

PERFORMING BECKETT IN  
DIFFERENT MEDIA IN SERBIA<sup>1</sup>Institute for Literature and  
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**Abstract:** In a very rich “love story” between Beckett’s work and Serbian audiences, there have been some significant cornerstones. Since the first translation of *Waiting for Godot* in 1953 to the present day, Beckett has been performed not only on stage (the famous clandestine performance of *Godot* in Belgrade in 1954), but also on Radio Belgrade (*All That Fall* in 1961) and Television Belgrade. It was with his radio drama *Words and Music* that broadcasting of the Third Programme of Radio Belgrade began in 1965. Unfortunately, there are no traces left of television programmes broadcast in the sixties, so the first reliable proof of Beckett’s presence in this medium are from the seventies. Together with his books translated into Serbian (novels, stories, plays, poems and essays), we can say that Beckett’s mostly spiritual “migrations” into other cultures (“mostly”, since he was our guest in 1958, when he spent a few weeks of his holidays during summer) were very successful in the case of the Serbian one. Since he himself was a voluntary migrant from one culture to another, and from one language to another, Beckett was familiar with the migrant experience of being poor and anonymous. In our paper, then, we will try to trace Beckett’s metamorphosis in different media in Serbia, and follow his rise in our culture during all those decades.

**Keywords:** Beckett, Serbia, Belgrade, theatre, *Waiting for Godot*, media, radio, television, bilingualism, spiritual migrations

Samuel Beckett entered into the Serbian culture quite soon after his fame had started spreading all over the world. As a matter of fact, when the young Serbian writer Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz saw one of the performances of Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot* in the Paris Théâtre de Babylon in 1953, he was amazed. Today this legendary play, directed by Roger Blin, is considered to be one of the cornerstones in the history of world theater. But, at that time it was a work of a completely unknown writer. Mihajlović was, as we said, amazed. He immediately recognized that he was witnessing an epic moment of Art. As chance would have it, he was living at the same square where the Théâtre de Babylon was situated and where the Beckett’s play started to be performed. Soon after Mihajlović came back to Belgrade, the text of *Godot* reached the capital as well. *Godot* was translated into Serbian the same year (1953) by Andreja Milićević.<sup>2</sup> Rehearsals of

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2 This translation of Milićević’s would be published as a separate volume *Čekajući Godoa* (*Waiting for Godot*) by the Srpska književna zadruga (SKZ) in 1964, since Beckett forbade the play to be published in the miscellany *Avangardna drama* (*Avant-garde Drama*), edited

*Godot* started on the stage of Beogradsko Dramsko Pozorište (BDP – Belgrade Drama Theatre) in January 1954, only a year after the Paris world premiere. Apart from the director Vasilije Popović, later to become an author known by the pen name Pavle Ugrinov, all actors were professionals of the house. The casting was as follows: Ljuba Tadić – Vladimir, Mihailo Paskaljević – Estragon, Rade Marković – Pozzo, Mića Tomić – Lucky, Rastislav Jović – the boy. However, as we have written before:

*Godot* did not enter into the official repertoire of this theater. Why? The fear of possible censorship in, at that time, a communist country, Yugoslavia, triggered in people a need for a kind of self-censorship. Surely Beckett's play did not offer the worldview that was favorable in the new communist social organization (Todorović 2014: 454).

The main reason why this happened was the fact that one of the rehearsals was seen by Miroslav Krleža.<sup>3</sup> After the rehearsal a conversation was struck in the office of the manager Dinulović. As one of the participants recalls, “he said that he reached certain conclusions about the work itself and that it referred to alienation, almost a reduction of man to a rag. On the other hand, it dealt with a psychological aspect, senility, an utterly ruined man” (Pašić 1999: 17). Analyzing the play, he negated it. He also stated that it was nothing new in theatre, that it had all happened already.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the reason, such a negative attitude of a respectable author must have caused annoyance in everyone involved. A solution was found nevertheless: a closed-door performance of *Godot* would be held, for members of the BDP ensemble only. The premiere would not be staged. Just like that! This performance took place in the spring of 1954, in April, and no one, including the performers' family members, was allowed to attend it!

Forbidden *Godot* was performed a few months later, nevertheless, in the atelier of the renowned painter Mića Popović, at Staro sajmište (Old Fairground). After the war these buildings were used to house many well-known painters, sculptors and authors, as decreed by the state. This unique performance was held at the end of May 1954. In any case, *Godot* in Mića Popović's atelier was prepared and performed in circumstances that could be described as unusual to put it mildly. The smell of forbidden fruit was spreading around Beckett. Vasilije Popović, the director of the performance, lived in one of those pavilions too. As Mića Popović's atelier

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for the SKZ by Slobodan Selenić the same year.

<sup>3</sup> Miroslav Krleža is the most famous Croatian author of the XX century, the darling of Tito's regime and arbiter in numerous literary, artistic and cultural debates. His word was often the last one in those not always innocent disputes. He gained a particular reputation as a playwright.

<sup>4</sup> It is noteworthy that the man who thus criticizes Beckett's vision of man's alienation in capitalism, lived enjoying all the blessings of the same in what was (for most people) unimaginable abundance in a villa situated in the residential part of Zagreb, travelled all over the world, and had his plays staged by all theatres of Yugoslavia.

was by far the largest of all (14.7 x 7 meters), the idea to perform the play there came naturally. There were some forty people inside sitting on the floor and chairs. "Somewhere in the middle of the performance a tempest broke out. By the end of the play electricity had collapsed and candles were lit" (Ugrinov 1990: 59). It seemed natural and normal at the time for Beckett to "illegally" loom over Staro Sajmište, then a place of art, but the site of a Nazi concentration camp for Serbs and Jews during the Second World War, a place of misery for many people. No news about the illegal performance was heard anywhere in the media at the time, although it must have been the talk of the town.

Two more years had to pass before *Godot* finally stepped on publicly to the stage.

The same *Godot* standing at the beginning of the end of one theatre will mark the birth of a new theatre. It is well-known and historically established that the right date in the history of Atelier 212 is the performance of *Waiting for Godot*. It was on December 17, 1956. The first *Godot* in a socialist country (Pašić 1999: 30).

We can say that the Belgrade performance, the closed-door rehearsal in April and the illegal performance in the atelier in May 1954 was one of the first in the world, after Paris. Although everything went on behind the closed doors, those two performances were seen possibly by a hundred people, the intellectual *crème de la crème* of Belgrade, and the impact of what had been seen could neither be dismissed, nor could Beckett's art be ignored anymore.

On Monday December 17, 1956, the "whole" of Belgrade gathered again to see *Godot* and on a "proper" stage, in a "proper" theatre, in the revamped hall of the Borba newspaper building, which contained exactly 212 seats, all wooden chairs. This official *Godot* was directed by the same director, Vasilije Popović, the scenery was the work of the same scenographer as for the original performance in BDP, Stojan Ćelić, and it was played by the same actors who were supposed to play in the original cast. Only the time and place differed.

What changed, then, in little over two years, since that unsuccessful Beckett's breakthrough into a communist country? Not much, however the conservative factions of the Communist Party had made a slight withdrawal, making room for the more progressive ones. The reception of both the audience and the critics was positive. *Godot* continued being performed in Atelier 212 all through to the end of the season of 1972/73! It was restaged with the same ensemble of actors on November 21, 1981 and continued until 1985. Atelier 212 took the role of the most avant-garde theatre in Yugoslavia in the decades that followed. It turned out that "*Godot* was a testing ground for our cultural bearings and cultural politics" (Ćirilov 1986: 46).

And thus began Beckett's relationship with Serbian culture. Soon after followed other plays, stage performances, translations of his novels,

stories and theatre plays. Thanks to one of those translations – the novel *Molloy* – from French, made by Kaća Samardžić, Beckett came to Belgrade together with Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, on July 7, 1958, in what was to be his only visit to Yugoslavia. After a few days in Belgrade, they went to Zagreb, and then to the Adriatic coast, to Lovran, where they had a “wonderful time” (Konstantinović 2000: 46), as Beckett wrote to his hosts, Kaća and Radomir Konstantinović (the editor of *Molloy*).

In the wake of the first performance Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* in Serbia in 1954, followed many others. All Beckett’s most important theatre plays were staged, some of them several times. *Endgame*, for example, was staged for the first time on March 1961 in the National Theatre in Belgrade, directed by Vuk Vučo. *Endgame* was performed again in the same theatre in 1993. Atelier 212, the theatre that started its life with the famous performance of *Waiting for Godot* in 1956, staged *Endgame* in 2010. *Happy Days* were performed in the Belgrade Drama Theatre in 1991. Thus, the theatre that banned the premiere of *Waiting for Godot*, finally put on stage one of Beckett’s plays. However, this was not all! *Waiting for Godot*, too, came back to this theatre house in 1991! This time with completely different participants. The same theatre staged this play once again in 1999. Of all Beckett’s plays *Godot* was performed most often in Yugoslavian/Serbian theatres: starting from 1954 until present day, in addition to Atelier 212 and BDP, it was staged in the Narodno pozorište (National Theatre) in Sombor in 1970, in the National Theatre in Užice in 1988, in the National theatre in Niš in 1991, in Jugoslovensko dramsko pozorište (Yugoslav Drama Theatre) in Belgrade in 2000, in the National Theatre in Piroć in 2002, and again in Atelier 212 in 2006, among others. *Krapp’s Last Tape* was staged in 1990 in the National Theatre in Niš, *The Play* in 1965 in Atelier 212, *First Love* in the same theatre in 2002; in 2011 in Parobrod in Belgrade *Rockaby*, *Footfalls*, *Not I*, *Come and Go*, Beckett’s short plays, were performed under the title *Pension Beckett*. Certainly, there were many other theatre performances of Beckett’s plays in Serbia, but here we confined ourselves to mentioning only the most important ones.

Serbia has one of the most important theatre festivals in the world, the famous BITEF (abbr. of The Belgrade International Theatre Festival), which takes place every September annually in Belgrade. It was founded in 1967 by the same person who had founded Atelier 212, Mira Trailović, together with Jovan Ćirilov. There we have had the opportunity to see *crème de la crème* of the world theatre performances for more than half a century. Among others Bob Wilson, Peter Brook, Lindsay Kemp, Pina Bausch, Roberto Ciulli, La Mama, Living Theatre, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Nuria Espert, Yuri Lyubimov, Giorgio Strehler, Jozef Svoboda, Maurice Bejart, not to mention numerous actors, composers, etc. At that time BITEF was one of the rare major theatre festivals in the world to be able to host theaters from East and West, North and South, from communist and capitalist countries, as well as from the Third World. In

the 1960s, the founders of this festival courageously followed tumultuous events in global theatre teeming with avant-garde explorations.

Of course, there were several other occasions the Belgrade audiences had the chance to see Beckett's plays. In 1976 we hosted the Schiller Theatre from West Berlin, and they were performing *Waiting for Godot*, *That Time* and *Footfalls*, directed by Beckett himself! A Hungarian theatre from Budapest, Bábszínház, performed *Act without Words* in 1978, directed by Kató Szönyi. In 1993, The Montenegrin National Theatre staged *Beckett Fest*, directed by Slobodan Milatović.

Samuel Beckett is one of the rare writers who explored the possibilities of theatre in different media. So, after his very successful beginning with theatre itself (*Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Happy Days*), which made him world famous, he turned first to the radio. His first play for this medium was the radio drama *All That Fall*, written in 1956, soon after his success with *Godot*. The premiere of this play was on the BBC Third Programme in January 1957. Very soon thereafter this play was broadcast on Radio Belgrade, in November 1961, directed by Arsa Jovanović, who would later become a well-known director of films, and television and radio dramas. Artists from Belgrade quickly recognized the value of Beckett's explorations in new media. After this premiere followed others. For instance, it was with Beckett's *Word and Music* that the broadcasting of the Third Programme of Radio Belgrade<sup>5</sup> began in 1965! This too was directed by Arsa Jovanović, while the music was composed by John Beckett, Samuel's cousin. Actors were Branko Pleša and Sven Lasta.

We have seen how the life of two important, still extant, cultural institutions in Serbia, The Atelier 212 in 1956 and The Third Programme of Radio Belgrade in 1965 began with Beckett's works. Are there other such cases anywhere in the world?

In December 1966 the Second Programme of Radio Belgrade broadcast the radio adaptation of Beckett's prose work *From an Abandoned Work*. This work was first broadcast on the BBC Third Programme in 1957, and the director was Petar Teslić. On the Third Programme of Radio Belgrade in 1971 there was the premiere of *Come and Go*, directed by Goran Marković. Actors were Mića Tomić, Dobrila Stojnić, Ljiljana Gazdić, Đurđija Cvetić and Branko Cvejić. The Second Programme broadcast *Lessons* in October 1972. Curiously, the director was Vasilije Popović, the very same that directed the banned *Godot* in 1954! The Third Programme broadcast *Lessons*, produced by BBC, in English, with English participants (Harold Pinter, Leonid Fenton, Patrick Magee, etc.), in 1972. The Second Programme broadcast *First Love* in September 1979, directed by Ognjenka Milićević. The same channel broadcast *Cascando* in December 1980, directed by Petar Teslić. Actors were Nikola Simić and Jovan Milićević. *Krapp's Last Tape* was performed on the Third Programme of Radio Belgrade in November 1990. Actors were Zagorka Marjanović and Predrag Laković.

<sup>5</sup> The Third Programme of Radio Belgrade was the equivalent of the Third Programme of BBC, dedicated basically to the cultural content.

Just how much the Third Programme of Radio Belgrade was devoted to the work of Samuel Beckett can be illustrated by the following example. During the Fall/Winter/Spring 1985–1986 they broadcast twenty-five essays about Beckett’s work—his theatre, prose, poetry, essays, film, translations, literary tradition—together with his Biography, Chronology of Samuel Beckett’s Literary Works and Bibliography, written by myself; all texts were edited by myself. Everything was published in “Treći program” (The Third Programme Journal), No. 67, IV, 1985, pp. 75–420. This was the largest thematic issue of any journal in Yugoslavia dedicated to Beckett at the time. Among other authors were André Topia, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Ruby Cohn, Melvin J. Friedman, John Pilling, John Fletcher, Hersch Zeifman, James Acheson, Shoshana Avigal, Clas Zilliacus, Breon Mitchell, Jean-Jacques Mayoux and Ludovic Janvier, some of the greatest Beckettologists.

As we can see, Beckett’s presence on Serbian radio channels was quite frequent. However, Beckett was further exploring the possibilities of drama performances. The medium of television would be the next in line to be tested. It could be said that Beckett was following the development of media: radio was older than television, so, logically, it was his second choice, after theatre. Radio drama differs very much from classical theatre performance. The absence of image, the absence of stage, the absence of audience, the impossibility to see what is happening in front of one’s eyes. There is only the sound—words, music, different sounds. Beckett was probably aware of what he was engaging in in 1956, when he was writing *All That Fall*. Contrary to radio, the medium of television offers the possibility of both sound and image. Thanks to this medium, today we have recordings of all Beckett’s works. Most of them are available on the internet, a medium completely unknown to our writer. I wonder if Beckett would have liked to try to explore it too? Knowing his curiosity and his capacity for experiments, I think that we all know the answer.

After works for radio came works for television. Beckett started to write especially for this medium in 1966, exactly ten years after his first radio experiments. His *Eh Joe* was broadcast for the first time on the BBC Two on July 4<sup>th</sup> 1966. An interesting detail is that before writing for television Beckett had written a screenplay for his unique film, titled simply *Film*, in 1964. *Film* was directed by Alan Schneider and the only actor was Buster Keaton, the famous hero of slapstick comedies in the silent movie era. This was his last role.

Unfortunately, there are no traces left of the TV programmes broadcast in the sixties in Yugoslavia/Serbia, and the first reliable evidence of Beckett’s presence in this medium comes from the seventies. In addition to broadcasting Beckett’s original works, Belgrade Television produced several programmes dedicated to his life and work. No wonder that several of them focused on the famous *Waiting for Godot* performances of 1954 and 1956. One of them, “Pozorišni salon” (The Theatre Saloon) from 1984, was exactly about this. To be more precise, it was about the banned perfor-

mance of *Godot* in BDP in 1954, and it involved some of the participants of that event: Rade Marković, Ljuba Tadić, Đuza Stojiljković and Soja Jovanović. The other is “Međutim” (However) from 1985. This program was about the clandestine performance of *Godot* in the atelier of the painter Mića Popović in 1954, and the first official Beckett in Atelier 212 in 1956. It offers the opportunity to listen to the statements of those who directly participated in those events: Mića Popović, Mario Maskareli, Minja Dedić, Predrag Dinulović, Borislav Mihajlović Mihiz, Antonije Isaković, Sveta Lukić, Stojan Ćelić, Rade Marković, Bata Paskaljević, Mića Tomić, Ljuba Tadić, Rastislav Jović, Mira Trailović, etc. Actors, the scenographer, the director, the theatre manager, the audience, they are all trying to reconstruct the past. As in Beckett’s *Molloy*, we are aware of the unreliability of human memory. Who, what, where, when, how? But, in the end, the collective memory shows itself to be superior to the memory of one person. Since there were no recordings of any kind of those legendary events, a few photos notwithstanding, this was the only way to rebuild the past. Thanks to those testimonies, we were able to write about *Godot* in Belgrade, the facts that were completely unknown to all Beckettologists in the world.

Another programme about this event is „On neće doći večeras“ (He will not come tonight), from 2003, made on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the *Godot* ban in BDP. In this programme we can also see the story of Beckett’s unique sojourn in Belgrade, told by his Serbian friend Radomir Konstantinović. There are many other programmes in which we have the chance to listen to individual testimonies of different participants of the first *Godot* in Belgrade. This proves how much importance people still attach to this quite unusual performance of Beckett’s first theatre play.

One 1976 programme dedicated to, among other topics, the BITEF festival, „Kultura danas“ (The Culture Today), provides information about the performance of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* in the production of The Schiller Theatre from West Berlin, directed by Beckett himself. Among the guests of this programme were members of Théâtre des Nations—Jean-Louis Barot, Fernando Arrabal, or the great Russian theatre director Yuri Lyubimov.

TV Belgrade has broadcast Beckett’s plays on several occasions. As I already mentioned, everything broadcast in the sixties has been lost, since there were not enough tapes for all the programmes! So, the first reliable proof of the presence of Beckett’s works on our television comes from the seventies. For instance, in 1972 a French production of *All That Fall* was broadcast, but I was unable find more details about it (regarding the director, actors, etc.). In 1978 “BITEF on TV” broadcast Beckett’s *Three Pieces*. The production was English. It was an adaptation of performance of Piccolo Teatro from Milan, and the director was Tristan Powell.

Finally, in 2007 Television Belgrade broadcast *Beckett on Film* in ten episodes. This project aimed at making film versions of all nineteen of

Samuel Beckett's stage plays, with the exception of the early and unperformed *Eleutheria*. The project was conceived by Michael Colgan, the artistic director of Dublin's Gate Theatre, and released in 2001. The films were produced by Colgan and Alan Moloney for the Irish broadcaster RTÉ, the British broadcaster Channel 4 and the Irish Film Board. Each had a different cast and director, drawn from theatre, film and other fields.

Serbian TV audiences had the rare opportunity to see all of Beckett's work written for theatre. Starting, of course, with *Waiting for Godot*, directed by Michael Lindsay-Hogg, followed by *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, *Act Without Words I*, *Act Without Words II*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Rough for Theatre I*, *Rough for Theatre II*, *Play*, *Come and Go*, *Breath, Not I*, *That Time*, *Footfalls*, *A Piece of Monologue*, *Rockaby*, *Ohio Impromptu*, *Catastrophe* and *What Where*. In this collection of Beckett's theatre work, we saw some of the finest world actors, such as Barry McGovern, John Hurt, Alan Rickman, Kristin Scott Thomas, Julianne Moore, Jeremy Irons, John Gielgud, Harold Pinter, as well as directors such as Atom Egoyan, Neil Jordan, David Mamet and Anthony Minghella. This event was concluded with the broadcasting of *Samuel Beckett: As the Story was Told*, a documentary from 1996, directed by Seán O'Mórdha. With this we conclude this section of the paper, dedicated to multimedia performances of Beckett in Serbia. In the end, we can say that thanks to theatre, radio, television or cinema (one goes with the other) we were able to see and hear most of Beckett's work. After more than half a century, starting with the first traces of Beckett's presence in our culture, we can conclude that he is still present, alive and well. His star did not fade away, his work did not lose in relevance, unlike those of many other once famous writers.

Taken together with his books translated into Serbian (novels, stories, plays, poems and essays), Beckett's mostly spiritual "migrations" have been very successful in the case of Serbian culture. Since he himself was a voluntary migrant from one culture to another, and from one language to another, Beckett was familiar with the migrant experience of being poor and anonymous. Those feelings give his work a universal message, one that can be understood worldwide much easier than one might think. In our paper we have tried to trace Beckett's metamorphosis in different media in Serbia, and follow his rise in our culture during all those decades. He was translated into Serbian both from French and English, and we know that versions of his works differ from one language to another, and that he himself was an innovative translator of his own works. With the migration of language, migrates also the idea, the spiritual world of one author. As Beckett himself was a rare case of a bilingual writer who successfully wrote in two languages, he cannot be avoided when studying the phenomenon of bilingualism. His migration from his native language to another one is unusual, since he was a native speaker of English, and English is today a lingua franca. But that was Beckett, original in every way. He was not, of course, the only famous writer to



do it. “Nabokov, Kahlil Gibran, Salman Rushdie, Amin Maalouf, Joseph Conrad, Elias Canetti or Joseph Brodsky, they have all switched languages and obtained world fame” (Todorović 2013: 282). Beckett, Brodsky and Canetti were even awarded the Nobel prize for literature.

“Bilingualism is in the heart of his art. The very moment when he started to write in another language, he understood that his difficulties with words were doubled” (Todorović 2013: 282). By translating his own works he was “creating his own linguistic twins” (Bir 2003: 47). Above all, his bilingualism was completely voluntary, he was not persecuted for political or religious reasons, which was not the case with other writers who were forced to exile. “We can say that the reasons for his turning to French language were partly of esthetical, and partly of psychological nature. He made himself bilingual” (Bir 2003: 47). By writing and translating what he had written, Beckett created an astonishing double of his own work, that was not a simple copy. Every reader who masters both English and French can easily see the difference between two versions.

The migrations of his work are multiple. His works for theatre could be seen not only on stage, but also on television and in the cinema, or heard on the radio. Multiple translations of his opus make possible his migrations into completely different cultures all over the world. These artistic and spiritual migrations are enriching other cultures. And thanks to all those metamorphoses of Beckett’s work we are aware of his presence in our lives even today.

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Предраг Тодоровић

*Извођење Бекетових дела у различитим медијима у Србији*

*Резиме*

У веома богатој „љубавној причи“ између Бекетовог дела и српске публике, постојали су неки неизбежни преломни тренуци. Још од првог превода драме *Чекајући Гогоа* 1953. па све до данас, Бекет је био извођен не само на позоришним сценама (чувена илегална представа *Гогоа* у Београду 1954), већ такође и на Радио Београду (*Сви који њадају* 1961) и Телевизији Београд. Његовом радио драмом *Речи и музика* почело је емитовање Трећег програма Радио Београда 1965. Нажалост, не постоје видео записи емитованог телевизијског програма из шездесетих година, тако да се прво поуздано Бекетово појављивање у овом медију може сместити у седамдесете. Заједно са његовим књигама преведеним на српски језик (романи, приче, драме, песме, есеји), можемо рећи да су Бекетове углавном духовне „миграције“ у друге културе (углавном, јер он је био наш гост 1958. године, кад је у Београду и Југославији провео неколико недеља свог одмора) биле изузетно успешне у случају Србије. Будући да је он сам био добровољни мигрант из једне културе у другу и из једног језика у други, и да је од аутсајдера постао светски славан писац, Бекету је свакако било познато мигрантско искуство бивања сиромашним и непознатим. Та осећања дала су његовом делу универзалну поруку која се може разумети широм света много лакше но што се на прво читање или гледање то да наслутити. У нашем раду, стога, ми ћемо покушати да опишемо Бекетове преображаје у различитим медијима у Србији, и да пратимо његов успон у нашој култури током свих тих деценија.

*Кључне речи:* Бекет, Србија, Београд, позориште, *Чекајући Гогоа*, медији, радио, телевизија, билингвизам, духовне миграције