



Mixed bag of Beckett in brief

THEATRE

Fragments by Samuel Beckett
 Directed by Peter Brook
 Octagon Theatre
 Review: Ron Banks

Samuel Beckett's bleakly funny, existential view of the world can be savoured in these five short plays that run for only an hour.

Funny is a relative term with Beckett, of course, as those who know their *Waiting for Godot* will acknowledge. His work is not of the laugh-out-loud variety when it comes to comic routines; more the pained titter, the sad smile of recognition, the wistful humour of regret and loss.

Nevertheless, these fragments of Beckett are funny, clever and enjoyable in their own way, performed cleverly and clearly by a cast of three — two men and a woman. The plays were originally directed by Peter Brook in 2006 to celebrate the centenary of Beckett's birth and have been on tour ever since then with various casts.

In the first piece, *Rough for Theatre I*, a blind man and a cripple meet as strangers on a street and engage in conversation. The cripple is more aggressive and urges the blind man to join him in overcoming their respective disadvantages. There is something *Waiting for Godot*-ish in the wordplay, but rather more physicality in the encounter as the blind man gropes the cripple in the search for reassurance.

In the second piece, a monologue by Hayley Carmichael, Beckett is at his most enigmatic and gnomic, and I'm still puzzling over what *Rockaby* means. The program notes tell us a woman dressed in black evening dress rocks herself in a rocking chair.

It's only at the end we realise that the hard chair of Brook's interpretation is supposed to be a rocking chair, but I'm still none the wiser. Perhaps I should see it again. Something about a woman sitting at a window and looking out at the world. Well, Beckett is all about interior and exterior states of mind.

Ironically, the mime *Act Without Words II* is the funniest and cleverest, and clearest in meaning. Two men separately are prodded from big white sacks and get on with their lives, metaphorically represented by the task of getting into a suit and shoes.

The first is a pessimist, whose anguish at the simple task of dressing is visible in his anguished face and contortions. The other is a sunny optimist for whom preparing for the day is a breeze of teeth cleaning, combing hair and admiring oneself in the mirror. Both are delightful performances.



There is also a very short poem about suffering and boredom before the hour-long encounter with Beckett concludes with *Come and Go* — the three actors dressed as old women meeting on a park bench. They ask can they speak about their school days but are forbidden. They are forced to whisper each about the other behind their hands, a mostly mime experience that does bring a smile to audience faces.

Beckett can still be a challenge even after his style of absurdist theatre has been around for 50 years. But these mostly early works are worth bringing back, especially when they are so well performed by Hayley Carmichael and her colleagues Cesar Sarachu and Antonio Gil Martinez. Both men are Spanish and it is not possible to identify who is who from the program notes or the contents of the fragments. How very Beckett.

Fragments ends on February 25.