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PennebakerAssociates Inc.

21 West 86th St. • New York, N.Y. 10024 • (212) 496-9195

ROCKABY

The image is a startling one: An old woman sits rocking, her grey hair pushed beneath a strange, black hat, her face waxy and ashen. She wears her mother's sequined black funeral gown and rocks to the word-music of her younger self -- her memories. These carry her "to and fro," back into herself and inexorably toward death.

The scene is Rockaby, a one-character "theatrical poem" by Nobel Prize-winning playwright Samuel Beckett, which had its world premiere on April 8, 1981, at the State University of New York at Buffalo's Center Theatre. Barely 15 minutes long, Rockaby has nonetheless astounded critics with its spellbinding dramatic power.

Happily for New York State television viewers, Rockaby, at the moment of its theatrical birth, was preserved through the cinematic vision of filmmakers D.A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus.

Rockaby, artfully filmed by Pennebaker and Hegedus, captures the excitement of rehearsing for a new work by the world's greatest living dramatist. Gifted British actress Billie Whitelaw searches, with director Alan Schneider, for the appropriate cadences and subtle gestures that will re-create, on stage, Beckett's staggeringly-powerful art. The film includes a thoughtful narrative by Daniel Labeille, Beckett scholar,

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director, actor and faculty member at SUNY's Cayuga Community College, who served as the inspirational force behind Rockaby.

Particularly captivating in the film is Whitelaw, who emphasizes her desire only to re-create what Beckett has written.

"I have no interest in what they (Beckett's words) mean," she says in the film. "I want to create. Beckett blows the notes. I want them to blow out of me." Schneider, who has staged all of Beckett's plays, and who has won both Tony and Obie awards comments, "The way she works with his words is just extraordinary."

There is spectacular footage, also, of Whitelaw, as she appeared under Beckett's direction in the playwright's Happy Days (1961). Here, she spends an entire play buried in sand, sinking ever more deeply, yet continuing to prattle about the trivialities of life. Equally extraordinary is footage of Whitelaw in another Beckett work, in which she plays a deaf mute suddenly given the power of speech: Only her mouth is visible. Her white teeth contrast vividly with her black-painted mouth which dazes the viewer with a dizzying rush of words.

The film shows the rehearsal process as Schneider works feverishly with light board technicians and the technician responsible for making Whitelaw's life-ensuring rocker, rock.

Also filmed are sections of a symposium at SUNY at Buffalo held the afternoon of the opening. Beckett scholar Martin

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Esslin, famous for his book The Theatre of the Absurd and former head of the BBC's Radio Drama Department, joins other top Beckett scholars and Schneider, in discussing Beckett's increasing conciseness. Rockaby, they indicate, is a kind of single, slowly leashed metaphor with the visceral power of a single visual image.

The film concludes with the world premiere itself, as it was performed that spring in Buffalo. A few days later, Mel Gussow of the New York Times offered this analysis:

"The play lasts only 15 minutes, but by any measure other than length this is a major dramatic event, evocatively encapsulating -- in words and in visual metaphor -- the perdurability of the human spirit, man's clinging to his mind as life preserver.

"...As an intuitive emotional experience, "Rockaby" is overpowering, hypnotizing the audience in its spotlighted gaze but, in common with all of Beckett's plays, it also has narrative and intellectual substance, some of it subliminal."

The play has been performed in La Mama in association with New York University, at SUNY at Purchase and in Paris.

The film and the world premiere of a new Beckett play came about after Labeille wrote to Beckett, in the fall of 1979, asking him to suggest a play for a SUNY Beckett Festival, with the event itself being the subject of a SUNY film. In June, 1980, Beckett wrote back with an unexpected gem: the manuscript

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for a new play, accompanied by a modest note: "For your project if you think it worthwhile."

Patricia Kerr Ross, director of University-wide Programs in the Arts and Labeille, were co-executive producers of Rockaby. Saul Elkin, chairman of the Department of Theatre and Dance at the State University at Buffalo, served as associate producer.

One of the nation's leading documentarians, D.A. Pennebaker developed the cinema verite style of filmmaking with Richard Leacock, Albert Maysles and Robert Drew in 1959. Hegedus both shoots and edits and she is noted particularly as editor for the team's Town Bloody Hall, The Energy War and Elliott Carter in Buffalo.