



ARTSCLUB
THEATRE
COMPANY

Teacher Resource Guide
2005/06 Season

WAITING FOR GODOT
by Samuel Beckett

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Stanley Industrial Alliance Stage

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Synopsis and Critical Response

It's almost impossible to provide a conventional plot summary of *Waiting for Godot*, which has often been described as a play in which nothing happens. Two tramps, Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo), are waiting by a tree on a country road for Godot, whom they have never met and who may not even exist. They argue, make up, contemplate suicide, discuss passages from the Bible, and encounter Pozzo and Lucky, a master and slave. Near the end of the first act, a young boy comes with a message from Mr. Godot that he will not come today but will come tomorrow. In the second act, the action of the first act is essentially repeated, with a few changes: the tree now has leaves, Pozzo is blind and has Lucky on a shorter leash. Once again the boy comes and tells them Mr. Godot will not come today; he insists he has never met them before. The play concludes with a famous exchange:

Vladimir: Well, shall we go?

Estragon: Yes, let's go.

They do not move.

This superficial summary doesn't do justice to the play's impact. *Waiting for Godot* is widely considered one of the most important works of 20th-century drama. It revolutionized theatre in the 20th century and had a profound influence on generations of succeeding dramatists, including such renowned contemporary playwrights as Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard. After the appearance of *Waiting for Godot*, theatre was opened to possibilities that playwrights and audiences had never before imagined. (See *Theatre of the Absurd*, page 10.)

The play's simple (some might say non-existent) plot provides a framework for great thematic riches. Alfonso Sastre describes the play as "a death certificate for hope." He goes on: "This is precisely what is so fascinating about *Waiting for Godot*: that nothing happens. It is a lucid testimony of nothingness... (But) 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 before us the 'nothing happens' of our lives."¹

Though often described as tramps, Vladimir and Estragon are never explicitly called tramps in the script. They wear bowler hats, and many of their comic exchanges draw from vaudevillian routines. Ruby Cohn describes them as "a variant of the vaudeville pair of astute and obtuse comedian—a variant because Vladimir is not always astute, nor Estragon obtuse. As in vaudeville, one friend often echoes the other's words, changing the tone."² She and other critics have identified Estragon as representing the body and Vladimir the mind. "Thus, Gogo eats, sleeps and fears beating while onstage, whereas Didi ponders spiritual salvation. Didi is the more eloquent of the two, with Gogo sitting, leaning, limping, falling, i.e. seaking nearness to the ground. Gogo's stage business bears on his boots, and Didi's on his hat. Gogo wants Lucky to dance, but Didi desires him to think. Gogo stinks from his feet, and Didi from his mouth. Gogo is given to pantomime, while Didi leans towards rhetoric. Their very nicknames—*go go* and *dis dis* (from French *dire*)—summarize the polarity..."³

The two men contrast each other in numerous ways: Estragon is pessimistic, Vladimir more hopeful; Estragon is forgetful, Vladimir mindful; Estragon suspicious, Vladimir conciliatory. Their relationship has been described as a type of marriage (albeit a very dysfunctional one), and the two men can't seem to function alone; any attempt to part ways proves short-lived.

Certainly they have known each other long enough to develop regular habits. A. Alvarez says, “The subject of the play is how to pass the time, given the fact that the situation is hopeless,” and characterizes passing the time as Vladimir and Estragon’s “mutual obsession.”⁴ Consider the following exchange, which immediately follows Pozzo and Lucky’s exit in Act One:

Vladimir: That passed the time.
Estragon: It would have passed in any case.
Vladimir: Yes, but not so rapidly.

The two men explicitly acknowledge the rituals by which they combat boredom and silence throughout the second act. “The idea of *Godot* as a play in which ‘nothing happens, twice’ is understood by no one as sharply as the tramps,” Alvarez writes. “Nothingness is what they are fighting against and why they talk... The talk is kept going by simple device—instant forgetfulness... It is as though a great fog of boredom enveloped every event and every word the instant it occurs or is uttered. ...But perhaps Estragon’s forgetfulness is the cement binding their relationship together. He continually forgets, Vladimir continually reminds him; between them they pass the time.”⁵

Estragon is so forgetful that Vladimir must remind him no less than six times during the course of the play that they are waiting for Godot. Each time the exchange is virtually identical:

Estragon: Let’s go.
Vladimir: We can’t.
Estragon: Why not?
Vladimir: We’re waiting for Godot.
Estragon: Ah!

And who is Godot? A common critical assumption is that Godot is God, an uncaring deity who may or may not exist. Some critics point to the resemblance between the words “God” and “Godot,” although this does not exist in the French (where God translates as “Dieu”), the language in which Beckett originally wrote *Godot*. However, given that Beckett’s first language was English, he would certainly have been aware of the name’s suggestiveness.

Beckett rejected any symbolic interpretations of the play. “If I knew who Godot was,” said Beckett, “I would have said so in the play.” Still, the play is rife with references to God and to Christian stories and imagery. And consider the following passage:

Vladimir: I’m curious to hear what he [Godot] has to offer. Then we’ll take it or leave it.
Estragon: What exactly did we ask him for?
Vladimir: Were you not there?
Estragon: I can’t have been listening.
Vladimir: Oh... nothing very definite.
Estragon: A kind of prayer.
Vladimir: Precisely.
Estragon: A vague supplication.
Vladimir: Exactly.
Estragon: And what did he reply?
Vladimir: That he’d see.

Estragon: That he couldn't promise anything.
Vladimir: That he'd have to think it over.

They then go on to refer to the people and things Godot plans to consult before making a decision, which include "his friends, his agents, his correspondents, his books, his bank account." For every suggestion that Godot is divine, there is another detail that calls that interpretation into question.

Whoever Godot may be, Vladimir and Estragon seem eternally at his mercy, as they fill the days of waiting for his arrival. Alvarez characterizes the play as "the fullest statement of the problem that bedeviled Beckett, as it bedevils nearly everyone else: how do you get through life? His answer is simple and not encouraging: by force of habit, by going on despite boredom and pain, by talking, by not listening to the silence, absurdly and without hope."⁶ It's a bleak but brilliant outlook that has fascinated theatregoers for decades.

Works Cited:

1. Sastre, Alfonso. "Seven Notes on *Waiting for Godot*." In Cohn, Ruby, ed. *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
2. Cohn, Ruby. *Just Play: Beckett's Theatre*. Princeton University Press, 1980.
3. Cohn, Ruby. "Philosophical Fragments in the Works of Samuel Beckett." In Esslin, Martin, ed. *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice-Hall, 1965.
4. Alvarez, A. *Beckett*. 2nd Edition. London: Fontana Press, 1992.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.

Samuel Beckett Biography

Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin in 1906. He claimed to have been born on April 13, which was both Good Friday and Friday the 13th, but the date is disputed: his birth certificate puts the date a month later.

He studied Modern Languages at Trinity College, Dublin, and was the top student in his class; he was also a notable cricket player. In 1928, he was appointed to an exchange lectureship in Paris, where he met James Joyce, who proved a huge influence on Beckett's early fiction.

In 1930, Beckett became a Lecturer in French at Trinity College, Dublin. His first published work, a critical study of Marcel Proust (1931), solidified his academic reputation, but Beckett gave up teaching after two years to write full-time. He spent the next five years traveling in Germany, France, Ireland and England, supplementing his small income (an annuity from his late father) with literary journalism and translation.

He published his first collection of short fiction, *More Pricks than Kicks*, in 1934, and his first collection of poetry, *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates*, the following year. In 1937, he settled in Montparnasse in Paris in 1937 and met Suzanne Dumesnil, who became his companion and, much later, his wife. From the late 1930s to the early 1950s, Beckett published a series of novels, including *Murphy*, *Watt*, and the trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. In 1945, he began writing exclusively in French, subsequently translating his work into English.

In 1948-49, Beckett wrote *Waiting for Godot*, but was unable to find a producer or publisher for it until 1952, when it was published in Paris. *Godot* had its first French production in Paris in 1953, and was an immediate critical sensation. Its success made the reclusive Beckett an international figure, with productions in London and New York.

Other bleakly comic plays followed, notably *Endgame*, in which two of the characters speak from ashcans, and *Happy Days*, in which the heroine is buried up to her waist—and then her neck—in sand. Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969, which his wife Suzanne considered “a disaster.” Beckett, an intensely private person, avoided the presentation ceremony.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Beckett continued to write shorter, increasingly abstract plays: in *Play*, three characters speak from urns; in *Not I*, the only thing visible onstage is the actor's mouth as she delivers a fragmented monologue. Beckett also wrote radio and television scripts. The last work published in his lifetime was *Worstward Ho!*, a collection of prose. Beckett died in Paris on December 22, 1989, leaving behind a body of work that continues to fascinate critics.

Works by Samuel Beckett

Plays

Waiting for Godot

Endgame

Krapp's Last Tape

Happy Days

Eleutheria (Beckett's first play; never produced; published posthumously)

Short Plays

Act without Words I & II

As the Story Was Told

Eh Joe

Play

Come and Go

Breath

Not I

A Piece of Monologue

Footfalls

Rockaby

Ohio Impromptu

Catastrophe

Rough for Theatre I & II

That Time

What Where

Radio Plays

Words and Music

Embers

Cascando

Rough for Radio I & II

Fiction and Prose

More Pricks than Kicks (short stories)

Murphy

Mercier and Camier

Watt

Molloy

Malone Dies

The Unnamable

How It Is

Ill Seen Ill Said

Worstward Ho!

Company

Morris Panych ~ Director

Morris Panych is known throughout Canada, Britain and the US as a playwright and director. His first play, *Last Call-A Postnuclear Cabaret* (1982), began a career-long collaboration with designer Ken MacDonald which has resulted in numerous critically acclaimed productions, including *7 Stories*, *The History of Things to Come*, *Lawrence & Holloman*, *The Overcoat*, *Earshot*, and *Girl in the Goldfish Bowl* as well as directing *Susannah* and *The Threepenny Opera* for Vancouver Opera. He has received 14 Jessie Awards for acting and directing. He was awarded the Governor General's Award for Drama in 1994 for *The Ends of the Earth* and in 2004 for *Girl in the Goldfish Bowl*. As a director, he has won two Dora Mavor Moore awards for directing his own works *Girl in the Goldfish Bowl* (2002) and *The Overcoat* (1998), and he recently directed *Nothing Sacred* and *You Never Can Tell* at the Shaw Festival. His play *Auntie & Me (Vigil)* ran in London's West End at Wyndham's Theatre for four months and was nominated by What's On Theatre for best new comedy.

Here's what Panych had to say about directing *Waiting for Godot*:

How did you and this play come together? Is it something you've always wanted to direct?

The play has always been of interest to me, since my university days, when I was at UBC; I never saw *Godot* performed at that time, but I did see *Happy Days* (at the Waterfront with Ronny Gilbert) and a wonderful production of *Endgame* (at the old Spratt's Ark Theatre with Micky Maunsell in it). Both of those experiences, along with reading some of his fiction, piqued my interest. I have always been a surrealist and absurdist at heart, these plays appeal to that sensibility in me. I wanted the experience of "getting inside" of the play to feel how it is written, to feel its construction, so that it can positively influence my writing. Beckett, as all great writers are, is fearless. I want to experience that fearlessness of expression.

Have you seen many productions of Godot? What's the most memorable?

I have seen the play performed twice. My favorite of the two was a production in Toronto from the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. The other was at the Manchester Royal Exchange, and although I liked the acting, I didn't like seeing it performed in the round.

What are the most exciting things about directing this play? The most challenging?

I can't really answer that question, because I'm not directing it yet. I never anticipate (at least I try not to) what the problems of a production might be until they are right in front of me. I can make an educated guess that making the situations seem real will be a challenge, that staging it might be challenging in such a large theatre, the size of which can destroy intimate moments. But it is essential for my directing that I come to a project with as few preconceived ideas as possible, since the object of rehearsal is to create an intense atmosphere of creativity, in my view.

Has Beckett influenced your work as a writer? If yes, how?

There is no doubt the writing has influenced me; particularly, as I said, the sheer act of courage.

Anything else?

I haven't really got a whole lot more to say at this point. I am looking forward to it; I think it is of central importance as a piece of dramatic literature, and as a play. I really like my actors, and of course the designer, and I am thrilled to be able to help bring this work to such a place as the Stanley. I am also happy to aid in bringing a work to Vancouver that so many hear about but few ever see. This is influencing me in a way of probably not wanting to throw in too many tricks, although I am sure there will be a few signature moments.

Existentialist Thought

“We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?”

- Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*

Existentialism is a movement in twentieth-century philosophy and literature that centres on the individual and his or her relationship to the universe or God. One of the leading exponents of existentialist thought was French novelist and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. His philosophy is articulated in his novels, such as *No Exit* and *Nausea*, as well as in his more purely philosophical works (*Being and Nothingness*, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*).

Among the most famous and influential existentialist propositions is Sartre’s dictum, “existence precedes and rules essence,” which is generally taken to mean that *there is no pre-defined essence to humanity except that which we make for ourselves*. Since Sartrean existentialism does not acknowledge the existence of a god or of any other determining principle, human beings are free to do as they choose. Along with this freedom to choose, there is the responsibility for the consequences of one’s choices. With this responsibility comes a profound anguish or dread.

Existentialism attempts to describe our desire to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. Unfortunately, life might be without inherent meaning (existential atheists) or it might be without a meaning we can understand (existential theists). Either way, the human desires for logic and immortality are futile. We are forced to define our own meanings, knowing they might be temporary.

The existentialist label has been applied to writers, philosophers, visual artists and filmmakers; the movement flourished in the mid-20th century Europe. Nineteenth-century precursors to this school of thought include Some notable 19th century precursors include Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Other 20th-century notables include Albert Camus, Jean Genet, Andre Gide, Simone de Beauvoir, Franz Kafka, and Beckett.

Theatre of the Absurd

Beckett is considered one of the defining playwrights of Theatre of the Absurd, a style of theatre developed by a number of primarily European playwrights in the 1950s and 1960s. The term was coined by the critic Martin Esslin, who made it the title of a 1962 book on the subject. Esslin saw the work of these playwrights as giving artistic articulation to Albert Camus' philosophy that life is inherently without meaning, as illustrated in his work *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Absurdist theatre discards traditional plot, characters, and action to assault its audience with a disorienting experience. Time, place and identity are ambiguous and fluid. Characters often engage in seemingly meaningless or nonsensical dialogue or activities, and, as a result, the audience senses what it is like to live in a universe that doesn't "make sense." The result is a dreamlike or even nightmare-like mood in the audience. Beckett and others who adopted this style felt that this disoriented feeling was a more honest response to the post-World War II world than the traditional belief in a rationally ordered universe.

Waiting for Godot remains the most famous example of this form of drama, although Beckett disavowed the label. Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* is another classic of the form. Ionesco's characters sit and talk, repeating the obvious until it sounds like nonsense—underscoring the inadequacy of verbal communication. Ionesco drew much of his dialogue from phrasebooks for people learning English as a second language; the nonsensicality is frequently hilarious, but a strong undercurrent of despair is also present.

According to Esslin, the four defining playwrights of the movement are Ionesco, Beckett, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov. Other writers often associated with The Theatre of the Absurd include Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Fernando Arrabal, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee and Jean Tardieu. Contemporary playwrights, like Tom Stoppard and Harold Pinter, have also been deeply influenced by this style of writing; and many of its conventions have, in recent decades, been absorbed into mainstream theatre.

Suggested Activities

1. “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness,” says Nell in Beckett’s *Endgame*, and *Waiting for Godot* is subtitled “a tragicomedy.” What elements of the play are comic? What are tragic? How do they work together to make the play meaningful?
2. Beckett was notoriously particular about his stage directions. An American revival of *Endgame* prompted him to write, “Any production which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me.” Choose a section of *Waiting for Godot* and write a completely different set of stage directions, while keeping the dialogue the same. How does the meaning of the play change?
3. Consider the use of repetition and variation in both text and action in *Waiting for Godot*. How do these techniques contribute to the aesthetic and thematic success of the play?
4. Many critics have pointed out that the sequence of events that happens in the first act of *Waiting for Godot* is essentially repeated in the second. What would happen to your interpretation of the play if the order of the two acts were reversed?
5. Who or what do you think Godot represents? Why? Find excerpts from the text to justify your interpretation. Find excerpts from the script that challenge your interpretation.
6. *Waiting for Godot* has been adapted for film a number of times. Choose a film version and compare it with the play.

ATTENDING THE SHOW

Arriving at the Theatre

Please arrive at the theatre with ample time (45-60 minutes, depending on the size of your group) to pick up and distribute tickets and resolve any seating issues within your group. Please ensure chaperones arrive before or at the same time as students.

Buses may unload passengers in the loading zone in front of the theatre but engines must be turned off while doing so. Once passengers have exited the vehicle, please be advised that you must find alternate parking for the duration of the show.

Theatre Etiquette

In order to ensure an enjoyable show for all audience members, please impart some general theatre etiquette to students. They should keep in mind that this is not a movie theatre and different audience etiquette applies to a live theatre environment.

- The use of cameras or any type of recording equipment (including cellular phones) is strictly prohibited.
- It is important to turn off wristwatch alarms, cellular phones, and beepers for the duration of the show. If you are concerned about missing an emergency call, please leave your name or device and seat location with an usher and we will alert you if a call comes through.
- No outside food or drink is allowed in the theatre or lobby.
- Please finish refreshments purchased at the concession in the lobby before entering the theatre.
- We request that you refrain from eating or unwrapping candy in the theatre, as it is a distraction for others.
- Please be modest with your use of fragrances so that audience members with allergies can also enjoy the performance.
- Seating at The Stanley Theatre and the Granville Island Stage is assigned. Please sit in your assigned seat and respect the fact that other seats have been reserved for other patrons.
- If you must leave the theatre during the performance, you will not be seated again until the intermission or another appropriate interval.
- Please respect your fellow audience members and the performers by refraining from talking during the performance. Even whispers carry!
- If you have a complaint about another guest, please tell an usher or the Audience Services Manager rather than approaching the person yourself. We will be happy to address concerns on your behalf.

Resources and Related Reading

Biographies:

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Selected Resources on the Web:

www.littlebluelight.com

www.samuel-beckett.net

www.themodernword.com/beckett