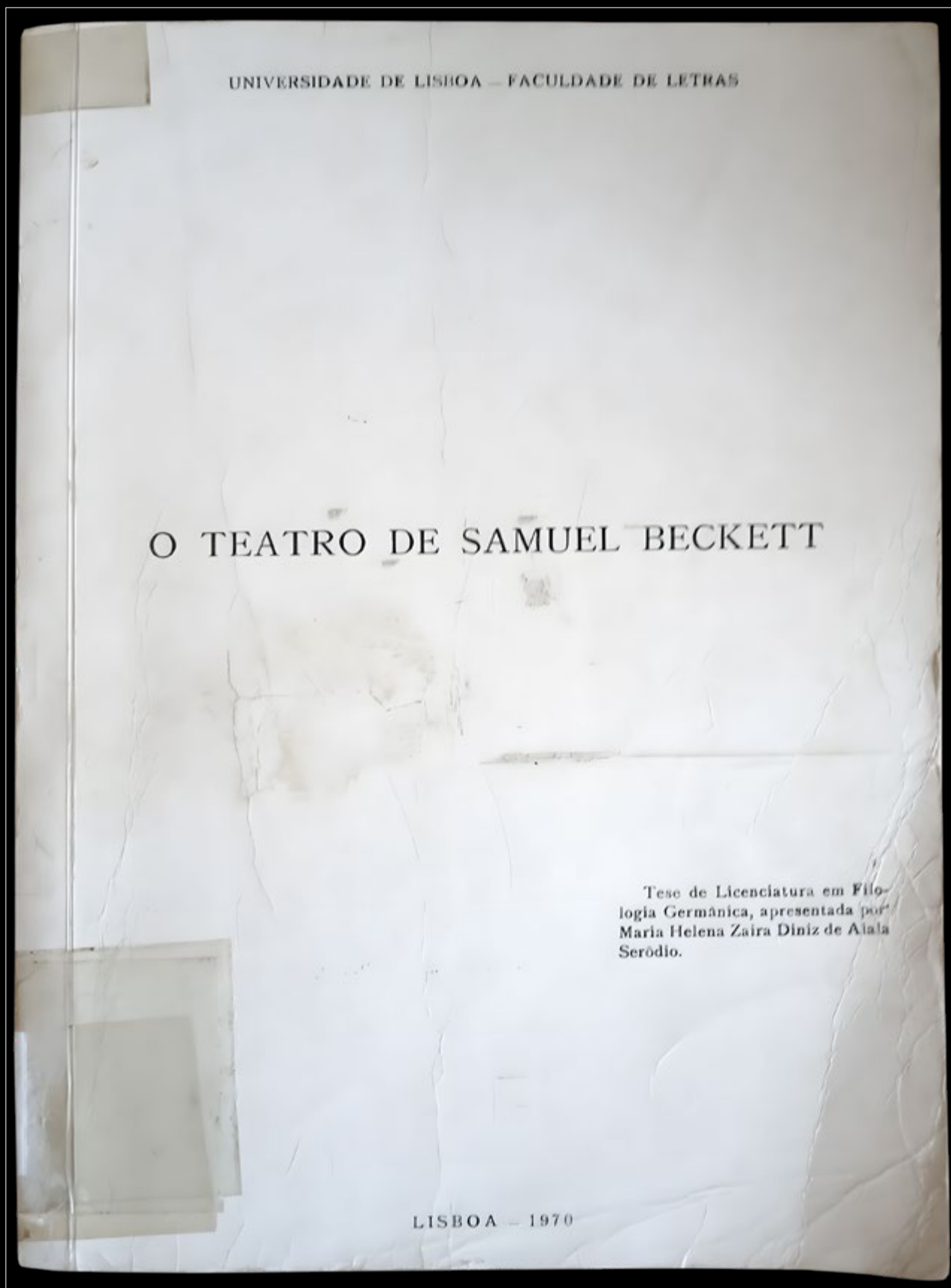




“WHO HE, ...AND WHAT IT?”^[1]

THE BRILLIANT UNDERGRADUATE
AND THE NOBEL PRIZE WINNER

MICHAEL GREER

CENTRO DE ESTUDOS DE TEATRO DA FACULDADE DE LETRAS
DA UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA (CET-FLUL)

O TEATRO DE SAMUEL BECKETT MARIA HELENA SERÓDIO

Tese de licenciatura em Filologia Germânica apresentada à Faculdade de Letras
da Universidade de Lisboa, 1970, 172 pp.

^[1] Samuel Beckett, *Play in Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett* (1984),
London: Faber, p. 150.

70 saw Maria Helena Serôdio, in her final undergraduate year, submit her bachelor's degree dissertation in Germanic philology. Her chosen subject was *O Teatro de Samuel Beckett*. In the previous momentous year, Neil Armstrong had taken a giant leap for mankind on the Moon and Beckett had become the third Irishman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature.^[2] Beckett was already a familiar name in Portugal, four years and many dreams before 25 de Abril; and, from 1959 onwards, there had already been a number of productions of his major plays on Portuguese stages^[3] with Maria Helena's dissertation including a number of splendid black and white photos of several of them.

Maria Helena Serôdio embarks upon an ambitious exploration of *absurd theatre* as both aesthetic form and existential investigation. Drawing on the Beckettian corpus – where silence and language, comedy and tragedy, presence and absence constantly intersect – she frames her argument around defining central motifs of Beckett's dramatic universe: the absurdity of human existence, the inherent

[2] W. B. Yeats was awarded the prize in 1922, and George Bernard Shaw in 1925. Seamus Heaney would become the fourth in 1995.

[3] The first production of Beckett's work in Portugal was of *Waiting for Godot* (*À Espera de Godot*) in 1959, which was followed by others of the same play in 1962, 1967 and 1969. *Act Without Words II* (*Acto sem palavras II*) and *Krapp's Last Tape* (*A última gravação*) were produced in 1961; *Happy Days* (*Dias felizes*) in 1968; and *Endgame* (*Fim de festa*) in 1970. And here I gratefully acknowledge the use of my colleagues Sebastiana Fadda and Rui Pina Coelho's chronology in "Samuel Beckett in Portugal: Imagens roubados ao tempo: 1959–2006" in *Sinais de Cena 5*. Lisbon: Campo de Letras, 2006. pp. 25–40. Besides these professional Portuguese productions, The amateur English language theatre company, The Lisbon Players, staged *Waiting for Godot* in 1961, which provoked a visit from the PIDE. As the story goes, having sat through fifteen minutes or so of a run of the play, the PIDE agents pronounced it "totally incomprehensible" ... and left. And so *Waiting for Godot* was performed uncut to great success. It's probably fortunate that they didn't stay long enough to meet Pozzo and Lucky.

suffering of being, the social infection of others, and the seemingly inevitable movement away from "from the tyranny of words to the voice of silence" ("Da tirania das palavras à voz do silêncio" p. 59).

At the outset, Maria Helena naturally places Beckett within the tradition of the theatre of the absurd: a post-World War II response to the breakdown of conventional meaning, the dissolution of rhetoric, and the inadequacy of language to represent human experience authentically. In this world of the absurd, characters find themselves trapped in repetitive cycles of action and speech, ultimately revealing the fragility of communication itself. Maria Helena highlights that Beckett's plays clearly exemplify these traits, using minimal action and circular dialogue to foreground a sense of existential disorientation and purposelessness.

The dissertation is particularly strong when Maria Helena links Beckett's absurdity to tragedy. She interprets Beckett's minimalism not as mere stylistic idiosyncrasy but as a dramatization of the tragic condition: the almost unbearable tension between human desire for meaning and a world that seemingly refuses to offer any meaning at all. Characters such as Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot* enact not only an absurd waiting but also a tragic persistence in the face of nothingness. In his fusing of tragic consciousness and absurd form, Maria Helena argues that Beckett's theatre is not a denial of tragedy but a reinvention of it in modern terms or "a nova forma do trágico" (p. 76).

A particularly resonant strand of Maria Helena's analysis concerns "the suffering of existing" ("o sofrimento de existir" p. 4) moving to what she frames as the "sin of being born" ("o pecado de ter nascido" p. 15). In Beckett's world, to exist is to endure. Birth is not a

beginning full of promise, but an entry into a realm of perpetual waiting, unfulfilled desire, and inevitable decay.^[4] This existential suffering is not portrayed with melodramatic pathos; it is rather registered through Beckett's restraint: empty stages, fragmented dialogue and repetitions that enact the very experience of living without clear justification or resolution.

Building on this foundation, Maria Helena explores the idea of "infection through others" ("a infecção dos outros" p. 23). In Beckett's theatre, 'the other' is not a figure offering consolation but is rather a vector of anxiety, obligation, and miscommunication. The presence of another character, as in *Endgame* with Ham and Chov, for example, frequently intensifies the sense of confinement rather than alleviating it, revealing how social contact can become a source of dread or contamination rather than fulfilment.^[5] This connects with what Maria Helena terms the "penumbra zone" ("a zona de penumbra" p. 39), a metaphorical space where identity is always partial, obscured by silence and the limits of language: dialogue is repetitive, circular, often collapsing into nonsense. Words accumulate only to reveal their own insufficiency. In this way, language becomes tyrannical-not because it dominates meaning, but because it fails or perhaps simply refuses to contain or convey it. Silent pauses, ellipses, stage directions emphasising absence over presence, all work together to make silence a counterpart to speech. For Maria Helena, silence in

^[4] Perhaps most powerfully expressed by Vladimir's: "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries." *Waiting for Godot* (1956), London: Faber. p. 90.

^[5] HAMM: Kiss me. (Pause) Will you not kiss me? // CLOV: No. // HAMM: On the forehead. // CLOV: I won't kiss you anywhere. (Pause.) // HAMM: Give me your hand at least. (Pause.) Will you not give me your hand? // CLOV: I won't touch you. *Endgame* (1958), London: Faber. P. 44.

Beckett is not emptiness but the presence of the unrepresentable, a necessary counterpart to language's futility.

Maria Helena writes with great clarity, balancing detailed textual readings with broader theoretical reflection. There is also an invitation to the reader to see Beckett's theatre as a space where existential disillusionment and theatrical innovation coalesce.

The dissertation is a thoughtful, nuanced engagement with Beckett, both critical and empathetic. Her focus on suffering, silence, and the limits of words resonates strongly with the core concerns of absurdist drama. *O Teatro de Samuel Beckett* is an early contribution to Beckett studies by a scholar whose promise, as we are all very much aware, was to be more than fulfilled in the many fruitful years that were to come.



SINAIS DE CENA
SÉRIE III NÚMERO 5
JUNHO DE 2026