentions, becoming transparent. (Norbert Kohl once quickly described the characters in Wilde’s Salome as “puppet-like.”) This Brechtian turn in Wilde’s Salome is extremely significant. Estelle Parson’s suggestive reading of Salome turns the normally eerie, fable-like, opulent, full-blown production into a subtly subversive and intentionally detached reading. The production placed Brecht and Wilde under the same lens. As a result, Parsons has brought two major writers into a previously hardly-imagined dialogue, possibly eroding the strict division between the apolitical opulence of Wilde’s theatre and the political anti-decadence of Brecht’s theatre.

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When confronted with Samuel Beckett’s short plays, you have two choices: either go along with their relentless minimalism or fight back. Marian Seldes and Brian Murray, under the direction of Lawrence Sacharow, clearly opt for the latter. Their presentation of three Beckett shorts along with one by Edward Albee at the Century Center for the Performing Arts suffers from the desire to make too much of too little. Beckett’s Not I for example, is the willful reduction of theatre to nothing but a “Mouth” and an “Auditor.” In response, this production uses all available means to squeeze as much spectacle out of the text as possible. The mouth is suspended halfway from the backdrop of a dark stage and casts a strange shadow that looks like a gigantic body; red lipstick, whitened face, a bright spotlight, and Seldes’s commanding voice do their part in transforming this mouth into a full-fledged show. Beckett had conceived of Not I as a counter-point between a performer and an auditor, with the Auditor’s gestures interrupting Mouth’s ceaseless chatter. Symptomatically, for a production driven by an unbending will to theatre, Auditor has been turned into a barely visible shadow, leaving the scene to Mouth’s operatic aria. Sacharow has pulled out all the stops, thereby drowning out Beckett’s restless but muted rumination.

Not I sets the stage for two more short pieces, A Piece of Monologues and Footfalls, that are animated by similar desire of finding the limits of theatre. A Piece of Monologue features a meditation on existence that culminates in the line, “Birth was the death of him.” The direction is too stuck on midcentury existentialism to hear that this is, among other things, a witty joke of the “life is life-threatening” sort. Murray, too, sounds only the harrowing tones, but not without turning them into a bravura piece of showmanship. He is visibly drawn into the plot of the monologue to the point where he begins to enact what he simultaneously narrates; the audience is drawn in with him and thus hooked on...
what would otherwise be just another mouth on a stage telling a story. Then again, the first piece had shown that a mouth is all you need for an act of theatre to be engaged, and so we should not be surprised that once we have an accomplished actor, there’s nothing left to be desired in the way of spectacle.

Except, perhaps, a second actor. From mouth to human being, we proceed to the luxury of having two speaking figures on the stage in the final Beckett short, *Footfalls*. Well, speaking of two figures may be stretching it, since one is barely visible, a face hidden behind gauze on the upper left corner of the backdrop. *Footfalls* does at least begin with a dialogue of sorts between what appear to be mother and daughter. Only the daughter has her feet on the ground, though, her footfalls resonating, as if in an echo chamber, across the stage. Which turns out to be a problem, for the mother hears and triumphantly counts every single one of them from her elevated hunter’s blind. It makes sense, then, that the mother would dominate the second segment, alone voicing a dialogue between herself and the daughter, who sullenly continues her amplified cross-walk. Once more, the direction veers toward the postapocalyptic world in which Beckett’s plays were set during the cold war. Slow-motion, hieratic gestures, ragged long dress and hair, echo-effect and evocative light, all this is too other-worldly to provide traction for a text that is, however indirectly, tied to the problems of everyday life—the footfalls are audible, Beckett tells us, because the mother never put carpet on the floor. It is Seldes who manages to distract us from this never-world atmosphere, when she, playing the daughter, brings Beckett’s morose monologue if not to life, at least to everyday life, by re-connecting it to the real world with carpets and hardwood floors, mothers and daughters.

If it takes a determined director and supple actors to turn Beckett’s unyielding texts into a performance that is almost too theatrical for its own good, Edward Albee’s *Counting the Ways*, for all its affinities to Beckett, poses no such resistance. *Counting the Ways* has clearly absorbed more than one Beckett lesson: its scenes, too, are interrupted, indeed more than twenty times; the movements of actors are suddenly arrested into tableaux; and this play, too, deals with questions of aging and death. All this is presented in a very different register, and the direction here thankfully gives up on doomsday scenarios by setting this play in a spare but real modernist living room, where a touching older couple engages in short pieces of dialogue and
monologues about the fate of aging love. “She loves me, she loves me not”—the rose petals fall one by one; a story about a high school prom; and the tragedy of separate beds. Here and there, random acts interrupt the amusing sequence of vignettes: He, played by Murray in high form, interrupts the petal game and proceeds instead to munch away at the rose; Seldes’s archly rendered reverie about the prom is disrupted by her husband grumpily asking for his shirts. Finally, we hear the author’s voice demanding from offstage that the two actors identify themselves. dutiful actors that they are, they willingly comply and individually deliver impromptu monologues, Seldes about the pronunciation of her name and Murray about baseball, including the current score of the fifth game in the world series (with the Florida Marlins leading the New York Yankees). These monologues are charming enough, but the whole breaking-of-the-fourth-wall business is the most dated part of the evening.

What it does, though, is throw into relief all the other ways in which these four short pieces manage to probe the theatre, measuring its boundaries, gauging its strengths, highlighting its essential functions. Even though Sacharow overcompensates as if afraid that any less effort would leave him with nothing (including no audience), he shows that Beckett and his minimalism are actually good for nothing (including no audience), he shows that Beckett and his minimalism are actually good for the theatre—far from killing it, they make it stronger.

MARTIN PUCHNER
Columbia University


The action of Michael Frayn’s fine new play Democracy takes place within the context of West German coalition politics during Willy Brandt’s landmark Chancellorship years. This potentially sprawling subject is given riveting dramatic interest and focus by centering on the intertwined personal stories of Brandt and Günter Guillaume, the East German spy who rose to become Brandt’s personal assistant and whose discovery was used as the excuse for Brandt’s eventual political downfall. However, the play’s real subject is neither politics, the machinations of a spy thriller, nor—despite the title—democracy. Rather it is, as Frayn states in a program note, complexity: “…the complexity of human arrangements and of human beings themselves, and the difficulties that this creates in both shaping and understanding our actions.”

Frayn also writes that he has long been fascinated and even moved by Germany’s postwar emergence as of one of Europe’s most prosperous, stable, and decent states, a marvel achieved, furthermore, by building it out of its own literal and figurative postwar rubble while faced with considerably more complexity than is the experience of most other countries. This is the context but, as Frayn carefully notes, the play is fiction even though grounded in the basic facts of a thoroughly researched history.

What we have in Democracy is another example illustrating Frayn’s frequent statement that there is a philosophical basis to all his plays. Specifically, here he is using the historical situation to explore the impossible task that we humans have in ever fully describing or comprehending the world around us even though we are compulsively driven to pursue that elusive goal by describing, classifying, and ordering bits of our reality. This idea features prominently in Constructions, his 1973 work of philosophy. While the play’s subject is complexity, I do not mean to imply that Democracy should be seen primarily as philosophy, for it is above all a fine piece of theatre, the creation of a superb dramatic craftsman whose intention is to provide us with a drama of compelling interest.

To be sure, it is compelling. By using the Brandt-Guillaume relationship to give voice and focus to the larger situation, Frayn unifies such elements as the shifting and mixed motives of Brandt’s cabinet members, those of other aides, and the complications of a functioning democratic governance. Layers of complexity continually unfold as we watch Guillaume insinuate himself ever closer to Brandt, it becoming clearer as the action progresses that both men have complicated personalities and motives that neither fully understands in himself or in others. One might wish to see some resolution of these ambiguities but in fact one of the strengths of Democracy is the absence of such answers. Frayn has the ability, like Chekhov, to keep his own voice from intruding upon that of his characters. They are always allowed to act for themselves instead of becoming the didactic proponents of any particular thesis of the author’s.

Frayn uses direct audience addresses to provide necessary expository or transitional material, moving the complicated action forward with a deft theatrical economy. As in his earlier Benefactors and Copenhagen, this device also reveals how much of the self may be hidden from our consciousness. Although Guillaume is fully engaged in the action