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## **'Restriction gives freedom': A dialogue between Jonathan Heron & Nando Messias**

### Introduction

Nando Messias<sup>i</sup> is a Brazilian artist based in London, who brings a 'queer' perspective to our understanding of Beckett's drama and his wider aesthetics which can be characterised as *Beckettian-queer* (cf. Heron, 2021). Queer Studies is an expanding field that combines interdisciplinary methods from the social sciences with a sustained exploration of sexuality and gender informed by humanities scholarship (e.g. Bersani, 1995). More recently, queer theorists have further developed the field by using Beckettian texts as objects of study (e.g. Thomas, 2019) which is explored in more depth in the 'Queer Studies' essay of the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Samuel Beckett* (TBC). This interview documents a queer performance artist who makes use of, and reference to, Beckett's writing in their original creative practice. The dialogue therefore contributes to the field in a number of ways, enhancing our understanding of Beckett, gender and sexuality, as well as queer/trans- experience.

Messias positions themselves as non-binary queer, in dynamic co-existence with all pronouns and none, and therefore using he/she/they in relation to context, situation and/or positionality. This is a queer creative strategy which has certain resonance in relation to Beckettian subjectivity, where the self is continually dislocated and dispersed through a series of encounters with the world. Anna McMullan has captured this phenomenological position as follows, where 'the body' in Beckett 'is presented as both sign and site, engine or *matrix* of production (of stories, semblances, voice, footfalls or hiccups) and *fabric* to be composed and recomposed with limited materials' (2010, 125, *emphasis added*). Messias' *matrix* is a body that can perform any gender, no gender, and all genders including their own; as a movement practitioner they also use the body in performance as raw material, like *fabric*, to compose and recompose through their practice. Messias has performed in London at several venues including the Royal Court, the Gate Theatre and the ICA, alongside international collaborations with the Theo Adams company, including the 2021 Brit Awards with Olly Alexander, Lavinia Co-op, and Elton John amongst others.

Messias is a 'queer optimist' (Greer, 2019), responding to incidents of transphobia by transforming them into performances of savage beauty but with a dancer's poise (Messias once auditioned for Pina Bausch, as the interview below attests). Greer describes the performance piece *The Sissy's Progress* (2015) in terms of 'optimism as vulnerability' (2019, 212) and 'such a process may be traced within a sequence of works by Messias... following a violent transphobic assault near their home in east London in 2005' (213). Queerness, for both Greer and Messias, is unfinished; like Beckett's protagonist in *Not I* (1972), the queer self is an erupting stream of words – not hers, not his, not theirs – unrecognizable (to the speaker) and unintelligible (to the listener):

what? . . who? . . no! . . she! . . [Pause and movement 2.] . . . realized . . . words were coming . . . imagine! . . . words were coming . . . a voice she did not recognize at first so long since it had sounded . . . then finally had to admit . . . could be none other . . . than her own . . . certain vowel sounds . . . she had never heard . . . elsewhere . . . (Beckett, 1972)

Messias is also a queer researcher and performance scholar in their own right and this is evident from the dialogue that follows, where they reflect upon their own practice as well as the significant influence of Beckett upon their work.

### Interview

JH: How would you describe yourself as an artist?

NM: My mode of performance is finding space in between categories, so the work lives somewhere between dance, theatre, performance art, installation. It's also in-between genders. As well as being in-between genres, my work is in-between genders. My work is very much about masculinity, femininity, male, female. It's about my personal experience, first and foremost, so it's autobiographical but it's also finding an in-between space between reality and fiction, so fictionalising, or romanticising, or theatricalising my real-life experience to be put onstage.

And your performances happen internationally?

Yes, my performances happen internationally. I've performed in Brazil, Japan, France, Germany, the US, other countries in Europe, a lot in London and the UK in general.

My first question about Beckett is: How did you first encounter his work? Do you have a memory of how you encountered the work of Samuel Beckett?

I went to drama school in Brazil. I had very classical training at drama school, very theatrical conservatory work. I felt, always, from the very beginning, in every single class I took in terms of voice, interpretation, that I never fit in. There was never a space for me. My voice was neither male nor female; it was queer. It was very effeminate. I tried to go down the route of trying to correct that and it didn't work. Until I realised that my power is in embracing failure, or embracing the mistake, and making that more a feature of who I am. Being who I am, rather than trying to be someone else. Even though that is what theatre is about sometimes – traditional, classical theatre is about playing the character. I realised the voice training, I couldn't fit in. In terms of interpretation classes, I could never fit in. I had to go through training in Chekhov, the more traditional Stanislavski techniques, and neither of that worked. I felt that in Beckett there was more leeway to be more myself.

That's quite a European repertoire to be looking at in a Brazilian context. Is that because the conservatoire's curriculum was dominated by a European, modernist aesthetic?

For sure. It's very much Stanislavskian method. You will find other ways of training but – for instance, my supervisor on the course trained with Eugenio Barba, so I also had that kind of influence. Also, Grotowski but, again, that's very European. It's all very European.

And the Beckett you encountered at the school was primarily drama (i.e. plays)? You weren't aware of his prose or his poetry? Do you remember which plays you first discovered?

I remember that we had to do *Waiting for Godot*. That was the first one I encountered. I found it fascinating because it was completely different to anything else. It was very queer in that it didn't fit in with anything else. I loved that; I really loved that. That was, for me, a source of hope. "There's something here that might be more interesting than the traditional roles which I don't fit in" – the 'Cherry Orchards' and all that which I had tried and failed.

What was it that interested you about Godot? Did you play a particular character in Godot?

We just read Godot. The other thing was Genet – I found Genet. That was with Biño [Sautitzvy]<sup>ii</sup>; we went to drama school together. Biño was training to be a theatre director and I was training to be an actor. Biño was the one who, when we took an interpretation class together, everyone was doing Chekhov and the more traditional European plays and Biño suggested, “Why don’t we do The Maids?” The Maids was – this is contested – but I think there was an interview where Genet says he wrote The Maids to be played by male actors. So, male actors pretend to be female, pretending to be another female. A mask on a mask. That’s the first breakthrough for me, “Oh, theatre can be something that I can be in. There’s a space for me to exist within theatre.”

Genet and Beckett are often read together. Although there may be something explicitly queer in the Genet, is there something that you find in Beckett that reminds you of Genet, or is there a certain resonance between the two?

Yes. The queerness for sure.

What do their plays allow you to do as a performer?

There’s a sense of pretend, but there’s a sense of allowing yourself to come into the role. You’re not a neutral body that’s being someone else. You can allow your person to be. It’s more like a performance than traditional theatre. My supervisor, and Biño’s supervisor, who were our mentors throughout the course, had lived and trained in Paris as director and performer. They had seen a lot of Tadeusz Kantor – Kantor was one of their favourite theatre directors. That came into as well, our formation in theatre.

Did you perform Beckett during that time, before you left Brazil? And how did that come about?

Again, it was with Biño. It might be worth explaining that the way this happened was we were reaching the end of our course, so we had our final project. I did a version of Medea, again, with my supervisor. It’s a very ancient tradition of male actors playing female characters, so I went back to Ancient Greece where it was an all-male cast. Then, the Elizabethan days, of course, Shakespearean. That was, for me, the first connection of, “There is a connection in theatre of this happening!” And then,

Kabuki theatre, as well – there are male actors playing female roles, and it's an accepted convention. That was my entry point into accepting that I don't need to be male, cisgender. There's another door. Biño's final project was Beckett. He had made a reputation for himself for directing Beckett plays. He'd done a few compilations of Beckett's work, and his final project he called M. It was extracts from Waiting for Godot and other short plays. I was in one that was the first of the trilogy<sup>iii</sup> which then became the name of the company. O Sótão was the name of the company and the name of that first play, which was using Rough for Theatre [sic.] and Not I (he had a female performer playing Mouth), and then he was invited to go on tour around Brazil with that play. The female actor dropped out and he said, "I'd like you to be part of this performance. Would you like to come in?" And I said, "On one condition: if I can play Not I. That's the one play I have always wanted to do." He said, "That's unusual. I wouldn't have thought of you doing that because it's a female voice. I think we should go with that because it's your desire, and I think it's important that that's the guiding force of our project. It's something you've always wanted to do – let's go with that." So, I went through this really interesting rehearsal process with Biño which was – Not I, as you know, is just a mouth. There's no movement. It was a very tight, light thing, where I had to look at the top of my nose. If the light hits the top of my nose, I'm out of place. It was very tight light spot.

With make-up or a cloth (over the face)?

What he did, and this is very controversial, you might find this horrifying in a way. It was Not I, most of the monologue. At the end of the monologue, the light opened, and I was Winnie. Then, I would open the paper umbrella and burnt it.

Just as an image (tableaux)?

Just as an image. So, I was dressed as Winnie, with the pink hat and pink umbrella.

So you were both Mouth and Winnie? Was there also an Auditor?

There was an Auditor onstage.

What do you remember about the Auditor?

They were wearing tights over their face, with an exaggerated headpiece to transform the head. The light was very low on the Auditor, in front of the audience – close to the audience. But Biño's rehearsal process was going around that, in the

sense that we rehearsed very physically with the body in a way of giving the text nuance. Going very high up with my voice, and very low with my voice, the use of resonators, we did this physically. After I found the text physically in my body, there was the restriction of bringing it to the voice – all the physical feelings that I found.

That's fascinating because one of the things that Beckett performers often talk about is restriction or limitation. Some performers have suggested that the more they are restricted (in rehearsal), the more freedom they have (in performance). This seems to be a paradox, but it's an enabling one. Is there anything you could say about that? Is this something you continue to use as a performer, this restriction that releases? I found those high notes and those low notes in my body, through my body. Every time I had to go there, it wasn't something rational or intellectual; it was something I could find in my body, even though I was restricted in that position where I couldn't move a millimetre. If I did, my mouth would move out of the light. I also find that, in creative processes, if I don't have lots of resources, the work flourishes because I have so many restrictions that I have to create the outcome from. If I have lots of resources, the work seems to be a shell, almost, because anything's possible.

Is there a connection here between your earlier point about being in-between genders and the notion of gender as a restriction?

Yes. I found the restriction of having a male body and having to be masculine and playing male roles, that was a restriction for me that I couldn't, wasn't willing to overcome. I didn't want to fit in. I didn't want to make myself look or sound or pass as male. That wasn't my interest, I wasn't there for that. All my training in ballet was, again, in trying to find a third space. Ballet is very gendered; male groups, female groups; male technique, female technique. I always wanted to do the female technique – I wanted to learn pointe technique, the hand movements are all different as well. I wanted to break the thing of maleness and femaleness and find my own space. That worked in the Beckett – it allowed me that freedom.

We'll come back to this idea of the 'third-space' later. How do we move the collaboration with Biño from Brazil to Paris? How and when did that happen? After that trilogy, Biño did a version of *Our Lady of the Flowers* (the Jean Genet novel). He was finding connections with Kazuo Ohno and [Tatsumi] Hijikata who themselves had done a version of *Our Lady of the Flowers*. I played Divine and that

was our last collaboration in Brazil together. That's when we decided to move away from Brazil; he moved to Paris to do a PhD. I moved to London to do a PhD. Then, our collaboration continued but me from here and him from Paris. We haven't done any Beckett since – the Beckett we did was in Brazil, in that context. But there's always been the collaboration of moving away from traditional – we moved more and more into performance [art or live art] since.

Could you say more about those subsequent collaborations, e.g. *Le Générateur*. This was a dance performance, a movement piece, that we did together. It was a long-term idea we had. It's called OH because it's O for Ohno and H for Hijikata. It's the two originators of Butoh. Kazuo Ohno is the one I've always identified with, who's seen as the body of Butoh, or the feminine in Butoh, and the light in Butoh. Hijikata was seen as the intellect of Butoh, the dark in Butoh and the male in Butoh. Those two creative forces that give a sense of yin-yang, of bringing two opposites together. They created this version of *Our Lady of the Flowers* together, and it's our homage to those two figures, the originators of Butoh. That's what this piece was all about.

There seems to be, in your description, a lot of interest in exploration of movement and the body, and I noticed when looking at your Sissy projects and the LADA publication (Messias, 2018) the following phrase: 'My spiritual companions in the studio were Pina Bausch, Kazuo Ohno and Samuel Beckett'. Could you share more? The way that worked is that I had their photographs with me in the studio. I put out chairs for them, and I had them sitting in the studio with me as a representation of them being there. Kantor comes to mind – when he died, they put a chair onstage as a representation. They all have been – Bausch, Ohno and Beckett – have always been guides to me in my artistic career, as a creative, as an artist. Ohno because the first time I saw this figure – he's queer in so many ways because he's older, and that in dance is very unique – to see an older body onstage. He became celebrated in his eighties and I think that's amazing. Playing a female role, so his memory of a Flamenco dancer, La Argentina. The story is that, apparently, he opened a book and a postcard fell out. He remembered seeing her performing Flamenco when he was in his early twenties. The whole choreography is him bringing her back from the dead, from memory. My supervisor, who was my mentor, always talked about seeing Ohno and the audience was in tears whenever they saw him performing. To me, that was



always a spiritual guide of this male bodied performer in a female dress, being himself but being female at the same time. And Bausch was [about] autobiographical work, the first time that was really celebrated and accepted. Also breaking barriers between dance and theatre and creating this dance theatre where it's both dance and theatre but it's neither. Using techniques of theatre to create dance, and it's really rooted in the performer's history. For me, there was a sense of, "There's something there that I can create from my history."

This is something I don't think I've shared before, but I auditioned for Pina Bausch. I was in a dreamworld when I auditioned for Bausch because I knew a lot about where she is coming from. I've seen all the videos. So being in a rehearsal room, where I've seen all these 1970s documentaries of seminal work of Bausch being created, was like being in a dream. The audition was very traditional, a ballet class – I'm trained in ballet, so I felt very much in my space. But I knew there was no room for me in that company because Bausch is very... there's male dancers dressed in suits and female dancers dressed in ballgowns. Of course, I wanted to wear the ballgown and high heels and I knew there was not going to be space for me there. I was being watched by all the original company members, and that was, for me, a dream. I knew that I was not going to go any further, but it didn't matter. Still when I was told not to come back the next day, I was, of course, floored. It was like the end of a dream. I woke up in a hotel room not knowing where I was, almost. "Did that really happen? I'm so devastated..." I knew my dream was never going to happen. But what happens from now on is that I can make my dream come true in my work. So, what is it in Bausch that I really love? Can I bring that into my work? It was liberating. I think that's where Bausch was. What do I love about Bausch? It's the ballgowns, it's the high heels, the hair, the being myself. I can make that happen. Of course, it would never happen in her company because there's no space for that. But I can create that space in my work.

And Beckett... Someone said, when Kazuo Ohno died and then Pina Bausch died very close together, they said, "They are dancing in heaven together." I saw that Beckett was in that party as well, somehow. This sense of breaking boundaries, I don't think there's been any revolution since Beckett, in terms of theatre; breaking all the rules, breaking all the expectations, making something completely new, that

makes us see theatre anew. In that sense, Bausch did that for dance, Kazuo Ohno did that for performance, and Beckett did that for theatre.

One shared interest there seems to be experimentation with artistic form and all three 'companions' have broken aesthetic boundaries or represent the freedom or inspiration for others to do the same. Does it trouble you at all that we're talking about a white, straight, [Irish] man with Beckett? While his work is still seen radical by some, there is a branch of queer and feminist scholarship that would see Beckett as a little passé or 'old school' in some contexts. I'm interested in your take on that, as you have a place for him in your queer space *and* he's a well-known heterosexual male from a certain generation. Does that trouble you at all or do you discount it? All those things need to be seen within the context of where they were. I think it's easy for us to look back and say, "They did this, they did that." but we need an understanding of the context of where they lived. Whenever I read Beckett, I want to do it. The language, the way his written work really moves me physically and emotionally. I want to do this, I want to read more, and read it again and again. Every time I read it, I find something new. When I was memorising *Not I*, it was so complicated, because I knew that he wanted it to be exactly the way the words were written. Of course, each person has their own pattern of language. So, I wanted to adapt things. Biño was very strict, he said, "No, it has to be exactly how it's written." There's tiny variation from one sentence to the next.

What language did you perform in?

In Portuguese.

This is worth reflecting on, because the rhythm will be different.

The rhythm is what's interesting in the work. Once you find the rhythm, it's imprinted in your head. There's a reason why you have to learn the way it was written.

And therefore, through rhythm, we are finding freedom within the restriction, again. This is something that Jess Thom talked about when she did her production with Touretteshero (2017-18). She was aware that there had been these other actors well-known for playing it, Billie Whitelaw being the obvious example. I was really struck by her vocal rhythm and the way in which she found the rhythm within the text. Her neurodiversity was, in a sense, her own way into the rhythm that she found. I wonder is there something from your experience of being a queer performer that would open-up Beckett plays to a new audience through your wider experience? Yes, the first thing that comes to mind is the way that we started the conversation. Before we started recording, you asked me what my pronouns are, and I said that I don't police my pronouns. He, She, They, all fit and [neither] fits. One of the things I see in Not I is the pronoun, the "She!"

And the refusal of that?

The refusal of that, exactly. I see that very much as one entry point into it. The other thing is that whenever I read Happy Days, I identify with Winnie. I feel like there's lots of things – the repetition of the life, the boredom, the things that are the same every single day that you just have to go through, and they are so boring, but you just have to do it. I really identify with Winnie and I've always wanted to do Winnie.

Do you think of Winnie as a female character, then? Mouth is, as you've explained, ungendered in a sense, but Winnie is quite explicitly female. You would play that non-binary and/or female?

I would play that in a way that the performer plays a role. So, I don't see gender as part of that at all, really. It's a role that I identify with, that I have the desire to experience. I've always wanted to play Winnie. It's something that's a light, a beacon that guides me. I want to get there. Getting there – the process is what's important for me, as well. How to get there, and what is relevant, or what is in that text that is of today.

In recent productions reviewers have talked about the scenography. When the play was first staged, there was the resonance with a post-nuclear landscape. Nowadays, people often think about the play in terms of climate change. The Deborah Warner production very much had a stark landscape in an changing environmental context. The Natalie Abrahams version had the rock falling down and slowly burying Winnie alive. The Katie Mitchell production featured a flooded kitchen. The body in that play becomes a body at risk of their environment swallowing them alive. One could also imagine an Australian bushfire...

... or a Brazilian Amazon fire.

Given what you were saying about performing gender, is it relevant that we see her being buried? We don't ever see her full body, we see her waist-up and then neck-up. Is this something that interests you?

Yes. This is a very specific statement about restriction of body, being in place and being put in one place. You can't move; there's no way. Maybe that's a way in to how I experience my life and myself in the world. I'm stuck in my body. I cannot be read as masculine or male, nor feminine or female. It's non-binary. Maybe that's it. The solution is in that restriction, and that place of being stuck. That's how I find freedom, in that position that might seem to be in one place, but *the restriction gives freedom*.

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<sup>i</sup> Nando Messias' work straddles performance art, dance and theatre. Their performances combine beautiful images with a fierce critique of gender, visibility and violence. Nando has performed at prestigious venues such as the Royal Court, The Gate, Hayward Gallery, V&A, Tate Britain, Roundhouse, Royal Vauxhall Tavern and ICA, among other spaces across the UK and internationally. As well as a practitioner, Nando is movement director for **Theo Adams Company** and a researcher of queer theory and performance. Nando's publications include 'Sissy that Walk: The Sissy's Progress' in *Queer Dramaturgies* (2016), 'visibility: Performance and Activism' in *Performing Interdisciplinarity* (2017), 'Injurious Acts: A Struggle With Sissy in Performance' in *Choros International Dance Journal* (2018) and 'Bibi is a Sissy: Drag, Death by Silence and the Journey to Self-Determination from Brazil to Britain' in *Drag Histories, Herstories and Hairstories* (2020). Nando's solo work has been curated by the Live Art Development Agency as part of the programme 'Just Like a Woman,' shown in the City of Women Festival in Ljubljana (2013), New York and London (2015). They were the recipient of 2019 Library of Performing Rights Commission for which they developed *The Pink Supper*. In 2015/16 Nando completed a national tour of *The Sissy's Progress* to much acclaim and press interest, followed by a tour of *Shoot the Sissy* to prestigious LGBTQ festivals and venues across the UK in 2017. *Death and the Sissy*, the closing performance of their sissy series, was presented in 2017 in London. (LADA published a study guide to the *Sissy* trilogy in 2018).

<sup>ii</sup> Biño Sautzvy is a Brazilian performer, actor, dancer, choreographer, director and researcher. He is a doctor of aesthetics, sciences and technologies of the arts - theater and dance specialty (Paris 8). His career began as an actor in 1994 in Brazil at the Group Oi Nois Aqui Traveiz. As a director in Porto Alegre, he headed the Sotão Group for five years. For this work he received the prize of best director of the city of Porto Alegre in 2001 and best dance performance in 2002. From 2003 in Paris, he created the Collectif des Yeux with whom he developed various performance projects, exhibitions, films and videos with others artists as Antony Hickling, Thomas Laroppe, Nando Messias, Lika Guillemot. Since 2011 he has collaborated with the group CocoRosie; with Bianca Casady (Coco), he performed in the exhibitions *Holy Ghost* in Moscow and *Daisy Chain* in New York, choreography and dance in *NightShift* shows, created in Germany and Austria, *Mother Hunting - A Miracle of Rose* and *The Angel Show* in Norway, and the multimedia project *Porno Thietor* by Bianca Casady & The CIA. He was a resident choreographer at Point Ephémère, Paris in 2009/10, at Micadanses, Paris in 2011 and has been an associate artist at Generator, Gentilly since 2014. Since 2010, he has been a teacher-lecturer in the Department of Theater at Paris 8 University. He also teaches as guest artist at NTA – Norwegian Theater Academy, Norway, and the circus school Académie Fratellini, Paris.

<sup>iii</sup> *O Sótão ou A Catastrofe* (1998), *All that Fall* (1999) and *M* (2000), known collectively as S.A.M.