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Monologue Theatre, Solo Performance and Self as Spectacle

Mm. There’s always going to be a smugness about you listening to this. / As we all take part in this convention … / And you are entitled. / This convention. These restrictions, these rules, they give us that freedom. / I have the freedom to tell you this unhindered, while you can sit there assured that no one is going to get hurt. Possibly offended, but you’ll live.¹

Conventions, restrictions, freedom, smugness and offence—such are the co-ordinates of the theatre experience ironically summed up by Conor McPherson’s disgruntled theatre critic and cantankerous monologist in St. Nicholas (1997). And for some they might also delineate a fairly accurate outline of monologue drama and performance. Indeed, from Samuel Beckett’s minimalist theatre of interiority, to Philippe Minyana’s “inventories” of everyday speech, to Karen Finley’s provocative and political solo performance pieces, these qualities are laced through radically different types of theatrical monologue. The idea for this book initially arose from an interest in the recurrence of types of monologue in twentieth century British and Irish drama, and the attendant tensions between convention and freedom. However, as is evident from

the essays herein, monologue is an incredibly widespread mode spanning “conventional” drama to “alternative” theatre. Monologue theatre nevertheless remains contentious, soliciting questions about the very nature of theatre itself, about the nature of performance and audience response, truth and illusion, narrative and experience. Is it an undoing or dismemberment of theatre’s core characteristics—imitative action and dialogue? Is it merely an excuse for autobiographical excess where the performance text is little more than a collection of reminiscences or testimonies?

Although it is to be found across the spectrum of modern and postmodern theatre, critical engagement with monologue’s modalities and implications, with the exception of Deborah Geis’s *Postmodern Theatric(k)s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama*, remains diffuse and scant. Undoubtedly, as several of the contributors to this volume indicate, critical commentary on solo autobiographical performance (which predominantly takes the form of monologue) has been growing. Beyond that there is a vague sense that for drama at

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2 In the opening chapter of *Beyond the Boundaries: American Alternative Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), Theodore Shank uses the conventional—alternative opposition to launch his discussion of the latter types of theatre. Conventional theatre is associated with playwriting, alternative with performance. He goes on to assert that “The artists who comprise the alternative theatre explore the relation of the artist to the work and the performance to the spectator” while “The conventional theatre is usually expressive of a past time. Artists convey through their works a knowledge of how it feels to be alive in their particular time and place” (7). Beyond the scope of Shank’s extensive history of experimental theatre in America however, the limitations of such an opposition are soon evident.


4 See essays by Dee Heddon and Catharine McLean-Hopkins below. Admittedly, at least one of the performances described by Heddon, *Salon Adrienne*, is not
least, all roads probably lead back to Samuel Beckett. Beckett is indisputably pivotal. While early examples of monologue plays include August Strindberg’s *The Stronger* (1888-9) and Eugene O’Neill’s *Before Breakfast* (1916), it is not until Beckett begins to explore the form in the late 1950s that its experimental potential is seriously developed. Nevertheless, in approaching the multiplicity of monologue forms that have appeared over the last thirty years, one must also reach beyond Beckett to the discourses and conditions that precede his work, as well as to those that succeed it.

As Mark Berninger notes in his essay in this volume, one of the difficulties that dogs any discussion of theatre monologues is the very looseness of the term. The question of how to define monologue in anything more than the most basic of ways opens the usual Pandora’s Box of problems attendant on generic criticism and also brings into view a number of contradictions. This is demonstrated, for example, by Patrice Pavis in his compendious and informative *Dictionary of Theatre* where at first he defines the term as follows: “A monologue is a speech by a character to himself, while a soliloquy is addressed directly to an interlocutor who does not speak.”5 In suggesting a distinct difference between soliloquy and monologue, Pavis’s definition alters the standard and more general dictionary designation of soliloquy as speaking alone with or without the presence of hearers (*OED*). Indeed, already the notion of a *silent interlocutor* presents a tautology. Later, when describing the “deep structure of monologue,” Pavis refines this by stating that while structurally the monologue is not dependent upon a reply from “an interlocutor,” it “addresses the spectator directly as an accomplice and a watcher-hearer.”6 The distinction between soliloquy and monologue first implied is thus effectively monological as it is structured around the performer’s conversation with an audience of one.

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erased. It is perhaps finally more useful to conceive of monologue as a genre, albeit a multifaceted one, and soliloquy as dramatic device.

More illuminating is Pavis’s general typology of monologues, which categorises according to dramaturgical function (narrative, lyrical/emotional, reflection/deliberation) and literary form (aside, stanza, interior monologue, authorial intervention, solitary dialogue, the monologue drama). These categories, whether implicitly or explicitly, inform the work assembled here. However, rather than attempting to produce an overview of types of monologue in theatre and performance or to copper fasten terminology, this collection of essays roams around various realisations and modifications of the monologue in plays and in solo performance. It is deliberately poly-vocal and poly-perspectival in its treatment not only of monodrama, but also of semi-monologues, autobiographical pieces, polylogues or ensemble monologues and ultimately transmedial performance.

Despite such diversity, two main strands in the theatre of monologue need to be highlighted: the monologue drama and the solo performance. While usually treated separately they have been deliberately juxtaposed here with the aim of drawing out the conceptual affinities and shared contemporary cultural conditions that underpin both varieties. These strands at times are highly distinct; at others they are closely interwoven. Both involve a speaker who delivers speeches before an audience, sometimes directly addressing that audience, sometimes addressing a silent or invisible character-auditor. Though in some cases speeches relate stories this may not be their primary function. If there is more than one speaker on stage speeches are not dialogical, rather they function as discreet units that may overlap or contradict one another. A prime example of this technique is to be found in Brian Friel’s Faith Healer (1979) in which three characters tell overlapping, yet discordant, stories

7 Pavis, Dictionary of Theatre, 219.
of their past lives together. Like monologue drama, the monologue or solo performance is generally carefully scripted. However, the status of the text evidently differs. If solo performance scripts appear less frequently in print, more importantly they belong to the author/performer in a way a conventional play text does not belong to the playwright. As Dee Heddon in her essay here describes: “In solo autobiographical performance, the performing subject and the subject of performance are typically one and the same.” The functions of author and performer are welded together, so it is unthinkable that a Karen Finley or a Bobby Baker solo piece be performed by someone else. Monologue in the sense of solo performance is therefore subjectively determined in an explicit and complex manner which is explored by Heddon and Catharine McLean-Hopkins below.

The contexts for monologue in the world beyond the theatre are relatively limited and are associated with various forms of performance activity: speeches, sermons, instruction and lectures; recitation and storytelling; confessions; and finally, “perversions” of these former categories in psychosis, hysteria and so on. It is therefore unsurprising that monologue and naturalism have little affinity with one another. As Pavis notes: “The monologue reveals the artificiality of theatre and acting conventions. Certain periods that were not concerned with producing a naturalistic rendering of the world could easily accommodate the monologue (Shakespeare, Sturm und Drang, Romantic or Symbolist drama).” Consequently, monologue dramas and performances rarely maintain the conventions of a naturalistic stage space. On the contrary, the empty stage or site-specific locations deliberately disrupt the illusion of the

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8 If, conventionally, playwrights more rarely take to the stage to perform their own work, then British playwright, David Hare’s performance of his own monologue Via Dolorosa (1998) playing himself changes this picture somewhat. Hare does not pretend to be an actor, rather his deliberately unpolished performance functions to authenticate the autobiographical elements of the dramatic text and to codify it as sincere testimony.

9 Pavis, Dictionary of Theatre, 218.
fourth wall. In the absence of this convention, monologue focuses attention intensely upon the speaker and upon the way in which s/he expresses her or himself. Language, the dynamics of narrative and linguistic elements are, as a result, foregrounded. So for example a play like Peter Handke’s *Kaspar* (1967) stages the violent acquisition of language, described by the playwright as “speech torture.” At the other end of the spectrum, Anna Deavere Smith’s performances *Fires in the Mirror* (1991) and *Twilight Los Angeles, 1992* (1993) are composed of eyewitness accounts (of violent clashes between African Americans and Jews in Brooklyn following the death of a black child killed by a car carrying a rabbi, and the L.A. riots) assembled and performed by Smith. Replicating the stories of the witnesses and their modes of expression through impersonation are the focal points of her performances.

It might be asserted that in some cases the monologue form is “essential” storytelling, a stripping away of dramatic illusion—for instance, Eamonn Jordan in his essay here writes of the role of naïveté as an attitude in Irish monologue drama. Nonetheless, distortion and dissonance are simultaneously generated, while the regularity with which “nudity” features in solo performance seems no accident. The literal stripping of the performer may be seen as a means of exposing a “true” self while simultaneously shocking or embarrassing the audience. Yet the possibilities that the speaker may not be entirely trustworthy, or may be a deliberate trickster, that as spectators we take the role of confessors, or worse still, voyeurs, hover in the wings.

Inevitably this draws any discussion of monologue to a set of central concerns orientated around subjectivity and performance. The roles of personality, persona, personification

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and impersonation are entangled with the linguistic and narrative elements mentioned above. Aspects of impersonation, in the sense of taking on and of giving voice to an identity, are explored in this volume by Rebecca D’Monté, in particular when she analyses Eve Ensler’s problematic “empowerment” play *The Vagina Monologues* (1996). Ensler’s personae exist not as conventional characters, but rather as a function of the stories they tell. The status of the play as a “personality vehicle” (D’Monté notes just some of the celebrities who have performed the text) and the pseudo-documentary status of the stories further complicate the interplay of personal, political and performative identities. Also in this volume, in an associated though somewhat differently inflected manner, Eckart Voigts-Virchow and Mark Schreiber discuss how character, especially in monologue or solo performance, increasingly gives way to “permeable personae” and a highly self-reflexive play of impersonation. In his book *Presence and Resistance*, Philip Auslander illustrates this tendency vividly when he contrasts the work of two well-known American performers, Laurie Anderson and Spalding Gray. Both, of course, work with or rather from autobiographical material, yet their attitudes to narrating and staging this material are, as Auslander indicates, quite radically divergent. For Anderson, performing, arranging, editing and rearranging her stories and anecdotes renders them “less literary in tone, more emblematic and less personal.” Although the stories are narrated in the first person, Anderson’s “persona in these pieces is so detached that one begins to doubt [their] autobiographical status,” argues Auslander. So their effect is, somewhat contradictorily, depersonalised, they “become the narrative equivalent of a sound bite.”\(^\text{12}\) In contrast, Spalding Gray’s monologues are proximate to the narrative structure of a television serial in which constant characters—in Gray’s case these characters are

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based on his wife and himself—reappear in different scenarios. Auslander, teasing out the interactions of persona, personality, the personal and impersonal in relation to these two performers, concludes that while:

the persona Gray has created through his performances is overtly autobiographical … possessed of a defined personality; Anderson’s persona, on the other hand, has progressively shed its autobiographical aura to become a nonpersona …

Both, however, are engaged in staging or mediating the self in, and in relation to “a mediatized environment.” The spectacle of the (alienated) self represented in this environment is taken a step further here by Johannes Birringer who contends that as contemporary performance moves towards a “theatre of transmediality” the spaces of identity and subjectivity are necessarily transformed and displaced by technology.

As several of the essays collected in this volume suggest, contemporary monologue theatre seems to grapple with the (post)modern condition of the “self.” In her study of American monologue drama, Deborah Geis argues that in contrast to the revelatory function of the soliloquy in Shakespeare’s drama, present-day monologues are frequently characterised by the ways in which they play “tricks.” Indeed for Geis, and as is evident in some of performance work already discussed, the

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13 Auslander, Presence and Resistance, 76.
14 Auslander, Presence and Resistance, 77.
15 Auslander, Presence and Resistance, 81. Auslander continues his exploration of mediatisation in Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), looking in particular at the value accorded to live performance—a traditionally highly prized dimension to alternative theatre of the later 20th century. Though not a question pursued by contributors here, Auslander’s controversial argument that with dominance of the “televisual,” and latterly new media, the prestige of presence is diminished, is one which is certainly pertinent to the dynamic of monologue theatre.
form is less engaged with character development or narrative progress than with theatricality, parody and ambivalence.\textsuperscript{16}

While these dimensions to contemporary monologue seem pre-eminently postmodern, as Mateusz Borowski and Małgorzata Sugiera explain, monologue in theatre emerges in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century within the context of a changing discourse around selfhood and how to represent inner, psychological states. In its turn towards monologue, theatre echoes the concerns of the literary genres of poetry and fiction, which are perhaps more indicative of the discourse of the age. Clearly elements from these non-theatrical genres later appear woven into the fabric of theatres of monologue.

Important among these elements is the development of dramatic monologue as a poetic genre in the early decades of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. What is perhaps most of significance are the ways in which dramatic monologue poetry problematises the construction of the speaking self. As Glennis Byron describes, the genre emerges at a time when notions of the self begin slowly to shift towards a concept of the subject:

As opposed to the notion of the individual self with agency and control over itself, the term “subject” suggests an “I” that is simultaneously a subject to itself within its own experience and always subjected to forces both outside the self, such as social and environmental forces, and within itself, the workings of the unconscious.\textsuperscript{17}

Dramatic monologue is generally perceived as a reaction to and rejection of Romantic lyricism, and a “unified Romantic subject.”\textsuperscript{18} The innovation of dramatic monologue, attributed

\textsuperscript{16} Deborah Geis, Postmodern Theatric(k)s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).

\textsuperscript{17} Glennis Byron, Dramatic Monologue (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) 45.

\textsuperscript{18} Byron, Dramatic Monologue, 3. Byron however also notes that the repetition in dramatic monologues of the questions “Who am I?” or “What am I?” suggests a
principally to Tennyson and Browning, seen in the context of changing cultural conditions is one that resonates with peculiar familiarity with claims often made for solo or monologic performance in the contemporary period. Victorian anxieties and uncertainties regarding “stable values and transcendent truth” find expression in this genre of poem that, according to Robert Langbaum, becomes the form “for an empiricist and relativist age, an age which has come to consider value an evolving thing dependent upon the changing individual and social requirements of the historical process.”

Dramatic monologue enables the poet to inhabit a range of personae that may, as opposed to the confidential, earnest lyric “I,” open a space for doubt and ambivalence around the speaker. Notwithstanding the Victorian association of introspection with abnormal states of mind, dramatic monologue gestures towards the broader historical context in which the notion of an autonomous, conscious self is gradually complicated by the emergence of modern psychological theories of the unconscious. The perception of the self as “not autonomous, unified or stable, but rather the unfixed, fragmented product of various social and historical forces,” is fundamental to the emergence not only of this poetic genre, but also to the later development of modernist aesthetics. If the form ripples with latent and manifest meaning (as is famously evident in Browning’s “My Last Duchess”), it also plainly draws attention to the speaker and the tension between fictive and autobiographical voices within the poetic frame. A similar tension is to be found in some forms of solo performance explored in this volume.

strong connection with the Romantic interest in self rather than any absolute rejection or break. See page 45 and following.

19 Byron, *Dramatic Monologue*, 34.
21 Byron, *Dramatic Monologue*, 43.
22 Byron, *Dramatic Monologue*, 43.
A final suggestive dimension to dramatic monologue is the way it can be seen as a venue for commenting upon or acting out particular gender roles. The device of persona permits the poet to take on the role of the opposite sex, though consideration of gender identity is rarely radical in 19th century verse. However, the nascent performance and questioning of gender identities in evidence in Victorian dramatic monologue can be seen fully and radically developed in much recent monologue theatre. So, as Brian Singleton, Dee Heddon, Jorge Huerta and Ashley Lucas in various ways explore, monologue today can constitute a forum for the airing of critical perspectives on normative gender roles.

Similarly we may find in prose interior monologue an important precursor to contemporary monologue drama. Defined by Robert Scholes as “a literary term, synonymous with unspoken soliloquy,” interior monologue as a “technique for presenting the inward life” has an extended history. It is a long-established convention that interior monologue can be used by an author to dramatise the “inner life” of characters in various ways. Scholes separates these into rhetorical and psychological. And although he distinguishes between the use of interior monologue in prose and soliloquy, it may be argued that in fact versions of both rhetorical and psychological forms can likewise be found in contemporary theatre. If interior monologue, as an umbrella term, covers various means of depicting the inner world of fictional characters, be it through “silent soliloquy,” authorial commentary and so on, then one of the most influential developments is the stream of consciousness technique. As is well known, this psychological term which hails from William James’s *Principles of Psychology*

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23 See Byron chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of gender in dramatic monologue poetry by male and female authors.
(1890), has come to designate an aesthetic strategy that deploys association and a disruption of conventional syntax to depict interior states. While the poetic genre of dramatic monologue situates the speaking “I” between internal and external forces, stream of consciousness prioritises internal experience and the realm of subjective perception. For Scholes, what connects writers who depict the interior lives of characters rhetorically (Gustav Flaubert, George Eliot or D.H. Lawrence) and those who do so psychologically (Virginia Woolf, James Joyce or William Faulkner) is that they all have “faced the problem ... of the limitation of verbal patterns as conveyors of thought and characterisation through thought.”

Repeatedly, language is found inadequate for the expression of identity or subjectivity. It is this cul de sac that Samuel Beckett so memorably transferred to the stage. As Eckart Voigts-Virchow and Mark Schreiber aptly describe, Beckett’s “soulless, monadic voices” are characterised by communication breakdown. Joyce attributed his use of interior monologue to Edouard Dujardin, blending it with stream of consciousness techniques; Beckett in turn adapted these elements to performance. But in contrast to Joyce’s proliferating linguistic aesthetic, Beckett’s is, to paraphrase Leo Bersani, an “art of impoverishment.” He notably complicates the position of the speaking self in various ways—by using technology (the tape recorder in Krapp’s Last Tape (1958)), by distorting or disrupting narrative development, and finally by the avoidance of the first person pronoun. This is explicit in Not I (1972) where the speaking mouth refers to herself in the third person; in A Piece of Monologue (1979) which uses the third person throughout; and in Eh Joe (1965) where the voice haunting Joe uses the second and third person. Nevertheless, the implication is that these are voices belonging in some way to the protagonist and the theatre in which they

27 Scholes, The Nature of Narrative, 199.
28 Edouard Dujardin, Les Lauriers sont coupés (1888).
speak is one of the mind, of conscience and of consciousness. Laurens De Vos in his essay here explores this interior theatre, arguing that “Beckett stages characters that are separated from themselves as a result of their introduction into the linguistic world. The discrepancy between the one who speaks and the character onstage is a theme that haunted Beckett throughout his career.” The spectacle of self as Other, strange and alienated is exacerbated by the speakers’ lack of a fictional, social or external context and their refusal, or inability to narrate their stories.

In contrast to Beckett’s amputation of narrative, the theme of alienation is expressed in Bernard-Marie Koltès’s in Night Just Before the Forests (1977) by the speaking “I” whose narratives proliferate manically. Here the speaking I does not deny itself, but rather frantically invents and re-invents itself through stories as a means of seducing a listener as Daniela Jobertová describes in her essay below. This process of invention through performative narratives is more playfully developed by Harold Pinter in his two rarely discussed monologue dramas Monologue (1973), Family Voices (1981). Pinter’s characteristic play upon hiatus and conversational games in Monologue is transformed into an elliptical speech directed to an empty chair, in Family Voices in the traffic of increasingly bizarre dead letters. In both plays any sense of consistent character identity is frustrated by the use of cliché, rote phraseology, contradiction and innuendo.

Dramatic and interior monologue therefore can be seen to suggest some of the principal trajectories in contemporary monologue drama and performance. The use of persona as a means of social critique, the undermining of gender stereotypes through role-play, blurring the outlines of the autobiographical, “authentic” subject, are recurrent features of, in particular, a genre of solo performance that has developed in the United States (and beyond) since the 1980s. Interior monologue may point towards a radically anti-narrative theatre of the
fragmented subject or to a much more conventional drama of story-telling, testimony, confession and so on.

The essays that follow revolve on a number of axes. The first of these concerns a primarily textual dimension to monologue theatre and the role of the writer. The aesthetics of the fragment, the role of narrative, and the relation of language to power are motifs explored by Mateusz Borowski and Małgorzata Sugiera, David Bradby, Laurens De Vos, Mark Berninger and Daniela Jobertová. Borowski and Sugiera introduce Jean-Pierre Sarrazac’s concept of the “playwright-rhapsode,” a figure whose creativity lies in the assemblage of texts and citation of various theatrical elements as a means of crafting a new work. They see monologue as “a prototypical rhapsodic form of playwriting which combines the dramatic, the epic and the lyrical mode” as well as “a model of a number of today’s developments in writing for the stage [that] necessitates a reformulation of the basic aspects of both the text for the theatre and its stage production.” Attention to the role of playwright as an assembler of textual elements is also a feature of David Bradby’s survey of monologue theatre in France since 1980. Bradby notes how in France playwrights have adopted the monologue as a means of “claiming the textual characteristics of a certain literary sensibility and using them as the springboard for a new approach.” This has involved a turn towards modernist techniques of stream of consciousness, linguistic experiment and an emphasis on textuality and the fragmenting of narrative and plot. De Vos, Berninger and Jobertová each spotlight the use of language in plays by Beckett and Sarah Kane, Pinter and Koltès respectively, exploring the dynamics of communication and lack thereof in the work.

The second axis is that of monologue and performing-the-self. The politics of identity in various guises is the focus of essays by Rebecca D’Monté, Eamonn Jordan, Dee Heddon, Brian Singleton, Catharine McLean-Hopkins, Jorge Huerta and Ashley Lucas, and Eckart Voigts-Virchow and Mark Schreiber. Gender is the most prominent area of concern here, although it
is mixed with other elements such as homosexuality, ethnicity and national identity. Monologue as a venue for articulating a crisis in the conventions of masculinity, and as a renovation of those conventions, is addressed by Singleton, Jordan, Voigts-Virchow and Schreiber. Singleton and Jordan also explicitly connect monologue and masculinity with social and political transformation. If these essays cohere around Hiberno and Anglo-American cultural co-ordinates, then Jorge Huerta and Ashley Lucas’s contribution adds complexity to the map of gender identity by surveying how recent Chicana/o solo performance critiques machismo and heteronormative stereotypes. While Chicana/o theatre has been conventionally committed to social justice and consciousness raising, as Huerta and Lucas document, contemporary solo performers are challenging some of the core traditional values that have demarcated Chicana/o identity, creating spaces in which to imagine new hybrid identities. The violent, macho identities that have recently featured in work by some Irish playwrights finds an unexpected counterpoint in the unpicking of just such stereotypes in Chicana/o solo performance. D’Monté also investigates issues of violence and gender in work by Eve Ensler, Claire Dowie and Sarah Kane, and looks at the contrasts in their approaches. Lastly, Heddon and McLean-Hopkins explore autobiographical solo performance work by a selection of American and British performers. Both highlight the dubious status accorded to the personal in performance and challenge the notion that the term autobiographical is often synonymous with self-indulgent, self-spectacle. Instead both argue for the political status of autobiographical performance.

A third axis is foregrounded by Johannes Birringer, which angles away from the conventions of performance and drama towards a media orientated experience of self. If, as David George states, “we may be entering an age in which there are only media (semiosis, assumptions, paradigms, models) and no ontology, only experiences (and no Self except the one like an actor’s career made up of the parts we enact and rewrite)” then
in this case “performance is the ideal medium and model.”30 For Birringer, performance in a medialized context with its connection to digital technology renders traditional conceptions of the body and subjectivity anachronistic. Ultimately what a “theatre of transmediality” would entail is an interactivity that undercuts spectator-performer positions and conventional notions of presence.

Despite the suggestion that the conventions of verbal or textual theatre are exhausted, Birringer’s transmedial theatre returns to issues that recur throughout this book—those of communication, interaction and the “here and now.” The performer-actor-viewer of Intimate Transactions (2001-5) is markedly a body alone in the dark, instructed to make contact with an other in the virtual space of the programme, tentatively feeling a path towards “sensory intimacy” with an other who cannot be concretely identified. While technology creates the space for this encounter—a virtual theatre—the solo body charged with a desire to connect, reacting to stimuli, or perhaps simply performing without an audience, seems to fold back upon the monadic voices of Beckett’s monologue theatre like a series of feedback loops.

To conclude, monologue theatre, be it solo performance or drama, plants the self at the heart of the spectacle. As the essays collected here demonstrate, that self—alienated, multifaceted, unfinished, split, political, gendered—is above all performative and provocative.