

Beckett by François-Marie Banier

This is a little book, the kind of book that's like a finely crafted jewel, as precious as a rare antique, nothing like vulgar pocket editions. Some small-format books are 'big books' because they know how to get the best from their size. This is true of "Beckett", a pocket art book with an inimitable finish published by Steidl: Beckett portrayed by his friend, writer and photographer François-Marie Banier.

By Axelle Emden

At first it's the format itself that catches the eye, with its nice thick cover that opens to reveal black endpapers before moving on to the full-page prints. We start with colour photos taken in **Tangiers in 1978**. Words come later – and this is intelligent and all too rare in a book of photographs, for it is the images that spark our curiosity, the desire to see and find out more. **Viviane Forrester** moves us further, with her wonderful words describing "*Beckett traversé, Beckett traversant*" (Beckett traversing, Beckett traversed).

The fact is, François-Marie Banier did not photograph Beckett when they met as friends: it's very hard to interview a friend when the meeting place is a café; what photographer would interrupt an intimate conversation, suddenly driving a wedge between the two people and encouraging the subject to pose, transforming what was true into something false? Instead of this faux pas, Banier took his photos from a distance, capturing the writer's movements like a photo-journalist. **The fact is that at that time they did not know each other.** Banier was unaware of the identity of the man with the distinctive silhouette, the chiselled face, and "the ocean-blue gaze hidden behind big glasses". And the photographer captured the innocent comings and goings that show Beckett going about his most insignificant daily activities. In this way, the pictures provide a glimpse into his most private world.

These comings and goings are also a man, walking. A thin frame striding forth, a beautiful, highly distinctive face with features that speak in silence. He is going somewhere. He is still going somewhere **21 years later**, but not in the same way. It was the year the Berlin Wall fell, the end of the Cold War, a perhaps insignificant year for a man who might appear so calm. **The black and white photos taken in Paris** show a different Beckett: the shorts showing his natural elegance have been replaced by a respectable suit and a cane. He now has to lean on his cane, and sometimes has trouble walking. He even has to stop for a rest, on a bench in a street whose name appears in the photo. His loneliness is not the same, nor are his worries; but his dignity is intact and the whole man escapes words.

"His heron-like silhouette vanished into the crowd of djellaba-clad Moroccans and ambling tourists. Like me, they were unaware that the tall, thin man was the great writer Samuel Beckett".

“I was so upset by not being able to capture the true dimension of his strange form that I often forgot to put film in the camera”.

Later in the book Viviane writes in English, the same words of course, for a little book that is so universal. **And François-Marie Banier also writes**, as we look at the man whose face is hidden by a tree in Paris, the man whose cane we can see, upright in his hand, and who is sitting with his feet crossed, on what we presume to be a bench, surrounded by inimitably Parisian autumn leaves.

The pictures might seem repetitive, as if it had been impossible to choose between them, as if a small series is being shown in its entirety, but in this way Beckett is captured in a unique way. As we turn the pages, we witness the scene, sharing the moment at the other end of the street with the photographer, welcoming the arrival of a passer-by, even occasionally seeing a car go by as he walks along. As who walks along? Beckett, of course, but also his friend Banier, capturing a life or a meeting of the ways or a moment when eyes meet. And now those same eyes are anchored to our own fleeting presence, now that 20 years have gone by in a few pages, or a few sages. It's a little work of art.

(Translation by Martyn Back)