

A NOVEL PLAY

THEATRE / Mendel Kohansky

THE NEW production at the Jerusalem Khan, *Mercier and Camier*, is an adaptation of one of Samuel Beckett's early works, a short novel he wrote in Paris in 1946, seven years before the premiere of *Waiting for Godot* made him the foremost playwright of our time. Heavily influenced by fellow-Irishman (and fellow-emigré) James Joyce, Beckett then thought of himself as a novelist, not a playwright. But *Mercier and Camier* contains all the elements out of which eventually sprang *Waiting for Godot*, the most significant play of this century.

I have not read the novel, but the Khan production, adapted and directed by Mihal Govrin, gave me the impression that Beckett was already thinking in stage terms when he wrote it. With all respect to the adapter-director — and my respect for her is very high indeed — it seems that she had little to do in order to transfer the novel to the stage. It is all dialogue of the kind that became famous through *Waiting for Godot*.

The action, such as it is, leading from nowhere to nowhere, is similar to the stationary situation of the two familiar tramps in a sterile landscape, under the naked tree.

MERCIER AND CAMIER are undoubtedly direct predecessors of *Godot's* Vladimir and Estragon. The two tramps in their shabby clothes, carrying bundles of meagre possessions, are on a journey. We do not know where they come from nor where they are going.

Beckett's biographer, Deirdre Bair, postulated an autobiographical element: the journey represents the author's departure from Ireland to take up residence in Paris. The young Beckett hated his native land, with its provincialism and narrow nationalism, and found his spiritual home in the highly charged cosmopolitan, intellectual atmosphere of Paris of the '30s. Thus, the journey of Mercier and Camier could represent "voluntary exile, greatly similar to that of Beckett's."

During their travels, the two men gradually dispose of their possessions. They eventually throw away their old, worn-out coat (all their belongings are common property, indicating that Beckett thought of them as one person, split in two to show two different facets of personality).

According to Bair, Beckett owned a shabby coat by which he was known in the literary pubs of London, and which he symbolically discarded when he left Ireland. Also, he gave his heroes names identifying them with France,

while the characters they encounter on their way bear such names as Conner and Madden, names he was leaving behind.

ALL THESE biographical clues notwithstanding, *Mercier and Camier* deals primarily with existentialist problems, so well known to us from Beckett's plays. The absurdity of the journey is best expressed by Mercier, when he tells someone that he and his friend, having spent many years deciding to embark on the fateful journey, have finally picked this day. All they are waiting for is the rain to stop.

The play, with its absurd, non-sequitur dialogue, is very much influenced by the English music-hall tradition, with Mercier playing the smart part and Camier the dumb one (the eternal stage duo: Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, Vladimir and Estragon, reason against fatuity; order against chaos).

A novel element here is the mysterious Vat, a tramp like the other two, who acts as narrator and commentator, but a narrator with a personality and problems of his own. He does not only accompany the two characters on their journey to nowhere to comment on their movements; he is on a journey of his own, laden with words and memories, carrying a huge bag out of which he scatters dog-eared sheets of paper representing memories. Towards the end of his journey, as Mercier and Camier have already disposed of their material possessions, his bag, the "cellar of memories," is empty.

THIS IS ONE of the best plays I have seen this season in the Israeli theatre; I would put it in the same class as *Metamorphosis*, Steven Berkoff's staging of the Kafka story at the Haifa Theatre. It is visually beautiful, the action taking place in a desolate Beckettian landscape (impressive set by Doron Livne, and expressive lighting by Benzion Munitz). There are no dull moments in this essentially static play, much of it due to the inventive movements and posings of the characters (movement supervised by Rafi Goldwasser). It is spare, almost skeletal, with a sustained mood throughout.

The cast consists of Aaron Almog as the Narrator, Sasson Gabbai as Mercier, and Avinoam Mor-Haim as Camier; with Shalom Keinan, Dani Mudja, Neta Plotzky and Uri Avrahami in the roles of the various characters they encounter on their journey. They all perform faultlessly. The fine translation from the French is by Mulli Melzer, who also contributed an enlightening essay to the programme. □