

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Waiting for Godot

BY SAMUEL BECKETT

DIRECTED BY CAREY PERLOFF

GEARY THEATER

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CHARACTERS AND SYNOPSIS OF *WAITING FOR GODOT*

The world premiere production of *Waiting for Godot* opened at the Théâtre Babylone in Paris, January 5, 1953.

CHARACTERS AND A.C.T. CAST

<i>Estragon</i>	Gregory Wallace
<i>Vladimir</i>	Peter Fréchette
<i>Pozzo</i>	Steven Anthony Jones
<i>Lucky</i>	Frank Wood
<i>Boy</i>	Lawrence Papale/Jonathan Rosen

PLACE AND TIME

Waiting for Godot takes place over two days on a country road near a tree at evening time.

SYNOPSIS

ACT I. Two tramps, Estragon and Vladimir, linger on a country road marked only by a withered willow tree. They are waiting for the mysterious Godot to arrive to save them. To pass the time, they converse, they fight, they embrace, they contemplate leaving, and they fiddle with their boots. Pozzo appears with his heavily burdened servant, Lucky, whom he leads on a leash and drives with a whip. Although Pozzo's conversation and Lucky's dancing and thinking occupy Estragon and Vladimir for a while, eventually Pozzo and Lucky move on, leaving the two tramps as they were before. A boy arrives to tell Didi and Gogo that Godot will not come today, but will surely arrive tomorrow. They contemplate suicide, but decide to wait until the next evening for Godot.

ACT II. Estragon and Vladimir wait on the same spot for Godot. The tree now displays a few leaves. Estragon doesn't remember anything that happened the day before, which upsets Vladimir. Pozzo, now blind, reappears with Lucky, who is mute. Pozzo, too, has forgotten the previous day's encounter, and Vladimir begins to suspect that everyone is lying to him, or to wonder if yesterday happened at all. Pozzo drives Lucky on, leaving Didi and Gogo alone together. Godot's boy emissary, who denies recognizing Didi from the night before, arrives to tell them that Godot will not come today, but will arrive tomorrow without fail. Estragon and Vladimir contemplate suicide, but decide to wait for Godot.

WAITING . . .

BY MARJORIE PERLOFF

“We do [Brecht] when we want Fantasy. When we want Realism, we do
Waiting for Godot.”

Jan Kott

What can the great Polish dramaturg have meant by this seemingly perverse statement? One usually thinks of Brecht’s political theater, with its topical plots, Marxist themes, and historical characters like Galileo or Hitler (*Arturo Ui*) as “realistic,” whereas Beckett’s “circus” play, in which, as hostile critics have put it, “nothing happens twice,” is known for its abstraction, its verbal repetition, its fantasy, and its refusal to make “sense.” When *Waiting for Godot* opened at the Théâtre Babylone in Paris 50 years ago (January 5, 1953), it was primarily viewed as an existentialist, philosophical drama about the incomprehensibility of a universe in which man waits for a sign that never comes. Even today, Beckett’s alternately hilarious and heartbreaking play tends to be read as allegory: the vaudeville “plot,” in which the two “tramps” Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo) argue, reconcile, tell tall tales, contemplate hanging themselves from the tree that is the stage’s central scenic element, and eat carrots, all the while “waiting” for the mysterious Mr. Godot (if that is in fact his name) to come, is construed as everything from medieval morality play to Freudian psychodrama about regression and sublimation.

Beckett himself consistently refused to provide explanations of this or any of his plays, even though, paradoxically, he kept close control over the text, refusing directors and actors much leeway as to interpretation. When the director Alan Schneider asked him, “Who or what does Godot mean?” he replied, “If I knew, I would have said so in the play.” Beckett cautioned those who were quick to see Godot as a symbol for God—a *deus absconditus* who never reveals himself to the world—that there were “no symbols where none intended,” as he put it succinctly on the last page of his comic novel *Watt*, written a few years earlier. Indeed, in its first version, Beckett’s play was called simply *En attendant* so as to deflect attention from the object of the wait to the process of waiting itself.

But waiting in what sense? Half a century after the first production of Beckett’s extraordinary play—now a classic produced around the world from Korea to Kosovo—what may strike us most forcibly is not its absurdity, although of course the dialogue is full of wonderfully absurd twists and turns, but its realism. The first critic to have understood this

was Hugh Kenner, who took a hard, pragmatic look at Beckett's play within the actual context of its historical moment:

Two men waiting, for another whom they know only by an implausible name which may not be his real name. A ravaged and blasted landscape. A world that was ampler and more open once, but is permeated with pointlessness now. Mysterious dispensers of beatings. A man of property and his servant, in flight. And the anxiety of the two who wait, their anxiety to be as inconspicuous as possible in a strange environment . . . where their mere presence is likely to cause remark. It is curious how readers and audiences do not think to observe the most obvious thing about the world of this play, that it resembles France occupied by the Germans, in which its author spent the war years. How much waiting must have gone on in that bleak world; how many times must Resistance operatives . . . have kept appointments not knowing whom they were to meet. . . . We can easily see why a Pozzo would be unnerving. . . . He may be a Gestapo official clumsily disguised. Here is perhaps the playwright's most remarkable feat. There existed, throughout a whole country, for five years, a literal situation that corresponded point by point with the situation in this play . . . and *no spectator ever thinks of it*.

I cite Kenner's passage (from *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett*; the emphasis is mine) at length because it makes what is, I think, the crucial point about *Waiting for Godot*. The play's situation is wholly realistic: it takes its subject matter directly from Beckett's activities in the French Resistance during World War II. But, great artist that he is, Beckett has transmuted this material so fully, has endowed each situation with such profound resonance, that this great war play—so superior to the didactic and ideological “war literature” of the 1940s and '50s—emerges as a parable of the human condition, as well.

First the particulars. When war broke out in Europe in 1939, Beckett was in Foxrock, visiting his family. As a neutral alien, he could easily have sat out the war in Ireland; but he immediately rushed back to Paris, where he had lived for much of the past decade, and joined the then fledgling Resistance. He later said he felt he had to help his Jewish friends who were already being persecuted. (In the earliest version of *Godot*, the character now called Estragon was called Levi and was obviously a Jew.) Beckett's particular cell, “Gloria,” sponsored by the British SOE (Special Operations Executive), was an information network, whose main job was to copy and translate documents about Axis troop movements and relay them to Allied headquarters in London. The messages were transmitted on microfilm (often hidden in the bottom of matchboxes) and were coded, using such

bland statements as “Uncle Jacques has lost his umbrella” or extracts from popular songs and classical poems.

An adequate “cut-out” system, as it was called, meant that most individual members of the line knew at most only two telephone numbers or places of rendezvous so that, if they were caught by the enemy, they could not implicate more than one or two people. Members were referred to only by their pseudonyms, Beckett’s being “Sam” or “l’Irlandais.” Thus the cut-out, seated, say, on a particular park bench, would wait for his contact and then make a brief statement in code. But, from the first, the Resistance cells were threatened by double agents, and in August 1942 Gloria was exposed and Beckett and his companion, Suzanne, had to flee to the Unoccupied Zone. After a hair-raising trip south, during which they slept in ditches (rather like Vladimir and Estragon), they settled in the little village of Roussillon in the Vaucluse, where they were to live out the two and a half years until the Armistice. In Roussillon, Beckett continued his Resistance activities and, to cover his tracks and make a little money, worked during the day for various farmers harvesting wine grapes and potatoes. One such farmer, named Bonnelly, appears in the French version of *Godot*, when Vladimir insists to a skeptical Estragon, “*Pourtant nous avons été ensemble dans le Vaucluse. . . . Nous avons fait les vendanges, tiens, chez un nommé Bonnelly, à Roussillon.*” (“And yet we were together in the Vaucluse. Yes, we were picking grapes for a man called Bonnelly at Roussillon.”) This passage is changed in the English version, where Vladimir merely refers to “the Mâcon country” and tells a skeptical Estragon, “But we were there together, I could swear to it! Picking grapes for a man called . . . (*he snaps his fingers*) . . . can’t think of the name of the man, at a place called . . . (*snaps his fingers*) . . . can’t think of the name of the place, do you not remember?”

The Roussillon years were characterized by the curious mix of danger and boredom known only in wartime. Communication with strangers (and everyone but Suzanne was a stranger to Beckett here) was always coded or at least guarded: one could trust no one, even as one worked with cut-outs referred by friends in other places. Mostly, the time was spent waiting—waiting for the war to be over. When it ended in 1945, Beckett briefly returned to Ireland to see his family but then returned, not to Paris, which was still out of bounds to aliens at the time, but to Saint-Lô in Normandy, where he worked in a Red Cross hospital and witnessed at first hand the terrible devastation of the French countryside. Only in 1946 did he return to Paris and begin what has been called the “siege in the room”—the astonishingly fruitful period when Beckett shut himself up in his old apartment on the Rue des Favorites and produced, in a few short years, what he had never been able to do as a young man—the great body of work that includes the trilogy of novels *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, as well as *Waiting for Godot*.

In revising *Godot*, Beckett kept the basic motive, derived from his daily conversations in Roussillon with Suzanne and various townspeople, but removed the specificity of reference that would limit the drama's range. We have, then, two "tramps" who, despite their vaudeville antics, aren't really tramps at all, their speech being studded with references to Shelley and Yeats, the Gospels, and St. Augustine, and who, when they want to really insult one another, use scientific nomenclature like Estragon's "Gonococcus! Spirochete!" Have Didi and Gogo been together for years, or have they only met recently? Are they close friends or mere working colleagues? We never know for sure, any more than we later know whether they have met Pozzo before or whether the country road and tree of Act II are the same as those of Act I. We only know that the two tramps have been told to wait at a particular spot (but is this the right spot?) for a man called Godot, although they are not even sure of his name. When Pozzo enters, they first take him for Godot, and even when the illusion is dispelled, identities continue to be confused, especially in their second meeting, when Pozzo is revealed to be blind and Lucky mute. Or was the latter always mute, except for his totally preposterous scholastic disquisition on "divine aphasia" and the "Anthropometry of Essy-in-Possy"?

Waiting becomes, in Beckett's hands, both the cross the tramps have to bear and their greatest opportunity for amusement and entertainment. When Pozzo and Lucky finally quit the scene in Act I, Vladimir says, "That passed the time." Estragon responds, "It would have passed in any case." To which Vladimir replies drily, "Yes, but not so rapidly." This, one might say, is the audience's condition as well. What keeps us at the edge of our seats is that nothing ever turns out as we thought it would, and so we constantly have to revise our impressions. At the beginning of Act I, Didi seems to be the more aggressive of the two, Gogo more passive and emotional. But later Gogo gets lines that should by all accounts have been Didi's. Indeed, in keeping with the play's realism, the two characters have no fixed traits that they exhibit consistently; as in life, their actions and words repeatedly surprise us. Even Pozzo, the slave-master, capitalist landlord, strongman, or bully, sometimes sounds just like Didi or Gogo.

THE SHAPE OF EXPERIENCE

What, in this seemingly inscrutable world, provides order? In a conversation with Harold Hobson (1956), Beckett gave a rare hint:

I take no sides. I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe them. There is a wonderful sentence in [St.] Augustine. I wish I could remember the Latin. It is even finer in Latin than in English. "Do not despair; one of

the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.” That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters.

It is the shape that matters. What St. Augustine’s sentence does for Beckett is to provide him with a concrete embodiment of his intuitive sense that “if there were only darkness, all would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable.”

Thus, early in Act 1, when Estragon refers darkly to anonymous beatings and painful boots, Vladimir, “deep in thought,” remarks inconsequentially, “One of thieves was saved. [*Pause*] It’s a reasonable percentage.” The reference is to the Gospel of Luke:

And one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise. (Luke 23:39–43; King James version)

This famous story allows us to see the cup as being half empty or half full. Didi’s initial reaction, “It’s a reasonable percentage,” is comic because it introduces the secular world of economics and mathematics into what should be a meditation on the soul’s salvation. But this is only the beginning. When Didi now suggests to Gogo, “Suppose we repented,” we get the following absurd sequence:

ESTRAGON: Repented what?

VLADIMIR: Oh. . . (*He reflects.*) We wouldn’t have to go into the details.

ESTRAGON: Our being born?

6 Although Vladimir “breaks into a hearty laugh at this idea,” Estragon’s question is right on the mark, the Jews in occupied France having been punished for no more than for having been born what they were. Vladimir himself is skeptical of the “percentage,” given that, as he now explains to Estragon, only one of the four Evangelists “speaks of a thief being saved.” A second, Mark, doesn’t mention thieves but writes, “And they that were crucified with him reviled him,” thus putting a different spin on the story. Meanwhile—and here the play’s humor comes in—Estragon seems not to know what Didi is talking about. When the latter mentions our Savior, Gogo asks, “Our what?” As to the thief that was “saved,” Gogo asks, “Saved from what?” A bit earlier, when Didi asks him whether he has

ever read the Bible, Gogo responds “The Bible . . . (*He reflects.*) I must have taken a look at it.” And then, to Didi’s question, “Do you remember the Gospels?” Gogo remarks:

I remember the maps of the Holy Land. Colored they were. Very pretty. The Dead Sea was pale blue. The very look of it made me thirsty. That’s where we’ll go, I used to say, that’s where we’ll go for our honeymoon. We’ll swim. We’ll be happy.

The Dead Sea as swimming and honeymoon resort: the notion is, on the face of it, wholly ridiculous, the crucial question about the thief who was saved dissolving into the nostalgia for a purported lost innocence. But idle as this discourse is, what with Didi and Gogo constantly speaking at cross-purposes, the story of Christ and the two thieves won’t go away. At the end of Act 1, with Pozzo and Lucky gone, the Boy’s announcement that Godot won’t come, and night falling, Gogo recites a snatch of Shelley’s “Art thou pale for weariness” and leaves his empty boots on the ground:

VLADIMIR: But you can’t go barefoot!

ESTRAGON: Christ did.

VLADIMIR: Christ! What has Christ got to do with it. You’re not going to compare yourself to Christ!

ESTRAGON: All my life I’ve compared myself to him.

VLADIMIR: But where he lived it was warm, it was dry!

ESTRAGON: Yes. And they crucified quick.

What is going on here? Wasn’t Estragon the one who had never heard the designation “Savior” and made fun of Vladimir’s ruminations on the validity of Luke’s Gospel account? The one for whom the Bible recalled no more than maps of the Holy Land with a “pale blue” Dead Sea? Yet now it is he who compares himself to Christ and announces airily that he has been doing so all his life. One expects Didi to be furious, to question his friend’s newly declared identification with Christ. But instead of questioning Gogo’s motive, Didi merely says, “But where he lived it was warm, it was dry!” as if one’s communion with Christ had to do with climate. Gogo, now the practical one, keeps up this pretense: “Yes. And they crucified quick.”

The Gospel story thus gives the play its shape, even as its meaning remains open. Is the notion that “one of the thieves was saved” a good or a bad percentage? Or is the dialogue perhaps a coded exchange designating something else? One cannot know. But one can act as if the odds were there, and this is what Didi and Gogo do throughout their waiting. “Hope deferred maketh the something sick,” Vladimir mumbles early in the play. The

reference is to Proverbs 13:12: “Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life.” So it is in Beckett’s beautiful, enigmatic play: the tree of life, having sprouted “four or five” leaves between Acts I and II, stands before them and there is no rope with which to hang themselves from it. The play thus ends with the lines:

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let’s go.

(They do not move.)

Hope always deferred keeps us alive. It is not the content but the shape of experience that matters. Given the circumstances, there is nothing to do but go. And also to remain in place.

Marjorie Perloff is the author of many books on Modernism and the avant-garde, including *Wittgenstein’s Ladder* and *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, both of which include chapters on Beckett. Her émigrée memoir *The Vienna Paradox* is forthcoming from New Directions. She is professor emerita of English at Stanford University.

“YOU MUST GO ON”

A Brief Biography of Samuel Beckett

BY ELIZABETH BRODERSEN

Where would I go, if I could go, who would I be, if I could be, what would I say, if I had a voice, who says this, saying it's me?

Texts for Nothing, by Samuel Beckett

Samuel Beckett is arguably the most influential playwright of the 20th century. Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter, Athol Fugard, Edward Albee, David Mamet, and Sam Shepard are just a few of the contemporary dramatists whose boundary-breaking work must be counted among the theatrical progeny of Beckett's most famous play, *Waiting for Godot*, first produced in 1953 and today one of the most widely recognized titles in Western literature.

Abandoning conventional techniques of plot, character, setting, and dialogue, while distilling life and art to their very essence, Beckett created in all of his work a mysterious alchemy of farce and tragedy that focuses squarely on the central issue of modern existence: the struggle of each individual simply to “go on,” despite the inescapable awareness of our own fundamental meaninglessness. Like Didi and Gogo, *Godot's* familiar clowns—we all wait in a curious suspension of hope and despair for a salvation that never comes, passing our brief time in this world distracted by the griefs, joys, and traffic jams of everyday life. Beckett's singular gift, as scholar Linda Ben-Zvi writes, was to create for us characters uniquely adept “at sidestepping despair—singing, joking, dancing, walking, adding, thinking, and above all, talking to forestall the gloom they feel about the conditions of life they cannot control.”

EARLY LIFE

Samuel Barclay Beckett was born in Foxrock, near Dublin, on Good Friday, April 13, 1906, the second son of an Anglo-Irish middle-class Protestant family. Beckett's beloved father was a hearty fellow who loved going to the races, swimming with his sons in Dublin Bay, and hiking the nearby mountains for hours on end. His mother, on the other hand, was a sternly critical, strait-laced woman prone to violent outbursts of temper and bouts of dark depression. Beckett was close to all the members of his family, and their deaths would later have a profound impact on the evolution of his views on life, love, and art.

Although shy and occasionally solitary, young Sam Beckett enjoyed an active, happy childhood. At 14 he left home to attend Portora Royal School, where he excelled at sports, chess, music, and the execution of practical jokes. At 17 he went up to Trinity College, Dublin, where he studied French and Italian and developed a love for literature. His free time was often spent at the Abbey Theatre, where he particularly enjoyed Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* and *The Plough and the Stars*, as well as all of John Millington Synge, who Beckett later claimed to have been the dramatist who most influenced his own work. He also appreciated the lighter fare of the music hall and circus and the silent films of Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, whose physical comedy and humor-tinged pathos (and archetypal bowler hats) would so indelibly mark Beckett's later characters. Despite his apparently lively social life, however, he became increasingly withdrawn and depressed, disturbed by the suffering he saw around him on the streets of Dublin.

In 1928 Beckett took a post as lecturer in English at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he joined the circle of fellow expatriate Irishman and lover of words James Joyce, who became his friend and mentor and inspired much of Beckett's early prose. Beckett's first published work began to appear, including essays on Joyce and Proust, as well as his first poem, "Whoroscope," a brilliant 98-line deconstruction of Descartes, written on a whim over dinner for a poetry contest.

In 1930, Beckett returned briefly to Ireland to teach, but soon discovered that he hated the academic life. Deeply depressed by a bitter argument with his mother, who threw him out of the house in disgust after reading his writing, he quit his post to travel across Europe. When his father died in June 1933, Beckett was devastated by the loss of his closest companion: "I can't write about him, I can only walk the fields and climb the ditches after him."

After two years in London undergoing intensive psychotherapy, and one last terrible row with his mother, Beckett left the United Kingdom for good, and in 1937 he settled in Paris, where he became a familiar fixture on the literary and artistic scene. By 1938 he had published *More Kicks Than Pricks*, a collection of 10 stories (1934); followed by the poetry collection *Echo's Bones* (1935), and his first novel, *Murphy* (1938). In January of that year, however, he was deeply shaken by the random cruelty of a vicious assault: one night while walking with friends, he was stabbed by a pimp, whose knife narrowly missed Beckett's heart. When he later visited the assailant in prison to ask him why he had attacked him, the man could only reply, "I don't know, monsieur. I'm sorry."

While recuperating in the hospital, Beckett became friends with a young piano student, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, who would become his lifelong companion (and, in 1961, his wife). As the threat of war loomed, Beckett decided to remain in Paris with Suzanne

instead of returning to neutral Ireland; appalled by the Nazis' treatment of Jews, they joined an underground Resistance cell, for whom Beckett translated smuggled intelligence reports. In 1942, betrayed by a mercenary French priest, they fled Paris just minutes ahead of the Gestapo. Settling in the hill town of Roussillon in the Vaucluse, Beckett waited out the rest of the war working as a farmer, helping the Resistance, and working on the novel *Watt* (published in 1953).

With the cessation of hostilities in Europe in 1945, Beckett visited Ireland briefly before returning to France as a volunteer in a military hospital in Saint-Lô, where he was shocked by the devastation and misery caused by the war. In the winter of 1945-46, he finally returned to his beloved Paris, where the most creatively productive period of his life was about to begin.

FROM "FRENZY" TO "IMPASSE"

While visiting his mother in 1946, Beckett had a "revelation" that would utterly transform the way he looked at his life and work. Standing in her room, he became suddenly, glaringly aware of his own stupidity: "*Molloy* and the other [volumes in the 'trilogy'] came to me the day I became aware of my own folly. Only then did I begin to write the things I feel." Struck by an overwhelming compulsion to simplify, he determined to explore his own inner world as the source of his writing, to focus on universal explorations of human poverty, failure, exile, and loss.

At the same time, he decided to write only in French, as a way to "cut away the excess, to strip away the color," to experiment with language with a greater simplicity and objectivity. Galvanized by these decisions, Beckett commenced upon a "frenzy of writing," producing between 1946 and 1949 his greatest prose works—the three narratives known as "the trilogy," *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*—as well as the novel *Mercier et Camier* and several stories.

With the completion of *The Unnamable* in 1949, however, the brief spurt of productivity had been spent, and Beckett found himself inexplicably unable to write. In *Three Dialogues*, his famous 1949 text on painting, Beckett describes the profound frustration of this period in terms of the artist's existential dilemma: "There is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express."

Beckett attempted to break through his "celebrated impasse" by turning his hand to dramatic writing. "In search of respite from the wasteland of prose," he soon produced the plays *Eleutheria* and *Waiting for Godot*.

In 1950, Beckett's mother succumbed to Parkinson's disease. Stricken with grief while watching his mother's downward slide into dementia and death, and still lost "in the doldrums that followed the 'trilogy,'" he worked sporadically at several short texts, struggling to record the antithetical desire for cessation and continuation that was to plague his thoughts, and illuminate his writing, throughout his life. Picking up the ending of *The Unnamable* ("I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on") virtually uninterrupted, he began the first of his 13 *Texts for Nothing* (published in *Nouvelles et textes pour rien* in 1955 and adapted and performed at A.C.T. by Bill Irwin in 2001): "Suddenly, no, at last, long last I couldn't any more, I couldn't go on. Someone said, You can't stay here. I couldn't stay there and I couldn't go on." Simultaneously author and subject, the speaker of the *Texts* struggles in vain to identify the disembodied voices that run through his imagination, defiantly proclaiming the anthem of Beckett's favorite philosopher: "I think; therefore, I am." But just who exactly is the "I" who thinks and, therefore, exists? In Beckett's art, as in life, there is no easy answer.

GODOT ARRIVES

By 1951, at the age of 45, Beckett's work remained little known outside a circle of avant-garde artists. Eventually picked up by Jérôme Lindon's Éditions de Minuit, the trilogy appeared between 1951 and 1953; English editions, painstakingly translated by Beckett himself, soon followed in the United States and caught the attention of American academics.

Encouraged by his nascent success, Beckett became preoccupied with trying to get his dramatic work produced. Eventually the French actor-director Roger Blin agreed to produce *Godot*, and in 1953 the premiere production at Paris's Théâtre de Babylone was a *succès de scandale*, prompting fistfights among perplexed audience members waiting for a plot and not entirely certain they weren't the victims of some elaborate theatrical hoax. Similar controversy followed the London, Miami, and New York productions. Beckett found himself an instant international celebrity, and *Godot* entered the theatrical canon as an existential classic.

Discomfited by the attention and in despair over his continuing inability to write, he built a small home in Ussy, about 60 miles outside Paris, to create a haven where he could work undisturbed. "I feel very tired and stupid, more and more so, in spite of my often resting in the country," he wrote to a friend, "and I feel more and more that I shall perhaps never be able to write anything else. . . . I can't go on and I can't get back. Perhaps another play someday."

THE END

More plays did follow, notably *Endgame* (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *Act without Words I & II* (1959), *Happy Days* (1961), and *Play* (1963), as well as the prose narrative *How It Is* (1961), a film, radio and television plays, and a few pieces of short prose. By his death in 1989, Beckett had become such an avant-garde icon that every one of his nondramatic works had also been adapted for the stage, with and without his permission. Yet he never felt that he had conquered what he called the “agonies of galloping speechlessness.”

In his life as in his writing, Beckett stripped down to the bare essentials of human existence, living out his days in modest simplicity. Even when honored with the Nobel Prize in 1969, he refused to attend the award ceremony and gave the prize money away to needy artists. Although he flatly refused to grant interviews or public appearances throughout his life, he graciously agreed to meet anyone interested enough to show up at his neighborhood café for an espresso.

Despite—or perhaps because of—the mountains of words written about him, Beckett persistently resisted analysis of his life and work. “If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them,” he wrote. “And provide their own aspirin.” Beckett’s work was his life. “Nothing matters but the writing,” he insisted. “There has been nothing else worthwhile.”

Acutely aware of the brevity and ultimate meaninglessness of human existence, Beckett nevertheless struggled on, completing his last work, the short prose text *Stirrings Still*, in 1986, at the age of 80. “I couldn’t have done it otherwise,” he once said. “Gone on, I mean. I could not have gone through the awful wretched mess of life without having left a stain upon the silence.”

Material for this article was drawn from: *Conversations with and about Beckett*, by Mel Gussow; *Damned to Fame*, by James Knowlson; *Samuel Beckett*, by Deirdre Bair; “Samuel Beckett,” by Martin Esslin, *Britannica.com*; *Samuel Beckett*, by Linda Ben-Zvi; *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose 1929–89*, edited by S. E. Gontarski; and *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett*, by Hugh Kenner.

ENTER GODOT

A.C.T. Celebrates the 50th Anniversary of Beckett's Existential Classic

*A.C.T. celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Paris premiere of *Waiting for Godot* with a new production directed by Artistic Director Carey Perloff. Perloff, whose stagings of Beckett's work have been acclaimed in New York and Los Angeles, directs A.C.T. Associate Artists Gregory Wallace and Steven Anthony Jones, Tony Award-winning actor Frank Wood (Sideman), and acclaimed New York actor Peter Frechette in her first interpretation of Beckett for A.C.T., at the Geary Theater October 17–November 16. The cast is completed by two members of the A.C.T. Young Conservatory, Lawrence Papale and Jonathan Rosen, who alternate performances in the role of the mysterious Godot's messenger boy.*

*At the beginning of rehearsals for each play in the season repertory, the director, designers, and cast come together with A.C.T. staff, faculty, and students to present their collective vision of the production, which represents the culmination of extensive visual, historical, and textual research and intensive design meetings undertaken during a year-long collaborative process. In September, Perloff joined scenic designer J. B. Wilson (whose previous A.C.T. credits include *The Guardsman*, *The Royal Family*, *Gaslight*, *The Play's the Thing*, and *Saturday, Sunday and Monday*) and costume designer Beaver Bauer (*Blithe Spirit*, *The Beard of Avon*, *The Misanthrope*, *Edward II*, *Tartuffe*, *Insurrection: Holding History*, *The Royal Family*, *The Matchmaker*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Learned Ladies*, *Good*, *Twelfth Night*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *Feathers*, *A Lie of the Mind*, and *The Floating Light Bulb*) to introduce their new interpretation of Beckett's modern classic. Below are excerpts from their remarks.*

DIRECTION: CAREY PERLOFF

Beckett is my favorite playwright, and *Waiting for Godot* is such a seminal work that there doesn't have to be a specific reason to do this play. One of the central impulses for doing *Godot* now, however, was the experience of watching Gregory [Wallace] and Steven [Anthony Jones] on the Geary stage in [Richard Greenberg's] *The Dazzle* last spring, and thinking what an incredible homage to Beckett the second act of that play is. Peter Frechette was part of the original team that created *The Dazzle* [in New York], so it's wonderfully fortuitous to have him join this cast.

We typically plan our season quite far in advance at A.C.T. The past two years have been such a terrible time in the world, and when we began to talk about plays for this season, I kept thinking about a quote in the second act of *Godot*, when Pozzo and Lucky are lying

on the ground, and Didi and Gogo are trying to figure out what to do: should they pick him up? Should they not? Finally Didi says, “Let us not waste our time in idle discourse. Let us do something while we have the chance. It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we, personally, are needed. . . . Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us.” That quotation speaks so beautifully to the questions we wrestle with about making theater right now: Are we necessary at all? What kind of work should we create? *Waiting for Godot* is a powerful look at how much people need to be needed. And at what happens when people have lost the awareness of their purpose in the world.

You can read endless criticism of this play, and much of it is rather pretentious, about existentialism and the absurd and so on. The fact is, my favorite quote about this play comes from Jan Kott, the Polish dramaturg, who said, “In Poland, when we want fantasy, we do Brecht; when we want realism, we do Beckett.” In some ways, *Godot* is a surprisingly realistic play. It is very abstract in its form, obviously, but it clearly reflects Beckett’s experiences in World War II. I don’t know if you’ll see any of that background in the production, but I want us to think about *Godot*’s real-life context as we work on it, because I think it explains a lot about the play.

While living in Paris, Beckett became close to many Jewish artists, particularly James Joyce. The fact that, the moment war was declared, many of his closest friends were suddenly at risk, while others—like himself, who happened to enjoy neutral status as an Irish national—were not, affected Beckett deeply. The role of chance in human existence is a theme that runs through all of his work. He quotes St. Augustine in *Godot*: “Do not despair, one of the thieves was saved; do not presume, one of the thieves was damned.” This idea that of the two thieves crucified next to Christ, one happened to be rescued, and one did not—that it’s merely a matter of chance, who survives in the world and who doesn’t—became very much a part of Beckett’s emotional makeup, largely, I think, because of his experiences during the war.

I also find it interesting that Beckett, who didn’t have to be part of it at all, chose to put himself at risk as a member of the French Resistance. Part of his job was to take coded messages about German troop movements, translate them, and send them to London to be decoded. He was part of the “Gloria” cell, operating under the British Special Operations Executive, and he didn’t know who the other members of the cell were. They all had different names—he was called “*l’Irlandais*” (the Irishman)—so that if one of them was caught, they couldn’t betray the others. So this notion of two men sitting somewhere, waiting for someone to come and tell them something, is very connected to what Beckett did throughout the war, which was wait for code to come in, then wait for someone whom

he didn't know to come and pick it up, all the while hoping that the person coming wouldn't turn out to be a Gestapo agent—a Pozzo—who would kill him, but was actually someone who might save him.

Eventually, Beckett's cell was discovered, and friends came to his apartment to warn him and Suzanne [his French partner and later his wife] to escape. They immediately fled and walked all the way from Paris to the remote hill town of Roussillon, which is about 350 miles to the South (near Avignon), sleeping in ditches at night and in constant fear of capture. When they returned to Paris after the war, the entire infrastructure of the city had been destroyed, and many people they had known well had been killed. Beckett then volunteered with the Red Cross in St. Lô in Normandy, which had been devastated in the last weeks of the war. He saw there the horror of human beings attempting to put wounded victims of the conflict back together, against a landscape of total desecration.

Soon after the war, Beckett experienced a period of explosive creative fertility, writing *Godot* and then *Endgame* in short order. So it seems to me that his wartime experiences are very germane to the world of this play. The physical conditions of these characters are very real, as is the sense of waiting for something to happen that will give definition to your life, but not having any idea when it will come, or whether when it comes it will be positive or terrible.

People who knew Beckett said that *Godot* is also a realistic play about his marriage to Suzanne. So it is a play about these two "marriages": between Didi and Gogo, and Pozzo and Lucky. *Godot* contains the quintessential lines about marriage—"Don't touch me. Don't touch me. Don't come near me. Stay with me"—which I think apply to every relationship sooner or later. [*Laughter*] Apparently Beckett and Suzanne behaved exactly like Didi and Gogo on their 350-mile walk across France: They bickered, they cajoled; one was miserable, then the other. They were at each other all the time. And frequently one of them would say, as Gogo does, "Perhaps it would be better if we parted." But they don't. The most important thing is that these people need each other too much to part.

This play is very symmetrical: Two couples; two acts. People often joke that *Waiting for Godot* is a play where "nothing happens, twice." But the fact is, that balance, that sense of symmetry, is very important to the play, and to how Beckett, who originally directed it, thought about the play.

Beckett once said about Joyce, "His writing is not about something. It is that something itself." That's in a sense true of this play, as well—you lose the experience of the play if you try too hard to figure out what it's "about"—Is *Godot* God? Beckett consistently refused to tell people what the play is about, and he certainly didn't want people to think it's a play about God, although of course maybe on some level it is about God.

The fun thing about this play is that it's about actors, in a space, trying to figure out what they're supposed to be doing there, just as the audience sits in the theater thinking, What are we supposed to make of this? Beckett, with his stage directions, deliberately asks the actors to engage the audience—for example, when Didi moves toward the audience, looks out, and says, “Well, there's the bog,” or “No shortage of void here.” It's very clear in the stage directions that as characters they know they're on a stage. When they're frightened, there is no escape; they either run out into the audience, or they run upstage and look at the back wall. They know they can't get out that way, because it's the back wall of the theater. Their world is very clearly a theater. That's where [scenic designer] John [Wilson] and I started, thinking about a situation in which the audience (we hope!) becomes involved in the complexity of these characters' very real needs and desires, and at the same time celebrates the fact that they're sitting in a theater waiting, with those characters, for something to happen.

Beckett told his actors on the first day of rehearsal that they should imagine the entire play performed on a boat with a hole in it, and that the underlying action of the play is for them to keep bailing water to forestall sinking. Thus, in essence, during the entire play they are simply trying to keep afloat so they don't collapse into despondency and despair. That is why they are so scared of silence, because it might mean death and despair are upon them. So they have to come up with ways to keep talking and bailing, knowing all the while that the ship is sinking.

Beckett was a Protestant, which was rather unusual in Irish-Catholic Dublin, and he really knew his Bible. Whether or not you read this as a religious play, there are many references in the text to the Bible, and in particular to the Crucifixion—for example, that sad little tree with its two branches is in some way an echo of the cross. But in a broader sense, I think Beckett was interested in the relationship between hope and despair, which comes up in all of his work: What gives people hope in terrible times? In times of despair, why do human beings hope? Why does hope seem to be an instinctive, necessary human response? And what does hope, as an active thing, actually do for us? Of course, most people think of Beckett as very despairing. Certainly he had a mordant sense of humor. My teacher Martin Esslin used to tell a story about walking down the street with Beckett. Martin said, “Isn't it a beautiful day?” And Sam said, “Yes.” Martin added, “It's the kind of day that makes you happy to be alive,” and Sam responded, “Well, I wouldn't go that far.”
[*Laughter*]

It's important to remember, however, that this play was written as a vaudeville, complete with Irish music hall routines, at the same time that it is about very recognizable, real

relationships. How you balance that is really the challenge. It's very mordant, but it's also very funny.

Beckett's plays are filled with a belief in humanity. There's another beautiful passage from St. Augustine, which they keep misquoting in the play: "God, by deferring our hope, stretches our desire; / by the desiring, stretches the mind; / by stretching, makes it more capacious. / Let us therefore desire, for we shall be filled." I think that's part of the process of the play, between these men who each hope and despair at different times, that they keep encouraging each other to believe, so their minds will stay open to the possibilities of life.

C O S T U M E S

PERLOFF: One of the most difficult things to decide about this play is, What is the background of these characters? Beckett doesn't give you any biographical information, and what he does give you in the play text is contradictory. They're called "tramps," but they're not bums. Didi and Gogo quote Shelley and Heraclitus, they've read Aquinas, and somewhere along the line they climbed to the top of the Eiffel Tower. They were educated. Lucky seems to have been some kind of academic or intellectual, whom Pozzo has hired to teach him the higher things of life. And Pozzo appears to have been some kind of landowner.

One of the things we started with is identifying the body part on each of them that hurts. For Gogo, the pain of the world is focused in his feet. We looked at wonderful research of people sitting with their ankles exposed. His trousers should be too short because he wouldn't want anything to get near those hurting feet. Whereas one of Didi's big problems is whether he should button his fly, because maybe at the last minute he's going to want to pee and he won't be able to open it in time! And maybe he doesn't want his trousers to fit, because tight pants hurt so much, but then they keep falling down. Lucky can only think when his hat is on his head; this is important, because when the hat comes off he stops thinking. He also has a running sore on his neck, because of his rope. Lucky in a way is the most difficult to figure out, so we tried everything. Beckett originally put him in livery, so in the original production he was in a French railway porter's uniform. So Beaver and I spent weeks thinking, Uniforms, uniforms, uniforms . . . what would that be like? We tried countless iterations, because we wanted something with an open neck. And then we started thinking about pajamas, something very loose and vulnerable. We tried a lot of different things for Lucky and for Pozzo.

BEAVER BAUER: We found we had a lot of different thoughts about, within an overall direction for, each character. I looked through the work of several French photographers,

and became obsessed with pictures of people waiting. But waiting in a formal way, not in sweatpants and running shoes and informal clothes, the way we do now.

There's a book, *Kiki's Paris* [*Artists and Lovers 1900–1930*, by Billy Kluver], which I found particularly helpful. What I found is that, even people who each have only one outfit of clothes, usually have one wonderful character detail within that one look—for example, in the fit of the outfit, or in what they're wearing with it. Carey and I felt that each actor would bring to his character a wonderful synthesis, so the costume design for this play is not about me making a drawing, issuing an outfit, and saying, "Go," but rather letting each costume develop in the rehearsal hall, by looking at and living in the different pieces.

I also looked at Egon Schiele's paintings while working on the drawings for this play. One of the things I love about his portraits is the combination of stillness and animation. For example, at first it seems that Gogo just sits on his rock, but he also has periods of animation. And he and Didi do switch traits. Didi's energy level does seem much higher than Gogo's. So there might be some costume elements that are shared, as well, like ties with stripes going in different directions.

Another question we wrestled with is whether there will be differences between the two acts. There may be small differences, but that is the central ambiguity of the play: Are these two different days? How much time has passed? We don't want to be too literal in answering that.

THE SET

J. B. WILSON: When Carey and I started working on this play, we talked about a couple of different ways we could go. One was to create a vastness onstage, and the other was to create something very tightly edged. "Edge" for me became a key word. So we started to talk about edges—of the playing area, of the stage, of the space—and that when you cross that edge, then you are no longer in the play, you are "in the void," as Carey says. We looked for ways to draw those edges in an interesting way, and in a way that comments specifically on the Geary Theater. So we've created a second, much smaller Geary "proscenium," within the actual proscenium, to condense the space, and to make a deliberate statement about it. At the same time, we skewed the axis, so the floor—and therefore the actors—comes out closer to the audience. Skewing the axis of the playing area, so it isn't square to the stage, but is in effect a different stage within the first stage, generated an interesting dynamic.

Within that space, the script calls for "a road," "a tree," "a rock," and "the moon." That's about it. What I've always found most interesting about the design possibilities for this

play is the idea of the setting as a series of planes. I brought in pieces of cardboard, and we started moving them around, and pretty soon we arrived at the idea of the road as a ramp heading toward a hole in the sky—which isn't really a sky, but a wall that is also the sky. The ramp is a plywood ramp, out of the world of the rehearsal hall, more than anything else. And the floor is a plain gray floor. We talked about how important it is to have a strong horizontal playing area, where we can keep the focus on and the scale to the actors.

Then within the middle of all this, we have two organic shapes that are nonliving, or at least we assume they're nonliving at first: the rock and the tree, which are in contrast to these severely defined edges. In appearance it looks like a dead tree, but then in the second act it has some little green leaves on it. So if there's any hope in the play, it's that the tree's not dead! [*Laughter*] At least in terms of the set world.

PERLOFF: It's really the characters in this play who are the scenery. In designing the set we kind of worked backwards, trying first to figure out where Lucky would give his famous speech. The funny thing about the Geary is, the sweet spot of the stage is about 12 feet from the lip of the stage and about two feet up. I don't know why that is, but that's where you want to be if you're going to give your life-defining speech about death and destruction and existence. So we started from there, because I thought Lucky should have the perfect spot, and everything else would get designed around it. That's part of the idea of the ramp. But it's also just a road that goes nowhere. The road forks, but the fork doesn't go anywhere, either. As I said, in the world of this play, you can make choices about which path to take, but it doesn't really matter because it doesn't go anywhere anyway! [*Laughter*]

SYMBOLS OF WAITING

BY CAROLYN JOY LENSKE

“If I knew, I’d have said so in the play.”

Samuel Beckett to director Alan Schneider

During his life Samuel Beckett’s admirers and critics plied him with requests to explain the “true” meanings of his plays. Did Godot, with his physical absence and white beard, represent God? Was Pozzo the mysterious Godot, and Didi and Gogo did not recognize His coming? Beckett’s cheeky response to director Alan Schneider’s questions about Godot’s identity defends the playwright’s reluctance to define his work, while Beckett’s subtle imagery and ideas, and famously tight lips about them, have inspired an immense amount of scholarship dedicated to deciphering the symbolism in his texts. Beckett certainly drew inspiration from Western—particularly classical and Judeo-Christian—ideas and images. Attempts to classify his writing as pro- or anti-Christian, hopeful or hopeless, Marxist, or even Buddhist, however, have failed to provide definitive answers. According to actor Jack MacGowran, who worked closely with Beckett on several of his plays, this is because critics have missed Beckett’s point: “Because Godot begins with g-o-d, people have got the idea that [Beckett]’s referring to God. But he categorically states that that is not the point at all, that it doesn’t mean God at all. The whole play’s about waiting.”

While Beckett denied that the character of Godot represents God, he nevertheless included a great deal of Christian imagery in his play. Based on this imagery, such critics as Helene L. Baldwin believe that Beckett, an Irish writer well schooled in Christian theology, intended to promulgate a largely hopeful Christian message: Despite the suffering of the mortal world, faith in God keeps us alive. The set’s lonely tree, for example, is in Baldwin’s opinion the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life from the garden of Eden. It transforms later into the cross on which Christ was crucified, and when it grows leaves, it becomes a symbol of eternal life and an allusion to Revelation 22:2: “And the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.” The tree could also symbolize the Judas tree, upon which Jesus’s betrayer hanged himself. Critics have argued that Estragon, who suffers with foot trouble and compares himself to Christ in the first act, represents a damned soul. Christ, says Estragon, was “crucified quick,” while Estragon (and Vladimir) must continue to experience the horror of a meaningless existence. Also, as Estragon’s pain is always in his left foot, he mirrors the parable of the sheep and the goats

from Matthew 25:31-41, to which Beckett alludes in *Waiting for Godot*. (According to Matthew, after the second coming and the apocalypse, Jesus will separate the nations “as a shepherd divideth his sheep from goats.” The “goats” were set on Christ’s left hand and later consigned to the everlasting fires of hell, while the “sheep” on His right hand were saved.)

While Christian images figure prominently in *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett’s symbolism is not exclusively biblical. For example, Pozzo compares Lucky’s slavery to that of the classical figure of Atlas, who was forced by Jupiter to carry the weight of the earth and the heavens on his shoulders. In Act II, Pozzo is “as blind as Fortune,” the ancient Greek goddess of luck, who has steered all of the play’s characters onto a foul course. The willow symbolizes birth and death in Celtic mythology, and Pozzo invokes the Greek god of nature, Pan. Beckett also plays fast and loose with the pretensions of a classical education, especially with the characters of Pozzo and Lucky, who seem well versed in the “academy.”

Such scholars as H. Porter Abbott have also argued that *Waiting for Godot* has significant political resonances. Pozzo can be viewed as an overlord, an example of the bloated and oppressive bourgeoisie, while Lucky embodies the exploited underclass. Vladimir, with his self-consciousness and obvious education, is an intellectual; Estragon, a worker.

Critics have even suggested that Beckett was influenced by the principles of Japanese Noh drama, itself a symbolic and ritualistic form of theater. A Noh performance, for instance, traditionally takes place on a stark set and makes use of a large pine tree to represent longevity, steadfastness, and strength. It is true that the stock characters of Noh are surprisingly similar to those in *Waiting for Godot*; in Noh, there is the Doer; his Companion, a side character who is often a priest; a child; and a comic. Any attempts to connect Beckett’s symbolism definitively to that of Zen Buddhist Noh, however, have been frustrated by Beckett himself; according to critic Mel Gussow, Beckett said that he had never seen Noh.

So, how do we define Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*? Is the play pro-Christian, anti-Church, pre-Christian, Marxist, Buddhist, all of the above, or does it belong in some other category entirely? One of the great beauties of Beckett’s play is that the characters often go against their type, literally trading hats and personalities. The ideas and images in the play evolve, and Beckett creates an incredible sense of flux and movement in the characters’ interactions, even while the narrative and action of waiting remain frustratingly the same. Perhaps, then, the meaning of the play lies not in the meanings of its symbols, but in the contradictions of its symbols. As Gogo, Didi, or a member of the audience watching *Waiting for Godot*, one cannot count on any concrete, obvious meaning. All one can truly know is the waiting.

Scholar Mary A. Doll, in her book *Beckett and Myth: An Archetypal Approach*, similarly suggests that the ideas and objects that become symbols in *Waiting for Godot* are not important as individual indicators of meaning, but rather as familiar “things” that give the characters a sense of security in a world of nothingness. Christian parables, the tree that Didi and Gogo decide is a “weeping” willow, and the suffering of Atlas and Christ all help Didi, Gogo, Pozzo, and Lucky to feel the comfort of familiarity in a desolate landscape where there is “nothing to be done.” “Objects,” Doll says, “become touchstones of the true existential meaning for starved Beckettian souls,” a “tourist’s guidebook,” as Beckett himself described, written in one’s own language and culture, that attempts to explain the sights and geography of a foreign place. Without being able to imbue unfamiliar landmarks like the tree, a sore foot, or strange sounds with familiar meanings, *Godot’s* characters would be utterly lost. But while interpreting their world with familiar Western ideas helps the characters to pass the time, it does not quell their gnawing uneasiness, their underlying fear that beneath their familiar talk of Christ and salvation, there may be nothing at all.

It is this same uneasiness that prompts scholars, critics, and audiences to try to demystify *Waiting for Godot*. Looking for hard answers, they mirror Didi and Gogo’s very human impulse to distract themselves from the wait: It is much easier to apply meaning to one’s world, or to another’s art, than to contemplate the void of existence. And, like Beckett’s characters, we, the audience, believing in the promise of entertainment, seek a distraction for the evening to pass the time and save us from boredom and loneliness. Beckett, however, cunningly betrays our trust. Instead of a delightful and forgettable evening of entertainment, we encounter “a lucid testimony of nothingness,” as described by Spanish critic Alphonso Sastre. Sastre continues, “The gray and meaningless mass of our everyday existence is suddenly illuminated, disclosing its true structure, naked and desolate. That is the great revelation.”

Waiting for Godot is indeed a great revelation, but it is a revelation in which all is not made clear. Beckett presents us with objects and symbols. He reveals to us who we are and how we think. Yet he refuses to give us a concrete meaning to our existence. We are sometimes afraid, sometimes joyful, sometimes bright, and sometimes stupid, but always waiting for something Beckett will not define. Even the act of contemplating our desolate existence is itself a distraction from personal despair. According to Sastre, “These men who are bored cast us out of our own boredom.” Even Beckett himself cannot escape our desperate and deeply human hope to find that our lives have some significance greater than ourselves.

WHO IS GODOT?

Letters from Samuel Beckett about *Waiting for Godot*

Waiting for *Godot* was completed in 1949 but wasn't produced until 1953 (in French, in Paris). Before the play finally went into production, Beckett accepted an invitation from Michel Polac, the director of the avant-garde radio program Club d'Essai, to have parts of the play read over the air. Beckett, who refused to be interviewed about his work, wrote the first of these two letters as an introduction to the performance. The second is to Desmond Smith, who wanted to produce *Godot* in Canada.

PARIS, 1952

To Michel Polac:

You ask for my notions about *En attendant Godot*, extracts from which you are doing me the honor of broadcasting at the Club d'Essai, and at the same time for my notions about dramatic art.

I have no notions about dramatic art. I am not versed in it. I am not a theatergoer. This is admissible.

What is probably less so, under these conditions, is first of all to write a play, and then, having done so, not to have the ghost of a notion about it either.

Such is unfortunately my case.

It is not given to everyone to be able to go from the realm that opens out under the page to that of profit and loss, then back again, unruffled, as one goes from the daily grind to idle pub talk.

I know no more about this play than anyone who manages to read it attentively.

I do not know in what spirit I wrote it.

I know no more about the characters than what they say, what they do, and what happens to them. About their looks, I must have indicated the little I have been able to catch a glimpse of. The bowler hats for instance.

I do not know who Godot is. I do not even know if he exists. And I do not know if they believe he does or doesn't, those two who are waiting for him.

The two others who drop in toward the end of each of the two acts, that must be in order to break the monotony.

All that I have managed to be aware of I have shown. It is not much. But it is enough for me, quite enough. I can even say that I would have fared better with less.

As for wanting to find in all this a broader and loftier meaning to take home after the performance, together with the program and the ice-cream stick, I cannot see the point in doing so. Yet it might be achieved.

I am no longer involved, and will never be again. Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo, and Lucky, their time and their space: if I did manage to get slightly acquainted with them it was only by keeping very far away from the need to understand. They may be answerable to you. Let them shift for themselves. Without me. They and I are quits.

(Translated from the French by Edith Fournier.)

APRIL 1, 1956

Dear Mr. Smith:

Thank you for your letter of March 5th. I understand from Mr. Rosset that Mr. Myerberg is opposed to you presenting the play in Canada prior to the New York production. I am sorry to hear this. However you will not have long to wait now.

I am afraid I am quite incapable of sitting down and writing out an "explanation" of the play. I think the simplest thing would be for you to send me a list of queries. My answers to some of these might cover a lot of ground. The trouble with most commentators is their failure to see the wood for the trees. Do try to see the thing primarily in its simplicity, the waiting, the not knowing why, or where, or when, or for what. If there are obscurities of detail their elucidation will never be in term of a system of symbols. It is not in any sense a symbolic work. The point about Pozzo, for example, is not who he is, or what he is, or what he represents, but the fact that all this is not known, so that for a moment he can ever be confused with Godot. It is essential he should not be specified. It might even be said that he does not know himself who or what he is, and it seems to me that it is only out of a great inner dereliction that the part can be played satisfactorily. Confusion of mind and of identity is an indispensable element of the play and the effort to clear up the ensuing obscurities, which seems to have exercised most critics to the point of blinding them to the central simplicity, strikes me as quite nugatory.

There were, I thought, good things in the London production, in particular some good playing by Estragon and Lucky, but the set was quite wrong, and the timing, which is all important, I mean the giving full value to the silences.

I am not at all sure that the author's views are without danger for the director of production. Perhaps a wrong production, wrong for me, but with the coherence of your purely personal experience of the work, is to be preferred to one in which you try to combine with your own ideas others springing from a quite different conception. Nor is the author necessarily right. However, if you feel like running the risk send along your

questionnaire and I'll do my best to answer it. At least I can help you with difficulties in the script, if you have encountered any such.

With regard to rights of my next play, I am not at all sure that there will be a next. In any case you would have to apply to my publisher here, Monsieur Jérôme Lindon, Éditions de Minuit.

Originally published in *The New Yorker* (June 24, 1996).

ON AND ABOUT BECKETT AND *GODOT*

The premiere of *Waiting for Godot* in Paris in 1953 was one of the key events in the modernist calendar, something to be ranked alongside Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* or Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. It didn't, as some have claimed, signal the death of naturalism. What it did do was show how much drama could dispense with and still survive. As the Beckett scholar, Ruby Cohn, wrote: "After *Godot*, plots could be minimal; exposition expendable; characters contradictory; settings unlocalised and dialogue unpredictable. Blatant farce could jostle tragedy."

Like all landmark events, *Godot* often provoked an irrational fury. Thierry Maulnier in Paris dismissed it as a nine-day wonder, Bernard Levin in London initially dubbed it a remarkable piece of twaddle and Marya Mannes in New York doubted whether she had ever seen a worse play. Now we accept it, almost without hesitation, as a classic, one that yields new shades of meaning with every revival. When a black South African company brought the play to the Old Vic in the '80s, it became in part a cry of protest against apartheid. When Peter Hall revived it at the same theatre in 1997, one was keenly aware of Vladimir and Estragon's rage at their physical entrapment and senseless predicament. Like all masterpieces, the play shifts its meaning according to the socio-historical context in which it is presented.

After *Godot*, nothing was quite the same again. . . . Beckett's play was part of a wider cultural movement in which art was increasingly defined by thrift, spareness, and a shift towards the completion of the experience by the viewer, listener, or reader. You see it reflected in the growing popularity of the "difficult" paintings of Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock, of the minimalist music of Philip Glass and Steve Reich, of the less-is-more architecture of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

But *Godot* is only one of a total theatrical oeuvre of 19 Beckett plays . . . and it is fair to ask what their defining qualities are. Obviously there is an obsession with mortality, time, memory, and language as a defence against the nothingness of existence. I also see Beckett increasingly, for all his 50-year residence in France, as an implacably Irish writer—one influenced not just by the topography of his Dublin childhood but by the rhythms of his native speech and the uproarious pessimism of the Irish temper. I saw parts of the Gate [Theatre]'s [Beckett] festival when it was first staged in Dublin in 1991 and I was struck by its reclamation of Beckett as a deeply Irish writer: not just in the Synge-song exchanges of *Godot* but in the treatment of Winnie in *Happy Days* as a stoical Irish gentlewoman, and in the cryptic Yeatsian cruelty of a fascinating minor work, *Rough for Theatre 1*, in which a blind beggar effectively disables a one-legged cripple by seizing the crutch-like pole that

sustains him. Beckett may be universal but his roots lie in the landscape, lingo, and even the jaunty despair of his native land.

When it comes to literary influences on Beckett, Joyce and Dante may be the favoured examples. But I also hear in him the religious longings and obsessions of a writer who forsook faith early in life. James Knowlson, in his excellent Beckett biography *Damned to Fame*, records a turning point in Beckett's young life. Attending church with his father in his late teens, he heard a preacher address the subject of endless human suffering and declare that, "The crucifixion was only the beginning. You must contribute to the kitty." For Beckett the idea that suffering and death were a moral contribution to some ever-expanding cycle was anathema. Yet, for all his Voltairian scepticism, his work is saturated in the rhythms of the King James Bible and the works of St. Augustine. Beckett may have aroused the censorious wrath of the Lord Chamberlain in 1958 with the moment in *Endgame* when Hamm, Nagg, and Clov all pray to God and then give up in despair with Hamm crying, "The bastard! He doesn't exist!" But Beckett is marked by the kind of obsessive, atheistic fervour given only to those who from childhood are impregnated with religion. . . .

Beckett, as we all know, was a man possessed by painting and music, both of which left a deep mark on his creative imagination. He once said that Caspar David Friedrich's *Man and Woman Observing the Moon* was the source of *Waiting for Godot* and it is evident that the chamber music of Haydn and Schubert influenced his dramatic form. But what happens in Beckett's later plays is that the painterly-musical qualities take over, giving the work an unalterable shape. Billie Whitelaw, Beckett's frequent muse and a supreme interpreter of his work, once said of *Footfalls*, in which the heroine paces across a narrow strip of stage, "I felt like a moving, musical Edvard Munch painting and, in fact, when Beckett was directing *Footfalls* he was not only using me to play the notes but I almost felt that he did have the paintbrush out and was painting."

"Plays for Today," by Michael Billington, *The Guardian* (September 1, 1999)

The two friends, neither servants nor served, are free to fill Godot-less time with prodigious variety—recollection and prediction, mastication and defecation, feeling and playing. Their inexhaustible immediacy forms Beckett's text, while the subtext implies hesitantly, "I act, therefore I am." And even more hesitantly, "I wait, therefore I am—maybe." Acting while waiting, Beckett's characters grasp us all.

Introduction by Ruby Cohn to *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*

People who have seen *Godot* are able to suggest this or that solution—Christian, anti-Christian, etc.—precisely because Beckett has left the door open for them to do so. They

are wrong only if they intimate that the author himself passed through the door and closed it behind him. Rough words have been spoken about the allegedly excessive symbolism of the play. This is unjust. Beckett's finest achievement is to have made the chief relationships, which are many, so concrete that abstract interpretations are wholly relegated to the theater lobby. He gives us, not tenets, but alternatives seen as human relationships (between bum and bum, master and man); also as ordinary human attitudes to God, Nature, and Death on the one hand, and, on the other, to the "trivialities," such as clothes, defecation, smells."

"The Talent of Samuel Beckett," by Eric Bentley,
The New Republic (May 14, 1956),
reprinted in *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*, edited by Ruby Cohn

[Beckett's] English title does not translate the much more apt French one: *En attendant Godot*, which means "while waiting for Godot." The subject is not that of pure waiting. It is: what happens in certain human beings while waiting. Estragon and Vladimir do not only wait. In waiting they show, ultimately, human dignity: they have kept their appointment, even if Godot has not.

1967 Postscript to "The Talent of Samuel Beckett,"
by Eric Bentley, reprinted in *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*

I won't narrate the play for you; does one narrate a landscape, a face, a pattern, an emotion? One can describe them, or interpret them.

"At the Babylone a Fortunate Move on the Theater Checkerboard,"
by Jacques Audiberti (translated by Ruby Cohn), *Arts* (January 16, 1953),
reprinted in *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*

What does *Waiting for Godot* offer us? It is hardly enough to say that nothing happens in it. That there should be neither complications nor plot of any kind has already been the case on other stages. Here, it is *less* than nothing, we should say: as if we were watching a kind of regression beyond nothing. As always in Samuel Beckett, what little had been given to us at the start—and which seemed to be nothing—is soon corrupted before our eyes, degraded further, like Pozzo who returns deprived of sight, dragged on by Lucky deprived of speech—and like, too, that carrot which in the second act is no longer anything but a radish.

"Samuel Beckett or Presence on the Stage," by Alain Robbe-Grillet
(translated by Richard Howard), *Critique* (February 1953),
reprinted in *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*

This is precisely what is so fascinating about *Waiting for Godot*: that nothing happens. It is a lucid testimony of nothingness. . . . These men who are bored cast us out of our own boredom; their boredom produces our catharsis, and we follow their adventure breathlessly, for they have suddenly placed us before the “nothing happens” of our lives. The gray and meaningless mass of our everyday existence is suddenly illuminated, disclosing its true structure, naked and desolate. That is the great revelation.

“Seven Notes on *Waiting for Godot*,” by Alphonso Sastre
(translated by Leonard C. Pronko), *Primer Acto* (April 1957),
reprinted in *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*

The drama is a ritual enacted in an enclosed space into which 50 or more people are starting. They are all more or less patiently waiting for something; the Reversal, the Discovery, the deus ex machina, or even the final curtain. Settled numbly for the evening, they accept whatever interim diversions the stage can provide: tramps in bowler hats, for instance.

“Life in the Box,” in *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, by Hugh Kenner

Lucky’s monologue presents yet another kind of narrative, a mock account of the history of Western thought concerning the relationship between God and man. This narrative, this mock discourse, like the parables, presents an image of blighted hope. Despite the apparent chaos of the presentation, there are enough intelligible phrases with enough connections that a semblance of meaning does emerge from the welter of repetitions, puns, and pseudo-philosophical jargon. A paraphrase of that meaning could go something like this: despite the supposed existence of a personal God—both popular (with white beard) and philosophical (God qua God)—who supposedly loves mankind (while at the same time having neither sensitivity to man’s suffering nor power to help him and in some cases even tormenting some men), and despite the supposed intellectual and physical progress of man himself, mankind wastes and pines. No distraction of physical activity or mental contrivance can hide the fact that man is only a “skull,” fading, dying, only a skull that has been abandoned unfinished. An audience, of course, does not “catch” this whole “statement” and does not need to. Students of philosophy will hear the “quaquaquaqua” and be amused at Beckett’s mockery of Latinate pedantry (“now, consider a table, qua table”); Those swift with puns will enjoy the scatology, the athletic intellectuals will chortle over “conating” and “camogie” as allied activities; and anyone with an ear for poetry and a heart for misery will hear the sonorous repetitions of “wastes and pines” and the delicate lamentations of “alas”; and by the end, all will have given up attempts at logic, so that repetitions alone will arrest attention: “the skull the skull the skull the skull.” And the last word, liter-

ally the last word on the subject, “unfinished.” The discourse is unfinished; man, that mere skull, is unfinished. All the various fragments of Lucky’s monologue will not add up to an actual disquisition for the audience any more than it does for the three auditors onstage. But it disturbs them; yes, because it is, as Beckett terms it in the stage directions, a tirade, something vituperative, censorious in its language, something that has unpleasant content and meaning (and not just the “form” of apparent chaos). If the three listeners onstage become progressively more agitated, more violent in their reactions, it is in response to something they hear in what Lucky is saying. And if the audience has, along with its amusement at the parody and hi-jinks, a feeling of discomfort, that too comes from something Lucky is saying.

In a play where the word “saved” is used frequently and desperately, in a play that virtually begins with a “sacred” but untrustworthy story about salvation, it is unsettling to hear even a fragmentary denial of the possibility of that salvation. And the word “skull” does not help. Not only does “skull” obviously suggest death and disintegration, but also lodged somewhere in the memories of most people in Beckett’s audience is the name “Golgotha,” that place of the skull where the two thieves were crucified. If, as Lucky’s monologue suggests, man is only a skull—carrying his hill of salvation around inside him as a mere image . . . then special places like Golgotha and special salvations from dying Gods or delaying Godots are the mere delusion Vladimir uneasily fears they are. Lucky’s “narrative” thus becomes one more story to put beside Vladimir’s story of the two thieves, both ironic commentaries on the present situation of blighted hope.

Canter and Chronicles: The Use of Narrative in the Plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, by Kristin Morrison

The farther he goes the more good it does me. I don’t want philosophies, tracts, dogmas, creeds, ways out, truths, answers, nothing from the bargain abasement. He is the most courageous, remorseless writer going and the more he grinds my nose in the shit the more I am grateful to him. He’s not f---ing me about, he’s not leading me up any garden path, he’s not slipping me a wink, he’s not flogging me a remedy or a path or a revelation or a basinful of breadcrumbs, he’s not selling me anything I don’t want to buy—he doesn’t give a bollock whether I buy or not—he hasn’t got his hand over his heart. Well, I’ll buy his goods, hook, line, and sinker, because he leaves no stone unturned and no maggot lonely. He brings forth a body of beauty.

His work is beautiful.

Harold Pinter

Only the complacent and those who prefer to live in a world of dogmatic faith, and cannot face reality until the hour of tragedy strikes, can fail to enjoy and benefit from Beckett's work. It requires greater concentration than other literature, as all great art does, but it is absorbing and always thought provoking, sometimes quite shocking. But above all it is about courage, and therein lies the paradox of Beckett's appeal: the blacker it may appear at first, the more gripping it becomes, and the more life-enhancing. He is the last of the great romantics, but there is no sentimentality in Beckett. He often portrays the selfish, the self-important, and the tyrannical, and contrasts them to the weak and unfortunate, who have to live through their wits, but know the value of kindness, of sharing and of stoical humor. It is they who have the real courage and who convey it to the audience. Beckett can change people and never for the worse.

"Sam's Happy Days," by John Calder, *The Observer* (August 29, 1999)

Why did he write *Godot* in French rather than in English?

"Because English was too easy. I wanted the discipline." Then comparing plays to fiction, he said that he liked "the limitations of theater as compared to the nonlimitations of prose. I turned to theater as relief—from the blackness of prose." After fiction, "theater was the light." Glumly, he added, "Then it became its own darkness."

He said he wrote *Godot* in four months, "very fast, never faster," not knowing where it was going or what it was called. He wrote it in French in an exercise book, first page to last. When he reached the end of the notebook, he said, he turned it over and continued writing on the reverse side of the pages, back to front. There were some corrections and emendations, but no pages torn out. . . .

After he finished the play in longhand, he typed it. "I still have the manuscript," he said. Apparently it was one of the few he retained. At first, Gogo was named Levy. He said he didn't know why he changed the name, except that he wanted the two names to be a definite contrast: Didi and Gogo. "They are players," he said. "They play games," as do Pozzo and Lucky. "They are role players," in other words, actors. "Pozzo need not be a plutocrat. Blin had him played that way, but Pozzo is also a player," and in common with the other characters, "he runs out of games to play."

"Theater Was the Light. Then It Became Its Own Darkness" (June 24, 1978),
Conversations with and about Beckett, by Mel Gussow

What do I know of man's destiny? I could tell you more about radishes.

Enough, by Samuel Beckett

ON PERFORMING BECKETT

[RICHARD TOSCAN]: ONE OF THE THINGS THAT STRUCK ME ABOUT BECKETT IS A SIMILARITY BETWEEN SOME OF CHAPLIN'S EARLY FILMS AND BECKETT'S PLAYS. HAS HE EVER TALKED ABOUT THAT?

[JACK MACGOWRAN:] He has. He was one of the greatest enthusiasts of the old silent movies that you could find. Chaplin, Buster Keaton, all those people, they were all part of his youth, and he was very influenced by them. You see this coming out in his work every now and then in the vaudevillian kind of touches you get here and there.

SO BECKETT SEES HIMSELF AS A COMIC?

When I asked him, "How much laughter do you expect from my anthology [*Beginning to End*]?" he said, "As much as you can get." But it's ironic laughter, an extension of slipping on the banana skin. I think Beckett has the ability to write one line that contains tragedy and laughter at the same time.

IS THAT WHY YOU FIND BECKETT AN OPTIMISTIC PLAYWRIGHT? I KNOW YOU'VE BEEN QUOTED AS SAYING THAT.

Yes, but he's not entirely optimistic. There are the moments of pessimism and doubt, which I think are normal to us all. Otherwise, he's as optimistic a writer as any you'll find—but he's a realist. He talks of the human condition as it is, and sometimes it's not very pleasant in the world today. He's got no rose-colored glasses; he dispensed with them long ago. He sees life as it really is and has tremendous compassion for humankind. Man's inhumanity to man upsets him gravely.

YOU'RE IMPLYING THAT BECKETT IS REALLY A HIGHLY REALISTIC PLAYWRIGHT?

Absolutely. He's the greatest realist I know of this generation. He's an extreme realist. Pinter has said openly to the press, "Beckett to me is the acme of all the great writers of his generation. Without Beckett, I would not be writing. He rubs my nose in the shit and the more he rubs it in it, the more I like him." And this, I think, is a great compliment from one very good writer to another. . . .

HAS HE EVER TALKED TO YOU ABOUT HIS ARTISTIC GOALS?

No, never, though he said to me once, "Writing is agony." Even winning the Nobel Prize didn't please him. He didn't want it. He didn't want any limelight thrown on him. I think he felt, since James Joyce never got the Nobel Prize, that he wasn't entitled to it at all. And

he said, "I certainly won't go to Stockholm to take it. I'll send my publisher if you insist." I think in fact he's given most of the money away. He's a very generous man—if anybody approaches Beckett with a real problem, financial or otherwise, he will help them out. He lives up to what he believes about helping mankind, but he would not want to discuss it himself, because he doesn't want to take any credit.

DO YOU FIND A GROWING AWARENESS OF BECKETT AS THOUGH THE WORLD IS CATCHING UP TO HIS VISION?

I still think he is slightly before his time, but I think what he is trying to say will become more and more evident as the years go by. I find the easiest audience to play to are students who just seem to know what he is talking about, whereas the middle-aged group are not so tuned in on Beckett.

BUT HIS CHARACTERS TEND TO BE OLDER PEOPLE.

He doesn't write about young people at all, because he doesn't see life from that point of view. He only writes about what he knows and what he has seen. He's never found anything in the younger people that he felt he had to write about.

DO YOU FEEL THAT HE WRITES HIMSELF INTO HIS WORK AT ALL?

I do, but I can't specifically say where. At certain points, I think he appears in his own novels, without even, perhaps, being aware of it. But there's no play I know of that I could equate with Beckett himself or anything about him.

WHERE DO YOU THINK BECKETT WILL GO FROM HERE AS A PLAYWRIGHT?

That's anybody's guess. He's been reducing and reducing his writing to practically sentences and nothing more now. So I don't know what the next tangent will be, because he's reduced everything now to utter simplicity. *Lessness*, which is the last one he wrote, is only a very slim volume, but it contains very powerful poetic imagery. After this, I don't know—he's pared things down, shorter and shorter, until silence is perhaps the only answer.

Excerpted from "MacGowran on Beckett," an interview with actor Jack MacGowran, by Richard Toscan (1973), reprinted in *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, edited by S. E. Gontarski.

MEL GUSSOW: BUT WHAT ABOUT *GODOT*?

BERT LAHR: Beckett was a disciple of Joyce. Joyce was an anti-Anglophile. If you remember Pozzo, he was a fat man. he was dressed like John Bull and he had an emaciated

fellow, Lucky, with a rope around his neck. He beat him with a whip and threw chicken bones at him. Pozzo and Lucky are symbols for England and Ireland. I think Vladimir and—what the hell part did I play?—Gogo. They're one man. The animal was Gogo. All he thought about were physical things: sex, eating turnips, sleeping. He had no regard for more esoteric things, whereas Vladimir was always looking. He was searching for the cerebral, like a parent. Both qualities are inherent in man. They couldn't get along with one another. But they're tied together.

WHAT ARE THEY WAITING FOR?

Tomorrow. Anything. Waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting. For their wives. For wealth. Everything. It's sort of a mystery play. It leads you to the point where you think Godot is God, then it twists. It isn't God, it's human. People said, It's not a play, it's just symbols. Is it metaphysical thought? It was against all basic rules of comedy. Don't make fun of a blind man. But Beckett planned Pozzo. He made him such a heavy, you didn't give a goddamn what happened to him. When we beat him, they screamed with laughter. We played games with him. . . .

DID YOU HAVE ANY DOUBTS ABOUT *GODOT*?

We tried it out in Miami, which was like trying it out in a truant school. The biggest flop in the history of the theater. After the opening, there were 10 people out there. But then Tallulah Bankhead came. She was going to do *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and she said, "You're the only one who has the right instinct for this." I told Myerberg, "This is a funny show, too," so I insisted on approval of the director and of the cast if we were to come to New York. Herbert Berghof became the director. We immediately had a rapport. It was one of the most satisfying things. They didn't applaud. They just stood up.

Excerpted from "We Tried It Out in Miami, Which Was Like Trying It out in a Truant School" (June 1966), an interview with actor Bert Lahr (Estragon in the original American productions of *Waiting for Godot*), reprinted in *Conversations with and about Beckett*, by Mel Gussow.

ON THE FRENCH RESISTANCE

"*Dubito ergo sum*. I doubt, therefore I survive," the golden rule of the Resistance.

M. R. D. FOOT

Requirements for service [in the Resistance] . . . matched Samuel Beckett's qualities. Resistance workers had to have character and courage; dedication to human dignity and respect for human rights; intelligence (for assimilating, condensing, and remembering

information); emotional stability (flexibility, strong nerves, a quick wit); the ability to be silent and to be inconspicuous; resourcefulness (what could be called the novelist's eye for detail); a sensitivity to one's surroundings and an awareness of imminent danger; and respect for luck and even superstition. Fearlessness was also essential, for Gestapo "V-men" (*Vertrauensmänner*) were continuously infiltrating these groups, and the Gestapo's offer of £5,000 or more for information leading to the arrest of an underground worker became increasingly appealing to many among the hungry population.

Maurice Buckmaster, in charge of the F section of the SOE from 1941 until the end of the war, organized what he called his "Education for Cloak and Dagger." . . . Some information was passed by word of mouth—for example, the accepted rule that if a person were caught (and it was assumed that no one was invulnerable to torture), he or she was expected to say nothing for two days, even under duress of having teeth pulled one by one. The two days' delay would give companions time to escape. The best technique of remaining silent, they were instructed, was to count under one's breath, although the ideal goal was to emulate the bravest of prisoners, Jean Moulin, who never spoke at all when he was finally beaten to death. The optimal way to protect one's life—this was a fundamental rule—was to cultivate a life of privacy, since arrest inevitably meant discovery, which meant torture, which meant deportation, which meant death. . . .

The abbreviations, codes, and code names to learn or decipher were vast. Most agents had a personal code—a name or series of numbers, or even a transposition key as long as a couplet or the quatrain of a poem. Coded messages might consist of four-letter phrases with alternating vowels and consonants, printed in columns with a prearranged meaning attached to each. A KAK FOUR DODO LONA, for example, meant "parachute at next opportunity for container-loads Bren gun ammunition in magazines." These codes, explains one specialist, while gibberish to the Germans, "would obviously enough be deciphered, not sent in clear." . . .

The maquis and Resistance, by their own efforts, freed one-third of France, including Paris. . . . By D day, 30,000 Resistance and maquis had been executed; another 30,000 had been killed in battles with the enemy. Of the 115,000 deported to the Buchenwald, Ravensbruck, Dachau, and Mauthausen camps, and countless others deported for forced labor, only 35,000 returned.

Excerpted from The World of Samuel Beckett: 1906–1946, by Lois Gordon.

WAITING FOR GODOT: A GLOSSARY

BY CAROLYN JOY LENSKE AND PAUL WALSH

VLADIMIR/ESTRAGON/POZZO/LUCKY

Vladimir is a common Slavic given name. It could refer to a famous historical figure, or no one in particular. *Estragon* is the French term for the herb tarragon. It is derived from the Latin *dracunculus*, meaning “little dragon.” Tarragon was thought to cure the stings or bites of mad dogs and venomous creatures. The names Estragon and Vladimir appear only in Beckett’s stage directions. The main characters always refer to each other as “Gogo” and “Didi,” which sound like childish nicknames or baby talk.

Pozzo is the Italian word for a “well” or “pit.” *Lucky*’s name ironically underlines his lot in life.

“‘HOPE DEFERRED MAKETH THE SOMETHING SICK,’ WHO SAID THAT?”

“Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life.”
Proverbs 13:12.

“SUPPOSE WE REPENTED. / REPENTED WHAT? / OH . . . WE WOULDN’T HAVE
TO GO INTO THE DETAILS. / OUR BEING BORN?”

Beckett took the notion of original sin (that “man’s greatest sin is to have been born”) from the Spanish Golden Age dramatist Calderón de la Barca, whom Beckett first quoted in his critical study *Proust* (1931).

“DO YOU REMEMBER THE GOSPELS? . . . AH YES, THE TWO THIEVES . . . TWO
THIEVES, CRUCIFIED AT THE SAME TIME AS OUR SAVIOR . . . ONE IS
SUPPOSED TO HAVE BEEN SAVED AND THE OTHER . . . DAMNED.”

Vladimir refers to Luke 23:39–43: “And one of the malefactors who were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou art Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss. And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.”

The editors of volume one of *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett* point out that Beckett stipulated that Estragon's foot trouble is always with his left boot, to establish a parallel with the one of the two thieves who was damned.

In response to questions about Christian symbolism in his plays, Beckett answered, "I take no sides. I am interested in the shape of things. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine. . . . "Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned." That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters." Scholars have been unable to find the source of this quotation in the works of St. Augustine (354-430 C.E.), however, and it appears that Beckett either made it up or remembered it with more imagination than exactitude.

"A WILLOW"

Beckett's stage directions call only for "a tree," but Didi and Gogo decide that it is a "weeping" willow. According to Celtic mythology, two scarlet sea serpent eggs were hidden in the boughs of a willow tree. One egg contained the sun, and the other the earth, and when they hatched life on earth began. The willow tree has also been associated with death and magic since ancient Druidic times. The words "witch" and "wicked" are etymologically linked to the name of the willow tree, and its bark has been used in potions and medications as an anesthetic and fever reducer. Critics have given various other meanings to *Godot's* tree, suggesting that it represents the cross on which Christ was crucified, the tree of knowledge and the tree of life from the garden of Eden, and even the legendary Judas tree, from which Judas, Jesus's betrayer, reportedly hanged himself.

"WHAT ABOUT HANGING OURSELVES? / HMMM. IT'D GIVE US AN ERECTION. / (HIGHLY EXCITED.) AN ERECTION! / WITH ALL THAT FOLLOWS. WHERE IT FALLS MANDRAKES GROW. THAT'S WHY THEY SHRIEK WHEN YOU PULL THEM UP."

Like the willow tree, the mandrake root has connections to both birth and death. Occult and folk medicine practitioners have long used the highly toxic mandrake as an aphrodisiac, narcotic, and anesthetic. In witchcraft lore, it is a key ingredient of flying potions. It was said to grow at the base of gallows trees at the site of a criminal's last ejaculation, caused by the asphyxiation of hanging. Artists often anthropomorphized the mandrake in their drawings because its forked root resembles human legs. Folklore warns that the plant will shriek when pulled from the earth, and that the sound will drive the harvester mad.

Shakespeare employs the myth of the mandrake in *Romeo and Juliet* when Juliet, distraught at the idea of waking up in the family crypt before Romeo arrives, imagines that

she will encounter “loathsome smells, / And shrieks like mandrakes torn out of the earth, / That living mortals, hearing them, run mad” (iv.iii.459–48).

Mandrake also has a biblical connotation: In Genesis 30, “Reuben [Jacob’s son] went to the wheat harvest, and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them unto his mother, Leah.” Leah then said to Jacob, “Thou must come in unto me; for surely I have hired thee with my son’s mandrakes,” and she conceived a son.

“WHEN YOU THINK OF THE BEAUTY OF THE WAY. AND THE GOODNESS OF THE WAYFARERS.”

The editors of volume one of *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett* observe, “‘Wayfarer’ is a rather archaic, perhaps even a biblical word for a ‘traveler.’ When used alongside the phrase ‘the beauty of the way,’ it may not be too fanciful to suggest that, as well as associations of the parable of the good Samaritan, there may also be suggestions of the Taoist ‘way.’”

“PAH! THE WIND IN THE REEDS.”

When Vladimir believes he hears Godot arriving on his horse (it is actually Pozzo shouting at Lucky in the distance), Estragon dismisses Vladimir’s conclusion by referring to Matthew 11:7, “And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John [the Baptist], What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind?” Jesus advises that John, the reclusive precursor to Christ living out in the desert, is more constant than a hollow reed buffeted by the wind. But in *Waiting for Godot*, there is no John the Baptist, Jesus, or Godot on which to depend. There is only the sound of the wind in the reeds. The editors of volume one of *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett* also suggest an allusion to the title of w. b. Yeats’s volume of poems *The Wind among the Reeds* as “a metaphor for the movement of spiritual powers among mortals.”

“HE’S PUFFING LIKE A GRAMPUS.”

Estragon says that Lucky is spraying saliva and breathing heavily in the manner of a spouting grampus, defined by *Webster’s* as a “marine mammal . . . related to and resembling the dolphin, but without a beaklike snout” or “a cetacean, as the killer whale, similar to the grampus.”

“HE WANTS TO COD ME, BUT HE WON’T.”

Pozzo means that he will not let Lucky put one over on him or play him for a fool. Cod is a slang word for scrotum, which a codpiece would cover. In common American speech today, the same expression might be, “He wants to dick me over, but he won’t.”

“AS THOUGH I WERE SHORT OF SLAVES! ATLAS, SON OF JUPITER!”

Pozzo’s reference to classical mythology recalls how Atlas lost his property and became a slave. Atlas was not, in fact, the son of Jupiter. Atlas, a scion of the Titans, led those great giants in a war against Jupiter and the Olympians for control of the heavens. When the Titans lost the war, Jupiter doomed Atlas to carry the earth and sky on his shoulders. When Jupiter’s son Perseus later came through Atlas’s lands seeking hospitality, Atlas closed his doors to him: A prophet had once warned that his golden orchards would be stripped of their wealth by a son of Jupiter. In revenge, Perseus presented Atlas with the head of Medusa, which was so ugly that any man who saw it turned to stone. Atlas was immediately transformed into a mountain, thus fulfilling his destiny to support the world and, like Lucky, carry a great burden. In *Warten auf Godot*, the German version of the play directed by Beckett in Berlin in 1975, he changed “Jupiter” to “Japetos,” who *was* the father of Atlas. In changing the name for the German production, Beckett deliberately saved Pozzo from error.

“SO I TOOK A KNOOK.”

Pozzo’s word for slave is a Beckettian invention, perhaps derived from *knut*, the Russian word for whip.

“WHAT CAN I HAVE DONE WITH THAT BRIAR? / HE’S A SCREAM. HE’S LOST HIS DUDEEN. . . . / I’VE LOST MY KAPP AND PETERSON!”

A briar is a pipe made of briarwood; dudeen, from the Irish *duidin*, is 19th-century slang for a clay pipe with a short stem. Kapp and Peterson is still an elegant pipe and tobacco shop in Dublin, and their famous Peterson pipe, with its gracefully curved mouthpiece, continues to connote wealth and status.

“A GREAT CALM DESCENDS. LISTEN! PAN SLEEPS.”

Pan is the classical god of nature; thus Pozzo announces that nature himself has fallen asleep. Pan’s origins lie in the wild mountains of the Peloponnesus, and he is said to be the son of either Zeus or Hermes. He plays the syrinx, or panpipes, and as the god of goat herding, he possesses the horns and hindquarters of a goat and the head and torso of a

man. His character is marked by his reliance on instinct and his lack of social and moral values; he was an early prototype for the Christian devil. Myth connects him with lustfulness, fertility, lighthearted fun, and the cult of Dionysus. Pan is also said to haunt natural places and to cause sudden, overwhelming attacks of fear (“panics”) and nightmares, to which people succumb in bleak, forsaken places.

“ADAM”

Estragon tells Pozzo that his name is Adam, the first human created by God, according to Judeo-Christian biblical tradition. In the original French version of *Godot*, Estragon says that his name is *Catulle*, like Catullus, the great Roman lyric poet (84–54 B.C.E.). Catullus broke away from the Homeric tradition of epic poetry and focused on smaller, human activities, such as Catullus’ love for a woman he called Lesbia. Catullus’ writing, while known for its elegance, could also be quite vulgar, especially in poems describing his enemies and public figures.

“QUA SKY”

Pozzo fancies himself a sophisticated intellectual, and Lucky’s speech hilariously parodies his master’s pretensions later in the play. Qua is philosophical jargon for “in so far as,” “in the capacity of,” or “as.” “Qua sky” therefore means “the sky in and of itself.”

“OH TRAY BONG, TRAY TRAY TRAY BONG.”

Estragon pokes fun at English speakers who try to speak—and badly mispronounce—French. “Tray bong” could be *très bien*, “very well,” or *très bon*, “very good.” “*Très bon*” is often incorrectly used by nonnative French speakers instead of “*Très bien*,” in response to the question, “*Comment t’allez-vous?*” (“How are you?”).

“A GENUINE HALF-HUNTER, GENTLEMEN, WITH DEADBEAT ESCAPEMENT!”

A half-hunter is a pocket watch with a hinged lid in which a small opening or crystal has been inserted to allow the wearer to read the time at a glance. It is said that Napoleon Bonaparte was the first to cut a hole in the lid of his watch so that he could read the time on the battlefield without wasting precious moments in opening the case.

“I MIND THE GOATS, SIR. . . . [MY BROTHER] MINDS THE SHEEP.”

There may be an allusion here to the biblical parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. The “goats” were set on Christ’s left hand and later consigned to the everlasting fires of hell, while the “sheep” on His right hand were saved. There is also a par-

allel here with the two thieves who were crucified with Christ: The thief on the right was saved, while the thief on the left was damned.

“PALE FOR WEARINESS. / . . . OF CLIMBING HEAVEN AND GAZING ON THE LIKES OF US.”

Here Estragon paraphrases Shelley’s poem “To the Moon” (1820): “Art thou pale for weariness / Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth.”

“A DOG CAME IN THE KITCHEN / AND STOLE A CRUST OF BREAD. / THEN COOK UP WITH A LADLE / AND BEAT HIM TILL HE WAS DEAD. / THEN ALL THE DOGS CAME RUNNING AND DUG THE DOG A TOMB.”

This is Beckett’s adaptation of a German drinking song.

“EVERYTHING OOZES.”

Commentators have found a distortion here of the famous proposition of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who argued that “all things are flowing,” suggesting that because life is in constant flux, no one can never step twice into the same river. Here water has been transformed into pus. The editors of volume one of *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett* note that “in the later prose text, *Worstward Ho*, Beckett uses ‘ooze’ as a virtual synonym for the process of excreting words.”

“NO, I WAS NEVER IN THE MÂCON COUNTRY! I’VE PUKED MY PUKE OF A LIFE AWAY HERE, I TELL YOU! HERE! IN THE CACKON COUNTRY! / BUT WE WERE THERE TOGETHER, I WOULD SWEAR TO IT! PICKING GRAPES.”

The Mâcon country is in the famous wine-growing region of Burgundy, in mid-eastern France near Dijon. The “Cackon country” is Beckett’s play on the child’s expression for excrement, “caca.” This line was changed by Beckett from the original French version of *Waiting for Godot*, in which Estragon says that he has never been to the Vaucluse, a département in northern Provence, but has instead spent his life in the “Merdecluse,” *merde* being French for shit. (For the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s 1977 production of the play, directed in German by Beckett himself, the playwright changed the names again, to “Napa” and “Crappa.”) Beckett himself spent a great deal of time in the mountainous Vaucluse, in the town of Roussillon. He lived there from 1942 until 1944, harvesting grapes and other crops with local farmers and trying to avoid the Nazis and their Vichy cronies. Beckett lived next door to a local Resistance leader, but while many neighboring towns became hotbeds of Resistance and were brutalized for it by the Nazis, Roussillon went

largely unscathed. During the war, the town's days were relatively peaceful and "business as usual," while the nights were filled with uncertainty and fear.

"BUT DOWN THERE EVERYTHING IS RED!"

Beckett is perhaps referring to the color of the wine for which Mâcon is famous. In the French version of *Godot*, however, red (*rousse* or *rouge* in French) suggests the town of Roussillon, which is known for the red ochre that colors the land on which the town was built. The hillsides of Roussillon were mined for paint pigments—ochre creates colors that are fast and true—before the advent of synthetic dyes. The earth's dramatic tint inspired the town's myth: The wife of the local *seigneur* fell in love with a troubadour, and when her husband discovered their indiscretion, he killed the lover and had his heart served to his wife for dinner. When she discovered what had happened, she threw herself off a cliff, and her blood marked the hillside forever.

"WHAT IS TERRIBLE IS TO HAVE THOUGHT."

There is a possible allusion here to *Hamlet's* observation that "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (II.ii).

"QUE VOULEZ-VOUS?"

This is French for "What do you want?"

"GONOCOCCUS!"

The bacterium gonococcus (*Neisseria gonorrhoeae*) causes the sexually transmitted disease gonorrhea.

"SPIROCHETE! "

Spirochetes are slender, twisted microorganisms of the order *Spirochaetales*, many of which cause the sexually transmitted disease syphilis and other infections.

"MORPION!"

The word *morpion*, which means crab or louse, is adopted from the French. In 1597, the distinguished Scottish physician of the Elizabethan Age Peter Lowe wrote in his magnus opus, *The Whole Course of Chirurgerie*, "The morpions . . . are found chiefly about the privy parts."

“THAT LUCKY MIGHT GET GOING ALL OF A SUDDEN. THEN WE’D BE BALLOCKSED.”

To be ballocksed is to be spoiled, ruined, or frustrated. A ballock is a testicle, and during the 19th century the exclamation “Ballocks!” (now spelled “bollocks”) became a vulgar expression. In *Godot*, “ballocksed” is the equivalent of “screwed” or “fucked.”

“WE ARE ALL BORN MAD. SOME REMAIN SO.”

This may be a nod to Malvolio’s well-known lines: “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.” (*Twelfth Night* III.iv).

“CAIN! . . . ABEL! . . . HE’S ALL HUMANI TY.”

Estragon tries to see if Pozzo will respond to the names of the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain was a farmer and Abel a shepherd. When each of them offered a gift to God, Abel’s was accepted, but Cain’s was not. Filled with jealousy and rage, Cain murdered his brother. As a punishment, God cursed Cain so that the earth would never again bear fruit for him, and he was forced to lead a nomadic life.

“MEMORIA PRAETERITORUM BONO RUM.”

This is a Latin phrase meaning “in memory of bygone happiness,” or “the past is always recalled to be good,” from Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica*, the massive treatise in which he reconciles Christianity and Aristotelian philosophy.

“I WOKE UP ONE DAY AS BLIND AS FORTUNE.”

In classical mythology, the goddess Fortuna (also called Tyche) determined the luck of mortal men. She is often depicted holding a rudder, for steering men’s lives toward good or bad fortune, and with her eyes bound, for objectivity. Beckett plays Pozzo’s fortune against the name of Lucky, who, of course, has the worst luck of all.

“ASTRIDE OF A GRAVE AND A DIFFICULT BIRTH. DOWN IN THE HOLE, LINGERINGLY, THE GRAVE-DIGGER PUTS ON THE FORCEPS. WE HAVE TIME TO GROW OLD. THE AIR IS FULL OF OUR CRIES. (HELISTENS.) BUT HABIT IS A GREAT DEADENER.”

According to critic G. S. Fraser, Vladimir’s famous words may echo the language of Irish playwright J. M. Synge, who’s work Beckett enjoyed as a young theatergoer in Dublin. In Synge’s *Riders to the Sea*, Maurya says, “It was a hard birth I had with every one of them and they coming to the world . . . but they’re gone now the lot of them.”

GLOSSARY OF LUCKY'S SPEECH

The following is a paraphrase of the famous speech delivered by Lucky near the end of the first act of *Waiting for Godot*, suggested by A.C.T. Resident Dramaturg Paul Walsh: "Given the possible existence of a god who may or may not concern himself with humankind, and despite the efforts of civilization to prolong life through sport and medicine and such, we waste and pine and fade away. We are unfinished skulls."

While directing *Godot* at the Schiller-Theater in Berlin, Beckett suggested the thematic structure of the monologue: The opening is about "indifferent heaven," the middle section discusses "dwindling man," and the last subject is "the earth abode of stones," with a finale that summarizes all of the speech's themes and forms the "last straw" of "tears" and a focus on "the skull."

"PUNCHER AND WATT MANN": Imagined names for nonexistent scholars. A wattman is a streetcar operator, while a puncher validates passenger tickets on a tram.

"QUAQUAQUAQUA": Philosophical jargon that sounds like a duck's call. (See previous definition of "qua" on page 41.) As explained by Beckett during rehearsals in Berlin, the line "concerns a god who turns himself in all directions at the same time. Lucky wants to say 'quaquaquaquaversalis' but he can't bring it out." In Latin, *versalis* is a line or verse.

(DIVINE) "APATHIA": Stoicism, or an inability to feel suffering.

(DIVINE) "ATHAMBIA": An inability to feel strong emotions.

(DIVINE) "APHASIA": Inability to use or understand language. Lucky suggests here that the "divine" Being is uncompassionate, unemotional, and uncommunicative.

(DIVINE) "MIRANDA": Miranda was the name of Prospero's innocent, pure, and kind daughter in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

"SO BLUE . . . SO CALM": After a poem from Verlaine's *Sagesse*, "*Le ciel est pardessus le toit / Si bleu, si calme.*" ("The sky is up above the roof / So blue, so calm.")

"ACACACACADEMY OF ANTHROPOPOMETRY OF ESSY-IN-POSSY": "Caca" is a child's term for excrement and anthropometry is the study of the measurement of human proportion, which Beckett adulterates with further scatology ("popo" is the French term for potty and also sounds like "poo poo").

"TESTEW AND CUNARD": "Testew" is perhaps derived from *testu*, the old French word for head, but also suggests testicle and testicular. "Cunard" is a play on *connard*, French slang for jerk, which is derived from *con*, a vulgar term for the female sex organ.

“**FARTOV AND BELCHER**”: Comical names derived from fart and belch.

“**CAMOGIE**”: An Irish term for hurling, a type of field hockey.

“**PENICILLINE**”: A family of fungi that includes penicillin and bread mold.

“**SUCCEDANEA**”: Placebos.

“**FECKHAM**”: Another comical name with a possible sexual connotation.

“**PECKHAM FULHAM CLAPHAM**”: Areas of London.

“**BISHOP BERKELEY**”: Irish-born, Anglican bishop, philosopher, and scientist George Berkeley (1685–1753). He opposed the materialism of the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who said that matter is the only reality. An idealist (and egoist), Berkeley believed that matter cannot exist outside of human perception. Since the death of Bishop Berkeley, says Lucky, people’s heads have grown decreasingly smaller because they no longer have to contain all of matter within their skulls.

“**SKULL IN CONNEMARA AND ABODE OF STONES**”: A possible reference to the desolate, “crossbones”-like landscape of Connemara, in Galway, western Ireland. The region’s tiny farming plots are carved up by stone walls built after the famine of the 1840s, when the open system of farming was eliminated and the land was redistributed. Scholars have also suggested that Beckett is referring to Golgotha (Aramaic for “skull place”), the site where Christ died. The editors of volume one of *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett* note that in Beckett’s earlier writing, bones are consistently associated with “the white residue of painful memory of dead loves, which, as the past recedes, is then metamorphosed into stones.” Irish playwright Martin McDonough’s recent play *A Skull in Connemara* is presumably titled after Lucky’s line.

“**STEINWEG AND PETERMAN**”: More funny names. “Peterman” is English slang for “thief.” Also, for French audiences, *péter* means “to fart,” and Le Pétomane was a French vaudevillian who farted musical tunes at the Moulin Rouge. Finally, *Peter* and *petros* mean “stone” in German and Greek, respectively. Beckett asserted that many of the names and phrases in Lucky’s speech and elsewhere in the play are simply multilingual plays on words.

WAITING FOR GODOT: A PRODUCTION HISTORY

Samuel Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot* to overcome a case of writer's block and single-handedly changed the course of 20th-century drama. As with many revolutionary pieces of art, *Godot* was not very appealing to producers, and it took several years for Beckett to connect with Roger Blin, an established, but impoverished, producer who loved the piece. They opened *En Attendant Godot* at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris on January 5, 1953, with just enough funding to keep it there for a month. It ran for nearly nine months, however, with baffled audiences raving and raging that they had sat through a play in which nothing happened. The controversy eventually reached such a pitch that the production became a "must-see" for Parisian audiences. Reviews ranged from tolerant to enthusiastic, the most insightful of them realizing the subversive power of Beckett's theatrical imagination, combined with his mastery of vaudeville wit and humor.

Beckett translated the play into English, and *Waiting for Godot* premiered in London at the Arts Theatre Club on August 3, 1955. The production transferred in September to the Criterion Theatre in the West End, where it remained for some time. A London reviewer said about *Godot*, "It is bewildering. It is exasperating. It is insidiously exciting," expressing the ambivalence both critics and audiences seemed to feel. The London production won the *Evening Standard* Drama Award for most controversial play of the year (the one and only time that particular award has been bestowed). The following year, *Godot* opened at the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami, but it closed after a very short run, having been deceptively billed as the "laugh sensation of two continents." (Nearly half the audience walking out on opening night.) Nevertheless, *Godot* moved on to New York later in the year, where it ran at the John Golden Theatre for 59 performances to general critical acceptance, if not acclaim.

On November 19, 1957, the San Francisco Actor's Workshop produced *Waiting for Godot* for the inmates at San Quentin penitentiary. The response was tremendous. Each prisoner in the room understood what Vladimir and Estragon experience as they wait for an invisible authority to save them from their existence of entrapment. The play was such a success that it inspired the formation of the San Quentin Drama Workshop, an inmate-directed group that presented more than 30 plays over the following ten years for their prison audience, including two productions of *Waiting for Godot*, as well as two each of Beckett's later plays *Endgame* and *Krapp's Last Tape*.

Beckett himself directed the German translation of *Waiting for Godot*, *Warten auf Godot*, at the Schiller-Theater on March 8, 1975, and the next year he took the same production, in German, to London's Royal Court Theatre. *Godot* has since become a classic of 20th-century drama, helping Beckett to win the Nobel Prize in 1969 and receiving many professional and countless amateur productions all over the world, including Lincoln Center Theater's 1988 revival featuring actors F. Murray Abraham, Lukas Haas, Bill Irwin, Steve Martin, and Robin Williams. Beckett's death, in 1989, and the 50th anniversary this year of *Godot's* Paris premiere have sparked revivals in Dublin, Sydney, Stratford-upon-Avon, London, Washington, D.C., St. Louis, Boston, and San Francisco.

GODOTMANIA

BY PETER HALL

I have been brooding in my bath for the last hour and have come to the conclusion that the success of *Waiting for Godot* means the end of the theatre as we know it." Robert Morley, the famous character actor, made this prophecy in 1955. His generation—middle-aged—mostly endorsed his gloom. My generation of twentysomethings was glad.

The process began exactly 50 years ago, on January 5, 1953, when *Godot* was given its first performance in a 75-seat theater in Paris. France was where you went for radical theatre in those days. Whether it was the surrealistic images of Eugene Ionesco, the classical splendours of Jean-Louis Barrault and Madeleine Renaud, or the political philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, Paris continually outshone London.

And then came Samuel Beckett, soon to be recognized as the master innovator of them all. But he did not appear so at first—in fact, it took *Godot* several years to conquer. I heard of the play when it opened in Paris. But I am ashamed to say I did not see it. I had no idea that it would shortly dominate my life.

Godot returned theatre to its metaphorical roots. It challenged and defeated a century of literal naturalism where a room was only considered a room if it was presented in full detail, with the fourth wall removed. *Godot* provided an empty stage, a tree, and two figures who waited and survived. You imagined the rest. The stage was an image of life passing—in hope, despair, companionship, and loneliness. To our times, the images on the cinema screen are real, though they are only made of flickering light. Since *Godot*, the stage is the place of fantasy. Film is simile, lifelike; theatre is metaphor, about life itself.

In 1955, two years after the Paris premiere, I was 24 years old and a very lucky young man. I had been given a theatre—the Arts, in Great Newport Street, London—and charged to provide it with a play every four weeks. The resources were minimal and the money was not good (£7 per week and luncheon vouchers), but the opportunity to direct new plays (I began with *The Lesson*, the first Ionesco in Britain) and classics on a shoestring seemed too good to be true.

Then *Godot* came. In the early summer, when I was directing Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, I found a script waiting. Donald Albery, a leading West End impresario, informed me that he could persuade no actor to be in *Godot* and no director to direct it. It was still running in the small theatre in Paris. Beckett had now translated it and Albery wondered if I would like to do the English-language world premiere. I

ransacked my memory. The name was faintly familiar. There were novels, I knew, and I seemed to remember a connection with James Joyce.

I read the play and decided to do it. I won't claim that I saw it as a turning point in 20th-century drama: that came later. And it certainly took a month of intensive rehearsal for me to realise that the play was a masterpiece. But from the very beginning, I thought it was blindingly original, turning the undramatic (waiting, doubt, perpetual uncertainty) into tense action. It was exquisitely constructed, with an almost musical command of form and thematic material. And it was very funny. It took the cross-talk tradition of music hall and made it into poetry.

With *Mourning Becomes Electra* safely launched, I set off for a high-minded holiday in Spain. I took the 12 volumes of Proust with me. I was completing volume nine when a telegram arrived: *Mourning Becomes Electra* was failing in the summer heat. *Godot* must begin at once. I returned and went straight into rehearsal. I have never finished Proust.

Rehearsals were, I suspect, more enjoyable for me than for the actors. I had found it very difficult to cast the play: actors were bewildered by it. Who were these people? Where did they come from? Where were they going? Were they clowns or symbols? Or just tramps?

I soon felt secure in Beckett's rhythms. This was real dramatic poetry, not applied but organic. And I wondered less and less about what the play meant as day followed day. It clearly meant what it said. Two men were waiting for Godot. Who was Godot? That would depend on the audience and their beliefs—or lack of them.

By the time we opened, I was confident that we had something special. The first night therefore came as something of a shock. There were cheers, but there were also what are known as counter-cheers. On the line, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes. It's awful", a very English voice said loudly: "Hear! Hear!"

The critics next morning were not reassuring. Bafflement and derision were everywhere. "The language is flat and feeble," said Philip Hope-Wallace in the *Guardian*. "An evening of funny obscurity," was the *Telegraph's* verdict. "Mr. Samuel Beckett (an Irishman who used to be Joyce's secretary and who writes in French, a combination which should make anybody smell a rat) has produced a really remarkable piece of twaddle." So said the critic and columnist Bernard Levin.

It looked as if the play would have to close at the end of the week, but I begged the theatre owner to wait for the Sunday notices. Perhaps *Godot* would come, though frankly it didn't seem very likely.

Happily, he did—in the person of Harold Hobson, the critic of the *Sunday Times*. He found himself on the theatrical road to Damascus. He went on to write about the play for the next seven Sundays. Kenneth Tynan was also enthusiastic, although (unlike Hobson)

it took him some weeks to recognise the size of the Beckett revolution. He wrote that the play “forced me to re-examine the rules which had hitherto governed the drama; and having done so, to pronounce them not elastic enough.” That did for a beginning.

To my amazement, Godotmania gripped London. It was discussed, praised, analysed, and abused; cartoons were drawn about it, “Panorama” discussed it, Malcolm Muggeridge derided it. It was seen as an allegory of the Cold War. Metaphor had repossessed the theatre. And the way had been made straight for Harold Pinter, Joe Orton, Edward Bond, and subsequent generations.

It is often thought that 1956 and the first night of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* was the reinvention of British theatre. It is certainly true that Osborne changed a generation. So out went the slim volumes of verse and the imitations of *Lucky Jim*, and the Royal Court revolution was under way. All this was wonderful, but faintly parochial, which *Godot* certainly was not. *Look Back in Anger* was a play formed by the naturalism of the 1930s and the cosy craft beloved of the old repertory theatres. It now looks dated because it uses the convention of the well-made play. I think also that my generation heard more political revolution in it than was actually there, largely because we needed to.

By contrast, *Waiting for Godot* hasn’t dated at all. It remains a poetic masterpiece transcending all barriers and all nationalities. It is the start of modern drama. It gave the theatre back its potency and its poetry. And it no longer seems obscure. In 1997, I directed *Godot* again at the Old Vic. My 16-year-old daughter was baffled by the programme material detailing the play’s controversial history. “What on earth is there to understand?” she said. “It’s perfectly clear what it is about. You only have to listen.” How stupid it seems now that, 50 years ago, people denied that this play was a play. But I suppose new tunes are always by definition unfamiliar and disturbing. From that August evening in London, the play went everywhere. It is no exaggeration to say that it went round the world, and its success continues.

At the end of 1955, the *Evening Standard* drama awards were held for the first time. Because I had directed it, I was a nonvoting member of the judging panel when *Godot* was considered. Feelings ran high and the opposition, led by the conductor Malcolm Sargent, threatened to resign in high public dudgeon if *Godot* was awarded the prize for best play. An English compromise was worked out that changed the title and thus the nature of the award. It also happily ensured the future of the *Evening Standard* awards. *Godot* was crowned most controversial play of the year. It is a prize that has never been given since.

BECKETT'S *WAITING FOR GODOT*

BY BROOKS ATKINSON

Don't expect this column to explain Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which was acted at the John Golden last evening. It is a mystery wrapped in an enigma.

But you can expect witness to the strange power this drama has to convey the impression of some melancholy truths about the hopeless destiny of the human race. Mr. Beckett is an Irish writer who has lived in Paris for years, and once served as secretary to James Joyce.

Since *Waiting for Godot* has no simple meaning, one seizes on Mr. Beckett's experience of two worlds to account for his style and point of view. The point of view suggests Sartre—bleak, dark, disgusted. The style suggests Joyce—pungent and fabulous. Put the two together and you have some notion of Mr. Beckett's acrid cartoon of the story of mankind.

Literally, the play consists of four raffish characters, an innocent boy who twice arrives with a message from Godot, a naked tree, a mound or two of earth, and a sky. Two of the characters are waiting for Godot, who never arrives. Two of them consist of a flamboyant lord of the earth and a broken slave whimpering and staggering at the end of a rope.

Since *Waiting for Godot* is an allegory written in a heartless modern tone, a theatergoer naturally rummages through the performance in search of a meaning. It seems fairly certain that Godot stands for God. Those who are loitering by the withered tree are waiting for salvation, which never comes.

The rest of the symbolism is more elusive. But it is not a pose. For Mr. Beckett's drama adumbrates—rather than expresses—an attitude toward man's experience on earth; the pathos, cruelty, comradeship, hope, corruption, filthiness, and wonder of human existence. Faith in God has almost vanished. But there is still an illusion of faith flickering around the edges of the drama. It is as though Mr. Beckett sees very little reason for clutching at faith, but is unable to relinquish it entirely. . . .

Although *Waiting for Godot* is a "puzzlement," as the King of Siam would express it, Mr. Beckett is no charlatan. He has strong feelings about the degradation of mankind, and he has given vent to them copiously. *Waiting for Godot* is all feeling. Perhaps that is why it is puzzling and convincing at the same time. Theatergoers can rail at it, but they cannot ignore it. For Mr. Beckett is a valid writer.

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THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE 1969

Presentation Speech by Karl Ragnar Gierow, of the Swedish Academy (Translation)

“FOR HIS WRITING, WHICH—IN NEW FORMS FOR THE NOVEL AND DRAMA—
IN THE DESTITUTION OF MODERN MAN ACQUIRES ITS ELEVATION”

Your Majesty, Your Royal Highnesses, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Mix a powerful imagination with a logic in absurdum, and the result will be either a paradox or an Irishman. If it is an Irishman, you will get the paradox into the bargain. Even the Nobel Prize in literature is sometimes divided. Paradoxically, this has happened in 1969, a single award being addressed to one man, two languages, and a third nation, itself divided.

Samuel Beckett was born near Dublin in 1906. As a renowned author he entered the world almost half a century later in Paris when, in the space of three years, five works were published that immediately brought him into the centre of interest: the novel *Molloy* in 1951; its sequel, *Malone Meurt*, in the same year; the play, *En Attendant Godot* in 1952; and in the following year the two novels, *L'Innommable*, which concluded the cycle about Molloy and Malone, and *Watt*.

These dates simply record a sudden appearance. The five works were not new at the time of publication, nor were they written in the order in which they appeared. They had their background in the current situation as well as in Beckett's previous development. The true nature of *Murphy*, a novel from 1938, and the studies of *Joyce* (1929) and *Proust* (1931), which illuminate his own initial position, is perhaps most clearly seen in the light of Beckett's subsequent production. For while he has pioneered new modes of expression in fiction and on the stage, Beckett is also allied to tradition, being closely linked not only to Joyce and Proust but to Kafka as well, and the dramatic works from his debut have a heritage from French works of the 1890s and Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*.

In several respects, the novel *Watt* marks a change of phase in this remarkable output. Written in 1942–44 in the South of France—whence Beckett fled from the Nazis, having lived for a long time in Paris—it was to be his last work in English for many years; he made his name in French and did not return to his native tongue for about 15 years. The world around had also changed when Beckett came to write again after *Watt*. All the other works which made his name were written in the period 1945–49. The Second World War is their foundation; it was after this that his authorship achieved maturity and a message. But these

works are not about the war itself, about life at the front, or in the French resistance movement (in which Beckett took an active part), but about what happened afterwards, when peace came and the curtain was rent from the unholyest of unholyes to reveal the terrifying spectacle of the lengths to which man can go in inhuman degradation—whether ordered or driven by himself—and how much of such degradation man can survive. In this sense the degradation of humanity is a recurrent theme in Beckett's writing and to this extent, his philosophy, simply accentuated by elements of the grotesque and of tragic farce, can be described as a negativism that cannot desist from descending to the depths. To the depths it must go because it is only there that pessimistic thought and poetry can work their miracles. What does one get when a negative is printed? A positive, a clarification, with black proving to be the light of day, the parts in deepest shade those which reflect the light source. Its name is fellow-feeling, charity. There are precedents besides the accumulation of abominations in Greek tragedy which led Aristotle to the doctrine of catharsis, purification through horror. Mankind has drawn more strength from Schopenhauer's bitter well than from Schelling's beatific springs, has been more blessed by Pascal's agonized doubt than by Leibniz's blind rational trust in the best of all possible worlds has reaped—in the field of Irish literature, which has also fed Beckett's writing—a much leaner harvest from the whitewashed clerical pastoral of Oliver Goldsmith than from Dean Swift's vehement denigration of all humankind.

Part of the essence of Beckett's outlook is to be found here—in the difference between an easily acquired pessimism that rests content with untroubled skepticism, and a pessimism that is dearly bought and which penetrates to mankind's utter destitution. The former commences and concludes with the concept that nothing is really of any value, the latter is based on exactly the opposite outlook. For what is worthless cannot be degraded. The perception of human degradation—which we have witnessed, perhaps, to a greater extent than any previous generation—is not possible if human values are denied. But the experience becomes all the more painful as the recognition of human dignity deepens. This is the source of inner cleansing, the life force nevertheless, in Beckett's pessimism. It houses a love of mankind that grows in understanding as it plumbs further into the depths of abhorrence, a despair that has to reach the utmost bounds of suffering to discover that compassion has no bounds. From that position, in the realms of annihilation, rises the writing of Samuel Beckett like a miserere from all mankind, its muffled minor key sounding liberation to the oppressed, and comfort to those in need.

This seems to be stated most clearly in the two masterpieces, *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days*, each of which, in a way, is a development of a biblical text. In the case of *Godot* we have, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" The two tramps are

confronted with the meaninglessness of existence at its most brutal. It may be a human figure; no laws are as cruel as those of creation and man's peculiar status in creation comes from being the only creature to apply these laws with deliberately evil intent. But if we conceive of a providence—a source even of the immeasurable suffering inflicted by, and on, mankind—what sort of almighty is it that we—like the tramps—are to meet somewhere, some day? Beckett's answer consists of the title of the play. By the end of the performance, as at the end of our own, we know nothing about this Godot. At the final curtain we have no intimation of the force whose progress we have witnessed. But we do know one thing, of which all the horror of this experience cannot deprive us: namely, our waiting. This is man's metaphysical predicament of perpetual, uncertain expectation, captured with true poetic simplicity: *En attendant Godot, Waiting for Godot*.

The text for *Happy Days*—"a voice crying in the wilderness"—is more concerned with the predicament of man on earth, of our relationships with one another. In his exposition Beckett has much to say about our capacity for entertaining untroubled illusions in a wilderness void of hope. But this is not the theme. The action simply concerns how isolation, how the sand rises higher and higher until the individual is completely buried in loneliness. Out of the suffocating silence, however, there still rises the head, the voice crying in the wilderness, man's indomitable need to seek out his fellow men right to the end, speak to his peers, and find in companionship his solace.

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How do the names of Vladimir (Didi), Estragon (Gogo), Pozzo, and Lucky reflect their characters?
2. How are Didi and Gogo different? How are they similar? What characterizes the relationship between Didi and Gogo? Are they friends? Lovers? Partners? Enemies? Why do they remain together, in spite of their bickering? Conversely, what do they like about each other?
3. Do Didi and Gogo change over the course of the play? How do their characters differ and remain the same in first and the second acts? How are their physical ailments and complaints significant?
4. What draws Didi and Gogo to the mysterious Godot? Why are they waiting for him? Why do they continue to wait for him, even when he does not appear? Do you think Godot will ever arrive?
5. Do Gogo and Didi have a past? What was it like? What do you think their future will be?
6. Who is Pozzo? Some scholars have suggested that Pozzo is Godot, while others say that he represents the oppressive bourgeoisie. What do you think?
7. Does Lucky choose to be a slave? Why does he allow Pozzo to treat him with such cruelty?
8. Some scholars have said that Godot represents God. Who do you think Godot is?
9. Beckett once said, when asked if Godot is God, "I take no sides. I am interested in the shape of things." What is the "shape" of *Waiting for Godot*, and why is it significant?
10. Beckett often declined to comment on the meanings of his characters and ideas. Do you think Beckett's original intentions are important to understanding the play?
11. Christian symbolism plays an important role in *Waiting for Godot*. Would you characterize the play as pro-Christian? Anti-Christian? What do you think Beckett is saying about the role of religion in the lives of his characters?
12. Beckett puts great emphasis on the ideas of salvation and damnation, particularly in the Christian sense. Do you think that Didi and Gogo will be (or are) damned or saved? Does Beckett offer another alternative?

13. What is the social hierarchy of the characters in *Waiting for Godot*? How does Beckett indicate status, and what does he seem to say about these signifiers of class? How does the characters' status change throughout the play, if at all?
14. Throughout *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett experiments with the sounds and meanings of words from several different languages. What is the significance of this word play?
15. Beckett mixes a lot of scatological humor with references to great poets, philosophers, and sophisticated ideas. What does this tell us about Beckett's view of the human condition?
16. What has changed between the end of the first act and the beginning of the second? What do the tree, the rock, and the moon represent?
17. How does the experience of an audience watching *Waiting for Godot* reflect the experience of the characters in the play itself?
18. Do you find Beckett's play ultimately hopeful or despairing?

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WEB SITES OF INTEREST

The Samuel Beckett On-Line Resources and Links Pages. www.samuel-beckett.net/. (Includes the script of *Waiting for Godot*.)

Apmonia: A Site for Samuel Beckett. themodernword.com/beckett.

Bohemian Ink: Samuel Beckett. levity.com/corduroy/beckett.htm.

Global Village Beckett Project. home.sprintmail.com/~lifeform/global.html. Information and ordering site for the video documentary *Waiting for Beckett*.

The Journal of Beckett Studies. english.fsu.edu/jobs/default.cfm.

"Samuel Beckett," *BBC: Books by Author*. bbc.co.uk/arts/books/author/beckett/

The Samuel Beckett Centre. tcd.ie/Drama/content/01_intro.html.

The Samuel Beckett Endpage. beckett.english.ucsb.edu.

ShEm & saM, Three Comic Strips by Stephen Walsh and Brian O'Toole. freespace.virgin.net/kellie.s/special.htm.