Rethinking borders in Beckett studies and beyond
Nicholas Johnson

Perhaps because I grew up on the border between the US and Mexico, I have always been drawn to the limits and edges of discourses, and have tended to question where and how boundaries can be made more porous. I use the creative arts, especially the tradition of the “performance laboratory”, to collaborate across disciplines, as well as using studio techniques to build bridges between different methodologies. I identify myself as a “scholar-artist” who regularly generates both peer-reviewed publications and theatrical events, and I engage drama and performance in addressing the most urgent human questions of our century.

**Beckett studies** — The most durable through-line in my practice and research has been Samuel Beckett. I have spent the last decade publishing on Beckett in performance, directing Beckett projects internationally, and contributing to the scholarly infrastructure of international Beckett Studies. These activities culminated in the 2017 establishment of the Trinity Centre for Beckett Studies to consolidate our research, integrating the Samuel Beckett Laboratory, a space founded in 2013 by myself and Jonathan Heron (Warwick) for fundamental research into Beckett in performance, with the Samuel Beckett Summer School, an annual event at Trinity since 2011 that I co-direct with Sam Slote (English).

How Beckett is received, taught, and understood is being expanded by the work that we do on experimental, intermedial, intercultural, and other forms of “applied” Beckett, and the international reach of the Beckett Summer School makes a public contribution. In 2017 I directed *Virtual Play*, a virtual reality version of Beckett’s 1963 Play (in partnership with V-SENSE) that went on to win 1st Prize at the New European Media awards and has led to many publications beyond my discipline. I lectured extensively around Europe this year and facilitated performance workshops in Poland, Ireland, and Mexico. With Jonathan Heron, with whom I co-edited the 2014 “Performance Issue” of the *Journal of Beckett Studies* (23.1), I am currently editing the “Pedagogy Issue” (29.1, 2020); our co-written book *Experimental Beckett* is scheduled to be published in 2019 with Cambridge University Press.

**Practice-as-research beyond Beckett**

Drawing on insights from this research into Beckett, in recent years my work has pivoted to more interdisciplinary research projects in the areas of pedagogy (with Education), acting theory (with Neuroscience), VR and AI (with Computer Science), cultural trauma (with Sociology), and medical humanities (with both Medicine and Nursing/Midwifery). In my capacity as convener of the Creative Arts Practice research theme, I have discovered many opportunities to extend the impact of my “disciplinary” insights from within Drama.

My ambition is to help make Trinity College Dublin one of Europe’s leading universities for practice-led creative arts research. Art has the capacity and responsibility to amplify voices that are muted, to expose difficult or unsavoury histories, to elevate thoughts and opinions that fall outside those easily affirmed, and to work to engage conflicting philosophies — first and foremost by bringing people together. Each time I step into the theatre or the studio, I am re-invigorated in my desire to engage with challenging work, to place our ensemble practices at the heart of social change. This speaks to a wider strategy for creative arts at Trinity, where freedom of imagination represents a truly radical potential in what a university can be, while extending the power of what art itself can do.

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Nicholas Johnson holds a B.S. in Theatre from Northwestern University and a PhD from Trinity College Dublin. He joined Trinity in 2004 as a George J. Mitchell Scholar and has held visiting research positions at Freie Universität Berlin and Yale University. He convenes the Creative Arts Practice research theme, co-founded the Trinity Centre for Beckett Studies, and has published widely on Samuel Beckett and interdisciplinary performance. In addition to numerous practice-as-research projects, he continues to work in the professional theatre as a director, dramaturg, and literary translator.

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