WAITING FOR GODOT:
A CASEBOOK

“If I knew [what it meant], I would have said so in the play.”
— Samuel Beckett
Samuel (Barclay) Beckett (1906-1989)

Irish novelist and playwright, one of the great names of Absurd Theatre with Eugène Ionesco, although recent study regards Beckett as postmodernist. His plays are concerned with human suffering and survival, and his characters are struggling with meaninglessness and the world of the Nothing. Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969. In his writings for the theater Beckett showed influence of burlesque, vaudeville, the music hall, commedia dell’arte, and the silent-film style of such figures as Keaton and Chaplin.

“We all are born mad. Some remain so.” (from Waiting for Godot, 1952)

Samuel Beckett was born in Dublin into a prosperous Protestant family. His father, William Beckett Jr., was a surveyor. Beckett’s mother, Mary Roe, had worked as a nurse before marriage. He was educated at the Portora Royal School and Trinity College, Dublin, where he took a B.A. degree in 1927, having specialized in French and Italian. Beckett worked as a teacher in Belfast and lecturer in English at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. During this time he became a friend of James Joyce, taking dictation and copying down parts of what would eventually become Finnegans Wake (1939). He also translated a fragment of the book into French under Joyce’s supervision.

In 1931 Beckett returned to Dublin and received his M.A. in 1931. He taught French at Trinity College until 1932, when he resigned to devote his time entirely to writing. After his father died, Beckett received an annuity that enabled him to settle in London, where he underwent psychoanalysis (1935-36).

As a poet Beckett made his debut in 1930 with WHOROSCOPE, a ninety-eight-line poem accompanied by seventeen footnotes. In this dramatic monologue, the protagonist, Rene Descartes, waits for his morning omelet of well-aged eggs, while meditating on the obscurity of theological mysteries, the passage of time, and the approach of death. It was followed with a collection of essays, PROUST (1931), and novel MORE PRICKS THAN KICKS (1934). From 1933 to 1936 he lived in London. In 1938 he was hospitalized from a stab wound he had received from a pimp to whom he had refused to give money. [Beckett asked his assailant, “Why did you choose me?” The thug answered, “Je ne sais pas, monsieur” — “I don’t know, sir.” These words are spoken by the messenger boy in Godot.] Around this time he met Suzanne Dechevaux-Dumesnil, a piano student, whom he married in 1961. When Beckett won the Nobel Prize, Suzanne commented: “This is a catastrophe.” Beckett refused to attend the Nobel ceremony.

Beckett’s career as a novelist really began in 1938 with MURPHY, which depicted the protagonist’s inner struggle between his desires for his prostitute-mistress and for total escape into the darkness of mind. The conflict is resolved when he is atomized by a gas explosion.

When World War II broke out, Beckett was in Ireland, but he hastened to Paris and joined a Resistance network. Sought by the Nazis, he fled with Dechevaux-Dumesnil to
Southern France, where they remained in hiding in the village of Roussillon two and half years. Beckett worked as country laborer and wrote WATT, his second novel, which was published in 1953 and was the last of his novels written originally in English. It portrayed the futile search of Watt (What) for understanding in the household Mr. Knott (Not), who continually changes shapes.

After the war Beckett worked briefly with the Irish Red Cross in St. Lo in Normandy. Between 1946 and 1949 he produced the major prose narrative trilogy, MOLLOY, MALONE MEURT, and L’INNOMMABLE, which appeared in the early 1950s. The novels were written in French and subsequently translated into English with substantial changes. Beckett said that when he wrote in French it was easier to write “without style” - he did not try to be elegant. With the change of language Beckett escaped from everything with which he was familiar. These books reflected Beckett’s bitter realization that there is no escape from illusions and from the Cartesian compulsion to think, to try to solve insoluble mysteries. Beckett was obsessed by a desire to create what he called “a literature of the unword.” He waged a lifelong war on words, trying to yield the silence that underlines them.

WINNIE: Win! (Pause.) Oh this is a happy day, this will have been another happy day! (Pause.) After all. (Pause.) So far.
(from Happy Days, 1961)

EN ATTENDANT GODOT (Waiting for Godot), written in 1949 and published in English in 1954, brought Beckett international fame and established him as one of the leading names of the theater of the absurd. Beckett more or less admitted in a New York Post interview by Jerry Tallmer that the dialogue was based on conversations between Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil and himself in Roussillon. The tragi-comedy in two acts, opened at the Théâtre de Babylone on January 5, 1953, and made history. Two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, who call each other Gogo and Didi, meet near a bare tree on a country road. They wait for the promised arrival of Godot, whose name could refer to ‘God’ or also the French name for Charlie Chaplin, ‘Charlot’. To fill the boredom they try to recall their past, tell jokes, eat, and speculate about Godot. Pozzo, a bourgeois tyrant, and Lucky, his servant, appear briefly. Pozzo about Lucky: “He can’t think without his hat.” Godot sends word that he will not come that day but will surely come the next. In Act II Vladimir and and Estragon still wait, and Godot sends a promising message. The two men try to hang themselves and then declare their intention of leaving, but they have no energy to move. In Beckett’s philosophical show, there is no meaning without being. The very existence of Vladimir and Estragon is in doubt. Without Godot, their world do not have purpose, but suicide is not the solution to their existential dilemma.

VLADIMIR: We have to come back tomorrow.
ESTRAGO; What for?
VLADIMIR: To wait for Godot.
ESTRAGON: Ah! (Silence.) He didn’t come?
VLADIMIR: No.
After *Waiting for Godot* Beckett wrote *FIN DE PARTIE* (1957, *Endgame*) and a series of stage plays and brief pieces for the radio. *Endgame* developed further one of Beckett’s central themes, men in mutual dependence (Hamm and Clov occupy a room with Nagg and Nell who are in dustbins). “One day you’ll be blind, like me”, says Hamm. “You’ll be sitting there, a speck in the void, in the dark, for ever, like me.” In *KRAPP’S LAST TAPE* (1959) Beckett returned to his native language. The play depicted an old man sitting alone in his room. At night he listens to tape recordings from various periods of his past.

In several works Beckett used dark humor to establish distance to his grim subjects. In his last full-length novel, *COMMENT C’EST* (1961, *How It Is*) the protagonist crawls across the mud dragging a sack of canned food behind him. He overtakes another crawler who he tortures into speech and is left alone waiting to be overtaken himself by another crawler who will torture him in turn.

In the 1960s Beckett wrote for radio, theater, and television. During this decade, Billie Whitelaw became one of the most noted interpreter of Beckett’s works. Her performances include *Play, Not I*, and *Footfalls*. She also acted in such films as *Francy* (written by Anthony Shaffer, dir. by Alfred Hitchcock, 1972), *The Omen* (1976), *The Water Babies* (1979), *Maurice* (based on E. M. Forster’s posthumously published novel, dir. by James Ivory, 1987), and *The Krays* (1990). Alan Schneider staged most of the American premiers of Beckett’s plays. Schneider also directed the short Beckett movie *Film*, starring Buster Keaton.

In the 1970s appeared *MIRLITONNADES* (1978), a collection of short poems, *COMPANY* (1979) and *ALL STRANGE AWAY* (1979), which was performed in 1984 in New York. *CATASTROPHE* (1984) was written for Vaclav Havel and was about the interrogation of a dissident. In 1988, *Waiting for Godot*, was produced at Lincoln Center. Steve Martin, Robin Williams, and Bill Irwin played in the central roles.

Beckett lived on the rue St. Jacques. At the neighborhood cafe he met his friends, drank espresso, and smoke thin cigarettes. He also had a country house outside Paris. Beckett maintained his usual silence even when his eightieth birthday was celebrated in Paris and New York. At the age of seventy-six he said: “With diminished concentration, loss of memory, obscured intelligence... the more chance there is for saying something closest to what one really is. Even though everything seems inexpressible, there remains the need to express. A child need to make a sand castle even though it makes no sense. In old age, with only a few grains of sand, one has the greatest possibility.” (from *Playwrights at Work*, ed. by George Plimpton, 2000)

Beckett’s wife died in 1989. The author had moved just previously to a small nursing home, after falling in his apartment. Beckett lived in a barely furnished room, receiving visitors, writing until the end. From his television he watched tennis and soccer. His last book printed in his lifetime was *STIRRING STILL* (1989). Beckett died, following
respiratory problems, in a hospital on December 22, 1989. It is rumored that Beckett gave much of the Nobel prize money to needy artists.


Selected works:

* OUR EXAGMINATION ROUND HIS FACTIFICATION FOR INCAMINATION OF WORK IN PROGRESS, 1929
* WHOHOSCOPE, 1930
* PROUST, 1931
* MORE PRICKS THAN KICKS, 1934
* ECHO’S BONES, 1935
* MURPHY, 1938
* MOLLOY, 1951
* MALONE MEURT, 1951 - Malone Dies
* L’INNOMMABLE, 1953 - The Unnamable
* EN ATTENDANT GODOT, 1952 - Waiting for Godot
* WATT, 1953
* NOUVELLES ET TEXTES POUR RIEN, 1955
* FIN DE PARTIE, 1957 - Endgame
* THE UNNAMEABLE, 1958
* FROM AN ABANDONED WORK, 1958
* BRAM VAN VELDE, 1958
* ACTE SANS PAROLES, 1958
* KRAPP’S LAST TAPE, 1959
* ALL THAT FALL, 1959
* HAPPY DAYS, 1961
* COMMENT C’EST, 1961 - How it is
* WORDS AND MUSIC, 1962
* ACTE SANS PAROLES II, 1963
* CASCANDO, 1963
* PLAY, 1964
* IMAGINATION MORTE IMAGINEZ, 1965
* ASSEZ, 1966
* BING, 1966
* FILM, 1967
* VA ET VIENT, 1967 - *Come and Go*
* NO KNIFE, 1967
* EH JOE, 1967
* L’ISSUE, 1968
* SANS, 1968
* BREATHE, 1970
* PREMIER AMOUR, 1970
* SÉJOUR, 1970
* LE DÉPEUPLER, 1971
* BREATHE AND OTHER SHORT PLAYS, 1972
* ABANDONNE, 1972
* THE NORTH, 1972
* NOR I, 1973
* STILL, 1974
* MERCIER ET CAMIER, 1974
* ALL STRANGE AWAY, 1976
* GHOST TRIO, 1976
* THAT TIME, 1976
* ROUGH FOR THEATRE I, 1976
* ROUGH FOR RADIO I, 1976
* ROUGH FOR RADIO II, 1976
* FOR TO WEND YET AGAIN AND OTHER FIZZLES, 1976
* FOUR NOVELLAS, 1977
* ... BUT THE CLOUDS..., 1977
* MIRLITONNADES, 1978
* COMPANY, 1979
* ALL STRANGE AWAY, 1979
* NOHOW ON, 1981
* ROCKABY, 1982
* OHIO IMPROMPTU, 1982
* A PIECE OF MONOLOGUE, 1982
* MAL VU MAL DIT, 1982 – *Ill Seen Ill Said*
* WORSTWARD HO, 1983
* WHAT WHERE, 1983
* NACHT UND TRÄUME, 1983
* THE COLLECTER SHORTER PLAYS OF SAMUEL BECKETT, 1984
* QUAD, 1984
* CATASTROPHE, 1984
* COMPLETE DRAMATIC WORKS, 1986
* HOMMAGE À JACK B. YEATS, 1988
* TELEPLAYS, 1988
* LE MONDE ET LE PANTALON, 1989
* STIRRING STILL, 1989
* DREAM OF FAIR TO MIDDLING WOMEN, 1992
* NOHOW ON: THREE NOVELS, 1996

From Books and Writers website;
http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/beckett.htm
“When I was working on [his novel] Watt, I felt the need to create for a smaller space, one in which I had some control of where people stood or moved, above all, of a certain light. I wrote Waiting for Godot.”
— Samuel Beckett

Godot almighty

On the eve of its 50th anniversary production, Simon Callow traces the influence of Samuel Beckett's masterpiece

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(From left) Alan Dobie as Estragon, Richard Dormer as Lucky, Terence Rigby as Pozzo and James Laurenson as Vladimir rehearsing for Peter Hall's Waiting for Godot.
Photograph: Nobby Clark/ Getty

Now that its influence has begun to wane, and it ceases to remind us of its imitations, we can again see the most influential play of the second half of the 20th century for what it is. Waiting for Godot has lost none of its power to astonish and to move, but it no longer seems self-consciously experimental or obscure. With unerring economy and surgical precision, the play puts the human animal on stage in all his naked loneliness. Like the absolute masterpiece it is, it seems to speak directly to us, to our lives, to our situation, while at the same time appearing to belong to a distant, perhaps a non-existent, past.
In his subsequent plays, Beckett created a number of ineradicable images of the human condition, but it is his first performed play, which had its British premiere 50 years ago this year, that has joined the select stock of myths by which we understand ourselves.

That Samuel Beckett should have chosen to write a play at all is something of a mystery. “You ask me for my ideas on Waiting for Godot and my ideas on the theatre,” he wrote to Michel Polac on Godot's publication a year before it was produced. “I have no ideas on the theatre. I know nothing about it. I never go. That's reasonable. What is rather less so,” he added, “is . . . to write a play, and then to have no ideas on that either.”

Despite a youthful fondness for the art theatre in his native Dublin, and for the variety theatre anywhere, he was no buff, and his writing up to this point, inspired by the example of his literary masters, James Joyce and Marcel Proust, had consisted of fiercely difficult novels, poems and short stories. True, in 1930, he had written Whoroscope, a verse monologue in the voice of René Descartes, but it was never intended for performance.

After 1940, his work had undergone a radical change. If he was to write about impotence and ignorance, which he now conceived to be the essential experience of human life, he must, he said, abandon rhetoric and virtuosity. The English language having a natural propensity for both of these, he abandoned it, henceforward writing in clean and analytical French, swiftly writing three great novels, Molly, Malone Dies and The Unnameable in his adopted language, each of which is in the form of a soliloquy; none of them knew any immediate success and, indeed, it was almost impossible to find publishers for them. His decision to write for the theatre was, Lawrence Graver acutely notes, a part of this stripping away: in doing so, he eliminates the voice of the narrator.

It seems that it was also partially the lure of immediate returns, however modest, from the box office that suggested to the impoverished Beckett that he might write plays. His first was Eleutheria, a clumsy and over-ambitious experiment full of prefigurings of later Beckett - the hero is called Krapp — which he immediately followed with Godot, in which his touch is infallible.

The two plays were touted around unsuccessfully until Beckett's friend Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil took them to a progressive actor-director, Artaud’s associate Roger Blin, who plumped for Godot because it had only five actors and one tree. Characteristically, Beckett was delighted to find that Blin's current production was playing to half-empty houses: a guarantee of integrity.
It took two years for Blin to raise the money and get a theatre; finally, when the play opened in January 1953 at the nearly defunct Théâtre de Babylone in Montparnasse, it was greeted with a mixture of critical bewilderment, a certain amount of active audience hostility, partisan enthusiasm from some highly influential quarters (Jean Anouilh, the most successful French dramatist of the day, called it the most important theatrical premiere in 40 years) and straightforward delight from the paying audience, who attended the show in ever-growing numbers. It was word of mouth that swung it.

This curious paradox - the play's ability to frustrate intellectual criticism with its apparent elusiveness while gripping with a vice-like hold those who neither know nor particularly want to know what the play means - was repeated in London and on Broadway. It is a remarkable fact that both in America and in England, commercial managers were keen to do the play; the problem here was that none of the great actors approached would commit to it. Ralph Richardson was among them; he reproached himself for the rest of his life for turning down “the greatest play of my generation“.

Instead, the young Peter Hall cannily picked the play up, doing it at his Arts Theatre with a young and unstarry cast. The overnight reviews were dismissive, whereupon the great play agent Peggy Ramsay, using the guerrilla tactics for which she was famous, persuaded Hall to send Harold Hobson, the powerful critic of the Sunday Times, a copy of Beckett's novel Watt before he wrote his review. The result was a panegyric; business built and eventually a successful West End transfer ensued.

Of course, the play did not appeal to everyone: Peter Bull, the first English Pozzo, recollected a matinee at which an elderly lady penetratingly observed to her companion in the fairly wide open spaces of the stalls: “I wish the fat one would go. “ But, by instinctive genius, the tyro playwright had produced a work of absolute originality which was so sure-footed in its theatrical sense that despite defying all contemporary expectations, it communicated effortlessly with audiences, distilling its truth with the simplicity and profundity of a great poet who was also a sublime humourist.

Beckett's informed love of the great vaudevillians — especially Laurel and Hardy and Chaplin - enabled him to produce a work which stirs the heart of anyone who has been moved to laughter or tears by clowns, existing as they do in the tension between the dread of being alone and the horror of dependency. Eric Bentley, remarked of the first New York production that “highbrow writers have been enthusiastic about clowns and vaudeville for decades, but this impresses me as the first time that anything has successfully been done about the matter.” Of course, it
helps if the actors playing Vladimir and Estragon are great clowns or vaudevillians themselves. Bentley saw Bert Lahr - the Cowardly Lion from The Wizard of Oz - in the role of Estragon. "The perfect execution," he said, "by a lowbrow actor of a highbrow writer's intentions"; 20 years later, in London and Manchester, Max Wall performed the same service.

But such casting is a luxury; the play's opening image, of a tramp/clown in his bowler hat, tugging at his boots, with a solitary tree behind him, shortly joined by his identically attired comrade, creates the sort of deeply stirring emotion that the first sight of a great clown produces. These men - like all the great theatre images: Mother Courage with her cart; blind Lear; Falstaff wrapped around Doll Tearsheet — come from our dreams, from deep in our unconscious memories. We are them; they are us.

There is indeed a good case for thinking of the play as a dream play in its repetitiveness, its circularity, its sudden absurdities, its arbitrariness and savage eruptions. Estragon can barely keep awake, and sleep is a blessed state because the sleeper is oblivious of life's terrible reality: "He is sleeping. He knows nothing. Let him sleep on." The characters themselves seem to shift shape oneirically: out of the blue, Vladimir becomes an eloquent philosopher, quoting Latin tags; Estragon announces that "we are not caryatids"; for no known reason Pozzo is suddenly blind. Lucky suddenly dumb. An uneasy sense of unreality pervades everything: "You're sure you saw me?" Vladimir asks the boy. "You won't come back tomorrow and say you never saw me?" Just as in Strindberg's Dream Play, where Agnes"s repeated cries of "Poor, suffering mankind!" pierce the action, Didi and Gogo constantly cry out, apropos of nothing in particular, "What'll we do?! What'll we do?!"

But perhaps the dream is just the dream of theatre. Beckett's play is as conscious of its own theatricality as any by Brecht, by Pirandello, or — the comparison is inevitable and apt — Shakespeare. Theatrical imagery pervades the play. Vladimir, shocked at Pozzo's treatment of Lucky, accuses him of chucking him away “like a . . . like a banana skin”, to be stepped on, no doubt; when Pozzo delivers one of his lectures, he sprays his throat like an opera singer or a boulevard star; Vladimir and Estragon play-act to fill the void, doing old routines with hats; Vladimir takes on the role of Lucky, putting on his hat and walking up and down like a mannequin; when Estragon is terrified of being beaten up, Vladimir pushes him towards the auditorium: "There! Not a soul in sight! Off you go." Estragon recoils in horror, dreading the idea of becoming part of the audience, a fate worse than death.

Even the twilight itself is, according to Vladimir, "nearing the end of its repertory." Instantly, Beckett, in his first performed play, understood every
possibility of the theatre as metaphor. Slyly self-referential, he gives his tramps an exchange in which they say “Charming evening we're having.” “Unforgettable.” “And it’s not over.” “Apparently not.” “It’s only beginning.” “It’s awful.”

His characters are as much of a mystery to Beckett as they are to us; that gives them a great part of their fascination. They are archetypes, who have emerged, ancient and novel, from tradition. No doubt, as James Knowlson perceptively observes, Beckett coloured their situation with his own wartime experience of living in the sticks, in Roussillon, waiting, waiting for the war to end before life could begin again. No doubt Pozzo has qualities of the concentration camp capo. But the characters' existence is beyond history, beyond logic.

“I know no more about this play than anyone who just reads it attentively,” Beckett wrote. “I don't know what spirit I wrote it in. I know no more about the characters than what they say, what they do and what happens to them . . . everything I have been able to learn, I have shown. It’s not a great deal. But it’s enough for me, quite enough. I’d go so far as to say that I would have been content with less . . . Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo, Lucky, I have only been able to know them a little, from far off, out of a need to understand them. They owe you some explanations, perhaps. Let them unravel. Without me. Them and Me, we’re quits.”

http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,11710,1535466,00.html
CRITICAL RECEPTION

“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. . . .

Since Waiting for Godot is an allegory written in a heartless modern tone, a theatre-goer naturally ruminates 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 the drama is puzzling, the director and the actors play it as though they understand every line of it. The performance Herbert Berghof has staged against Louis Kennel's spare setting is triumphant in every respect. And Bert Lahr has never given a performance as glorious as his tatterdemalion Gogo, who seems to stand for all the stumbling, bewildered people of the earth who go on living without knowing why.

Although Waiting for Godot is an uneventful, maundering, loquacious drama, . . . 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. Theatregoers can rail at it, but they cannot ignore it. For Mr. Beckett is a valid writer.”

“[Beckett’s characters] just stand there with Existentialism on their faces.”
— George Oppenheim, Newsday, April 27 1956

“The language is flat and feeble”
— Philip Hope-Wallace, the Guardian, September 1955

“An evening of funny obscurity”
— the Telegraph, September 1955

“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.”
— British columnist Bernard Levin, September 1955

“[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.”
— Kenneth Tynan, September 1955

“It is more French than Irish, though there is a kinship with Synge’s tramps”
— Dublin critic, October 1955

“The scene — a country road, a tree — is still quite definitely France. . . . The Dublin voices strangely change the dramatic values of the piece as compared with the London presentation. Waiting for Godot seems much less moving here than it did across the water. Its tramps do not make the same impact nor arouse the same pity. They merely look and sound like two over-chatty wayfarers . . . We do not believe them when at the end they threaten to do away with themselves. We know that, as Dubliners, they are merely making talk and are too sensible to do anything so violent.”
— Dublin critic, October 1955

“We’re still waiting for Godot, and shall continue to wait. When the scenery gets too drab and the action too slow, we’ll call each other names and swear to part for ever — but then, there’s no place to go!”
— San Quentin prison journal, November 1957
CRITICAL RESPONSE FROM SCHOLARS

“Is this to say that no one misjudges it? Of course not. Godot is misjudged in every way, just as everyone misjudges his own misery. There is no lack of explanations, which are offered from every side, left and right, each more futile than the next.”

— Alain Robbe-Grillet, “Samuel Beckett or Presence on the Stage”

“How tempting . . . to jump to the facile conclusion that it is also a parable, and that all we have to do is fill in an agreed set of proper names, and lo, we have the whole thing on a plate. . . . Mr. Beckett is much too clever to have fashioned anything that can be solved by means of a crib. An allegory is supposed to be like life, but life is like Waiting for Godot, as it is like Alice in Wonderland. If it could be easily translated it would cease to have general application. If Mr. Beckett were to admit that Godot is the Almighty, his play would cease to be of such interest to those who do not concur with Lucky in his picture of the great quaquaquaqua. Nor should we be led astray by any similarities in names. The play was originally written in French, in which tongue the name of the maker of missed appointments bears no resemblance to Le Bon Dieu.

In short, Mr. Beckett is no simple arithmetician, and is not attempting to say anything so banal as the fact that two and two make four — or even five. His play is algebraic, in that its characters have the quality of X. And what X means, depends not upon him, but upon us. If you feel that the point of this life — the Intangible for which you may be waiting — is God, then indeed you may accept that solution as your X. If, on the other hand, you feel no such thing, then the play can still have a validity in other terms.

Herein lies the great importance of Mr. Beckett’s keeping his trap shut, so far as explanations are concerned, so leaving us free to draw our own conclusions, without any rumbles from the horse’s mouth. Sam having written a play of universal application, it might well be argued that any exegesis from him might turn out to be just as wrong as ours.”

“As for its historic destiny, it is summed up in Polish critic Jan Kott’s answer to a questioner who asked: ‘What is the place of Bertolt Brecht in your [i.e., the Polish] theater?’ He said, ‘We do him when we want Fantasy. When we want Realism, we do Waiting for Godot.’ This remark might also bring to mind the comment of the English poet and critic, Al Alvarez: ‘The real destructive nihilism acted out in the [extermination] camps was expressed artistically only in works like Beckett’s Endgame or Waiting for Godot, in which the naked unaccommodated man is reduced to the role of the helpless, hopeless, impotent comic, who talks and talks and talks in order to postpone for a while the silence of his own desolation.” — Eric Bentley, “The Talent of Samuel Beckett”

“According to Beckett the proliferation of words in the modern world does not necessarily imply communication between people. Often the so-called dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon degenerates into two monologues. The French mania for the conference, which we share, is beautifully caricatured in the public addresses of the atomizer-carrying Pozzo. Our surface etiquette and professed respect for others is met in Godot by the verbal and physical brutality of Pozzo toward Lucky. Estragon comments on the depth of our religious beliefs when he says, as Vladimir brings up the subject of salvation and damnation, “I’m going.” The myth of progress falls in Lucky’s speech, in which we learn that man, in spite of vitamins, sanitation, penicillin, and physical education, is in the process of shrinking. It is quite significant that this shrinking dates from the time of Voltaire who stands, here, for the century that believed too naively in the dream of human progress and probably, as well, for a time of surfaces, surfaces that Beckett is out to destroy. He reduces our delicacies to carrots, black radishes, and that staple of the starvation time under the German occupation, the lowly turnip. Our sex life leads to venereal disease; our laughter is silenced in pain; our fashionable clothes turn into rags, our lithe youth into stumbling old age, and our busy lives into a solitary waiting for death. We are not free but bound to each other and Godot; we are not equal but exist in a series of compartments in the social hierarchy; even our feelings of charity and fraternity are hesitant and fearful and inspired chiefly by our own selfish needs. As for our cult of sympathy, a quality that does little to remedy human suffering, Lucky’s angry kick is the best commentary.”

— Lawrence E. Harvey, “Art and the Existential in Waiting for Godot”

“How describe its initial impact to a generation that has grown up with Godot? Now that any serious drama seeks a mythic dimension; now that disjunction is the familiar rhetorical pattern of stage speech; now that tragic death almost always wears clown costume; now that the gestures of drama border on dance; now that expositions are quainter than soliloquies, and stage presence implies neither past now future—now it may be hard to recall that it was not always so. En attendant Godot brought the curtain down on King Ibsen. After nearly two decades, my bad memory clings to the warmth of that first Godot on a damp winter night. I had never heard of Beckett when I first saw Godot. I did not know my Bible well enough to recognize the scriptural kernel of the play. I had not read
Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* well enough to recognize the archetypical master-slave relationship. I was not even a devotee of silent comic films. In short, I came to *Godot* with no background; or with too much background of Broadway problem plays, Comédie Française classics, and verse drama wherever I could find it. And yet I knew almost at once that those two French-speaking tramps were me; more miserable, more lovable, more humorous, more desperate. But me.

Laughter did not ring out through the little Théâtre de Babylone, as in performances I saw later. Rather, chuckles faded into smiles or frowns. I must have been too full of feeling to notice the unusual stage silences through which I fidgeted in later productions. The élan of those aboriginal Beckett tramps carried me right over the silences. But Pozzo and Lucky repelled me, recalling a circus-master and his trained animal. Long a coward about physical pain, I could hardly look at Lucky’s neck, for fear of seeing his bruises, and I looked with distaste at Pozzo who supposedly caused the bruises I didn’t see. Lucky’s monologue was so terrible to watch, with Jean Martin’s spastic tics, that I thought *that* was the reason I could make no sense of it. I was ashamedly relieved when the other three characters shut Lucky up, and I was not sorry to see what I thought would be the last of him and his master. I can recall none of my intermission questions, but I can still see the act 2 leaves on the tree, like shreds of green crepe paper. And I caught the point of the dog-song at once. “That’s what the play is about,” I must have told myself, as I settled back familiarly into the patter of the two tramps. I was surprised by the return of Pozzo and Lucky, no more sympathetic when maimed and subdued. I was even more surprised at the callousness with which the friends treated the unfortunate couple. But I wasn’t surprised that Godot didn’t come. I was pretty sure that the end of the play was the end, but I was pleased to have this confirmed by scattered applause, in which I joined vigorously. I can’t remember the number of curtain calls, but there weren’t many.

How was *Godot* received by other audiences who did not know that it was to become a classic? It was a running gag in Miami, the American opening city, that taxis could be sure of fares at the end of act 1. Michael Myerberg advertised for (and did not find) an audience of 80,000 intellectuals in New York City. Moving response came from San Quentin prison, but Herbert Blau nearly had a mutiny in his company before he persuaded them to do the play that was so meaningful for prisoners. Several of its first directors returned for another round with *Godot*—Blin, Blau, Schneider. In 1966 Yugoslavian Miodrag Bulatovic wrote a sequel, *Godot Came*. Before the death of Berthold Brecht in 1956, he wanted to adapt Beckett’s play, and in 1971 Peter Palitsch, once Brecht’s student, produced a Brechtian *Godot*, replete with gestus and estrangement. Though the original reception of *Godot* was unexpectedly good, enthusiasm for it is still far from universal. In 1956 Bert Lahr-Gogo received a letter denouncing the play as ‘communistic, atheistic, and existential.’ In May 1971, an American college professor was forced to resign after directing *Godot*, which was declared “detrimental to the moral fibre of the college community.”

Beckett would be the last to defend *Godot*. ‘I began to write *Godot,*’ he told Colin Duckworth, ‘as a relaxation, to get away from the awful prose I was writing at that time.’ I have tried to show that if the prose of the trilogy is awful, it is in the sense of awe-inspiring, and yet I can guess at what Beckett meant. Malone was unable to stick to his spirit of system; doubt eroded each scene he tried to present. The Unamable was waiting
in the wings or the cellarage. In turning to dramatic form, Beckett may have been seeking an order that he could not honestly impose on his fiction. Later he was to tell Michael Haerdtel: ‘That’s the value of theater for me. You place on stage a little world with its own laws.’ But Beckett’s little stage worlds are emblematic of our big real world.

The seed of Godot is Luke’s account of the crucifixtion, as summarized by St. Augustine: “Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned.” The two thieves are Didi and Gogo; the two thieves are Pozzo and Lucky; the two thieves are you and me.”

— Ruby Cohn, “Waiting”
REMEMBRANCES OF GODOT

“If they don’t understand it, the hell with them.” — Samuel Beckett to Alan Schneider, when warned that the public might not comprehend his play

“For Roger Blin, the ideal cast would have been Chaplin as Didi, Keaton as Gogo and Laughton as Pozzo.” — Ruby Cohn, Waiting

“. . . As for the symbolism in the plays, you mustn’t show it. When I got hold of Godot I said to myself: ‘Oh, I see, I see, great! It’s a circus. We’ll have a bench in red velvet and a mattress and a kind of metal cross beam. And then we’ll unroll a canvas with the word sky written on it; and then the actors Estragon and Vladimir will come on carrying the tree in a box; and then they’ll come on in robes, rubbing powder on their feet in a corner so as not to slip on the waxed floor; then they’ll take off their robes and throw them into the wings, and the action will start.’

Well, I thought about that for three days. And then I said, ‘No, it’s impossible.’ If you start in a clown mode, a circus mode, in the second part there are things that clowns couldn’t say. But the circus element is there.” — Roger Blin, director of original French production

“There is one thing that disturbs me, that’s Estragon’s frock. I naturally asked Suzanne if it falls well. She tells me that he stops it halfway. He absolutely must not, nothing could be more wrong. He’s really too preoccupied at that moment, he doesn’t even realise it has fallen. As for the laughs that it is falling all the way might provide, to the great detriment of this touching final tableau, there is absolutely nothing to object to there, they would be on the same order as the preceding ones. The spirit of the play, to the extent that it has one, is that nothing is more grotesque than the tragic, and it must be expressed up to the end, and above all at the end. I have many other reasons for not wanting to skip this stage business, but I’ll spare you them. Just be kind enough to restore it as indicated in the text, and as we had agreed upon in rehearsal, and have the trousers fall completely around his ankles. This must seem stupid to you, but for me it is essential.” — Samuel Beckett, in a letter to Roger Blin, January 1953

During a London rehearsal of Godot, Beckett is alleged to have told one of the actors that he was not boring the spectators enough.

“[I]t so happened that the other actors were still busy with another production, so I was alone with [Beckett, who directed this production] right away at the first rehearsal. Beckett said, ‘Under the circumstances, we’ll start right in with this sentence, if that’s all right with you.’ Well, I was flabbergasted. I thought I’d at least have some time to acclimatise myself. And he went on to divide the sentence this way: ‘From here to there it’s the indifference of Heaven, and from here to there it’s the shrinking of Man, seen
spiritually I mean, and from here to there it’s the petrifaction.’ In my preparatory work, I’d already chosen signposts for myself, and it happened that they coincided exactly with what Beckett said. Naturally, that gave me a pretty good feeling, and I thought, ‘Aha, I already know what he means.’

Since I knew in good time that I’d be playing the rôle, I learned the sentence early and ‘carried it around’ with me. And I wondered, why is he called Lucky, the happy one? He walks on the rope, must carry constantly, is tormented, why happy? Well, it’s because he’s the only one of the four who has a concrete task, or who presents himself with a task. He exists because he does something. Pozzo says, ‘In reality he carries like a pig. It’s not his job.’ But he does it. That is a declaration of existence. And one naturally extrapolates from that and asks, why do we live? Why are we here, anyway? You’d die if you have no raison d’être, so Lucky clings to his task. . . . A lot of people said at the time [about Lucky’s speech], ‘Great, you needn’t be afraid if you “go up”. Just say anything, then.’ But I thought, there’s no period or comma in the sentence—it’s written without punctuation—so if you say one syllable differently, one small word, leave out an ‘and’, it’s like a nuclear explosion. That’s the problem with this sentence: you can’t peel off the tiniest piece or the whole awesome structure collapses.” — Klaus Herm (Lucky in Beckett’s 1975 Berlin production)

“In 1955, I was twenty-four years old and a very lucky young man. Eighteen months out of university, I had been given a theatre (The Arts, in Great Newport Street) and asked 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 started off with The Lesson, the first Ionesco in Britain) and classics on a shoe-string seemed too good to be true.

That year, I had another bit of luck. Waiting for Godot landed on my desk. In early summer, when I was busy directing O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra, I found a script waiting for me one morning. Donald Albery, a leading West End impresario, wrote that he could get no actor to be in Samuel Beckett's play, and no director would stage it. As I probably knew, it was running in a small theatre in Paris; he wondered if I would like to do the English world premiere. I had heard of the play -just - but I hadn't seen it. I had also faintly heard of Samuel Beckett - at that time, only a few people knew his work; there were apparently novels and a connection with James Joyce.

I read the play and responded warmly. 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 I did think it blindingly original, turning the undramatic (waiting and doubt and uncertainty) into tense action. It was exquisitely constructed and very funny. It took the cross-talk tradition of the music hall (celebrated by Laurel and Hardy and still powerful in Morecombe and Wise) and made it poetry. Above all, it had great metaphorical strength: it made the theatre a place that provoked the imagination again. I decided to do it. . . .

Rehearsals were, I suspect, more enjoyable for me than for the anxious actors. . . .
By the time we opened, I was confident that we had something special; the first night therefore came as a shock. There were, as they say, cheers and counter cheers. On the line ‘Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes. It’s awful;’ a loud and very English voice said ‘Hear! Hear!’ I had just been signed up by a powerful talent agency, the Music Corporation of America. Backstage after the performance, my brand new agent met me, his face puce with rage. He pointed out that my career was just taking off. I had hopes of a West End play, even a play on Broadway, ‘And then:’ he observed tersely ‘you go and do a thing like this.’

The critics the next morning were of the same opinion as my agent. Bafflement and derision were everywhere. . . . The owner of The Arts Theatre, Campbell Williams, warned me that the play would have to close on Saturday. I begged him to wait for the Sunday notices. Perhaps Godot would come - though it frankly didn't seem very likely.

Happily, he did - and in the person of Harold Hobson, the critic of The Sunday Times. He found himself (in a marvelously perceptive review) on the road to Damascus. 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.’

To my amazement, Godot mania gripped London. It was discussed, praised, analysed and abused; cartoons were drawn about it, Panorama discussed it, Malcolm Muggeridge derided it and the great character actor Robert Morley wrote to Peter Bull [who played Pozzo], ‘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.’

" . . . why the cast was not given medals of gallantry in the face of the enemy is inexplicable. Waves of hostility came whirling over the footlights, and the mass exodus, which was to form such a feature of the run of the piece, started quite soon after the curtain had risen. The audible groans were also fair disconcerting. By the time I had to make my first entrance (twenty minutes after the rise of the curtain) I realized that I was in for a sticky evening . . ." — British actor Peter Bull

“Doing Godot in Miami was, as Bert Lahr himself said, like doing Giselle in Roseland. . . it was — in the words of the trade — a spectacular flop. The opening night audience in Miami, at best not too sophisticated or attuned to this type of material and at worst totally misled by advertising billing the play as ‘the laugh sensation of two continents,’ walked out in droves. And the so-called reviewers not only could not make heads or tails of the play but accused us of pulling some sort of hoax on them. Although by the second week we were reaching — and holding — a small but devoted audience, the initial reception in Miami discouraged producer Myerberg, demoralized the cast, and led to the abandonment of the production. Later in the season, Myerberg changed his mind and brought Godot to Broadway, where it had critical success; but the only member of the
original company to go along was Bert Lahr, who gave substantially the same performance he had given in Miami . . .” — Alan Schneider, director of original American production at the Coconut Grove Theater in Miami (later replaced for the Broadway production by director Herbert Berghof)

“When the girlies didn’t show and nobody gets shot, it was like all the air left the huge room. All of a sudden wham! here comes Pozzo and Lucky, or translated a mean sonofabitch with a whip and a hungry look driving his slave. It was a unique moment, as most of us had never seen live theatre. Instantly there was identification with ‘Lucky’.” He’s packing the bosses bags like a good powder monkey. And look man, the dude’s got that sucker at the end of his cane. Suddenly there was no confusion about the Warden’s role and my own convict dog boy’s ass. I too had a lifetime rope around my neck. Everybody in the audience reacted. Waiting, the play was about waiting!”

— Rick Cluchey, prisoner at San Quentin, after seeing Herbert Blau’s San Francisco production staged for the inmates
INFLUENCES ON GODOT: SAMUEL BECKETT’S EXPERIENCES IN THE FRENCH RESISTANCE

It has been noted by more than one person that knew Beckett personally that aspects of his writing were heavily influenced by his experiences with the French Resistance during World War II. Professor Hugh Kenner of Johns Hopkins University met Beckett in 1957 and learned much about those war years:

“Sam was a typical Irish university bum until the war changed him when he joined the French Resistance. He is, incidentally, the only Nobel laureate listed in Wisden's — the Bible of cricket — because he played for Trinity in the 1920s. But Godot is a play about the Resistance; the characters have code names, are regularly beaten by the Gestapo, and continually await their assignments. It's worth remembering the same methods were used by the Fenians in the 1850s: the notion that if you didn't know very much, not many people can betray you. If you are compelled to talk, you can't satisfy them -- that's strictly Resistance. Sam belonged to a cell; a member talked; and one night as he and his wife were arriving home, they were warned the police were in their apartment. Instead, they went to the railway station and the south of France.

He was scarred by the Resistance. When you place three actors in jars and the spotlight rests on one after another until the spot gets bored, you are depicting a Gestapo interrogation. It’s ultrarealism.”

Becket biographer James Knowlson noted in his book Damned to Fame: the Life of Samuel Beckett that in the first draft of Godot one of the tramps was given the Jewish name Levi and there were specific references to the region of France where he was in hiding from the Nazis.

In the following excerpt, Marjorie Perloff gives the specifics of Beckett’s war experience:

From: “In Love with Hiding”: Samuel Beckett’s War
By Marjorie Perloff


Beckett might have sat out World War II in his native Ireland, but as he later quipped in an interview with Israel Shenker, “I preferred France in war to Ireland at peace.” By 1941 he had joined the Resistance in Paris, largely as a response to the arrest of such Jewish literary friends as his old Trinity College classmate Alfred Péron. As a neutral Irishman
who spoke fluent French, Beckett was in great demand; he and his companion (later wife) Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil joined Gloria, a reseau de renseignement or information network, whose main—and dangerous—job was to translate documents about Axis troop movements and relay them to Allied headquarters in London. The coding of messages and transfer of microfilm hidden in matchboxes, toothpaste tubes and so on has interesting implications for Beckettian dialogue that I discuss in Wittgenstein’s Ladder: the so-called “cut-out” system, for example, whereby each cell member reported to the next in line, often unknown to him or herself, surely stands behind particular sequences in Watt, which Beckett was writing in the early forties.

When Gloria was betrayed by a double agent in August 1942, the Becketts had to flee Paris immediately, heading for the Unoccupied Zone in the south of France. It took them, sometimes alone, sometimes with other refugees, almost six weeks to cross into the free zone at Chalon-sur-Saône in Burgundy; they made their way by hiding in barns and sheds and sometimes behind trees, inside haystacks and down in ditches. As Beckett later told his biographer James Knowlson:

I can remember waiting in a barn (there were ten of us) until it got dark, then being led by a passeur over streams; we could see a German sentinel in the moonlight. Then I remember passing a French post on the other side of the line. The Germans were on the road so we went across fields. Some of the girls were taken over in the boot of a car.

In another six weeks or so the Becketts reached Roussillon, a village so named for its location on a plateau of red rock, some 40 km. from Avignon, which was to become their home for the next three years. Much as the 700km journey on foot had been hazardous and painful, Beckett’s biographers agree that the stay in Roussillon was in many ways even worse: a mixture of boredom and danger. As an alien identifiable by his Irish accent, Beckett had to avoid Nazi patrols coming through the area by hiding, sometimes for days at a time, in the fields and woods on the outskirts of Roussillon. Then too, as Stan Gontarski points out, “they never knew when they heard someone approach whether it would be a Nazi patrol or friendly villagers.” Indeed, the uniqueness of the French war experience, as compared to the English or German, was that there was no sure way of differentiating between friend and enemy. Collaborator and Resistance fighter, after all, looked alike.

Waiting (the original title of Waiting for Godot) became, in any case, the central activity. At first the Becketts lived at the village hotel where bedbugs and mice were everywhere, and where they had to go outdoors, not only for the privy but also for drinking water. The fields where they searched for potatoes were often seas of mud. For a time, Beckett worked for a farmer named Aude and picked grapes for another farmer named Bonnelly, who is mentioned by name in En Attendant Godot:

VLADIMIR: Pourtant nous avons été ensemble dans le Vaucluse, j’en mettrais ma main au feu. Nous avons fait les vendanges, tiens, chez un nommé Bonnelly, à Roussillon.
Beckett and Suzanne finally got their own house, but it was unheated and the winter of ’43 was by all accounts especially cold and dreary. The village, enticing as it could be in the spring in its mountain setting of pine, oak, and olive (and after the war, a tourist attraction because of its prehistoric caves) was claustrophobic in winter, indeed a kind of prison.

Here Beckett spent the better part of three years. He spoke only French at this time, of course, there being almost no English speakers in residence. At war’s end, the Becketts made their way back to Paris, and the Irishman continued on, by way of a bombed-out London, to Dublin to see his mother for the first time in five years. Then, since his status in France was that of resident alien, Beckett was not permitted to return to his home in Paris where conditions were terrible—large-scale starvation—and hence he volunteered to help the Irish Red Cross build a hospital for the Normandy town of Saint-Lô, which had been devastated by the Allies en route from Cherbourg to Paris [figure 1]. In August 1945, Beckett wrote to Thomas McGreevy:

St.-Lô is just a heap of rubble, la Capitale des Ruines as they call it in France. Of 2600 buildings 2000 completely wiped out. . . . It all happened in the night of the 5th to 6th of June [1944]. It has been raining hard for the last few days and the place is a sea of mud. What it will be like in winter is hard to imagine. No lodging of course of any kind. . . . since last Wednesday we have been with a local doctor in the town . . . all 3 in one small room and Alan [Beckett’s friend Alan Thompson] and I sharing a bed!

“It was in St.-Lô,” Knowlson, who reproduces McGreevy’s letter, tells us, “that [Beckett] witnessed real devastation and misery . . . people in desperate need of food and clothing, yet clinging desperately to life.” One of Beckett’s jobs was to exterminate the rats in the maternity and children’s ward. The building job took six months to accomplish; in January 1946 Beckett finally returned to Paris to begin what is usually referred to as “the siege in the room” where he wrote the works that were to make him famous. Six years had gone by since France had fallen to the Germans in 1940.

The first writings of 1946 were a radio script for Radio Erin called “The Capital of the Ruins” and the stories included in Nouvelles et textes pour rien. The radio script begins on a low-key, factual note: Beckett describes the linoleum flooring and the “walls and ceiling of the operating theatre . . . sheeted in aluminum of aeronautic origin,” and he comments on the obstacles encountered in the building process. On the last page we read, “Saint-Lô was bombed out of existence in one night. German prisoners of war and casual labourers attracted by the relative food-plenty, but soon discouraged by housing conditions, continue, two years after the liberation, to clear away the debris, literally by
hand.” The new hospital was designed to be provisional. But “provisional,” Beckett remarks, “is not the term it was, in this universe become provisional.”

That last sentence explodes the script’s air of reasonable reportage. What is the meaning of the word “provisional” when the universe itself has become provisional? It is this question that gives impetus to the 1946 Stories and to Godot. Hugh Kenner, the first (and for a long time the only) Beckett critic to have paid attention to the actual donnée of Godot, describes the play this way in his Reader’s Guide to Samuel Beckett:

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 (“We’re not from these parts, Sir.”) 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 the 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—displaced persons when everyone was displaced, anonymous ordinary people for whom every day renewed the dispersal of meaning—have kept appointments not knowing whom they were to meet, with men who did not show up and may have had good reasons for not showing up, or bad, or may even have been taken; how often must life itself not have turned on the skill with which overconspicuous strangers did nothing as inconspicuously as possible, awaiting a rendezvous, put off by perhaps unreliable messengers, and making do with quotidian ignorance in the principal working convention of the Resistance, which was to let no one know any more than he had to.

We can easily see why a Pozzo would be unnerving. His every gesture is Prussian. 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, so far from special that millions of lives were saturated in its desperate reagents, and yet no spectator ever thinks of it. Instead the play is ascribed to one man’s gloomy view of life, which is like crediting him with having invented a good deal of modern history.

The “literal situation” was especially marked in the play’s first version in which, as Gontarski, who has studied the manuscripts, notes, Estragon was called Levi. Even Kenner, however, feels it important to note that “Beckett saw the need of keeping thoughts of the Occupation from being too accessible because of the necessity to keep the play from being ‘about’ an event that time has long since absorbed.” These words date from 1973; now, thirty years and a few wars later, we may be less nonchalant than Kenner about that absorption.
A GODOT GLOSSARY

ACT I

“Hope deferred maketh the something sick. Who said that?”: Proverbs 13:12 — Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but when longing is fulfilled, it is a tree of life.

Two thieves: Luke’s account of the crucifixion, as summarized by St. Augustine: “Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned.”

The story of the Englishman in the brothel: An Englishman, having drunk a little more than usual, goes to a brothel. The bawd asks him if he wants a fair one, a dark one, or a red-haired one. The Englishman replies that he wants a boy. Shocked, the bawd threatens to call a policeman, whereupon the Englishman pleads: ‘O no, they’re too gritty.’

Turnips and carrots: Turnips were one of the few vegetables that were plentiful during World War II, which is why Didi only has one carrot in his pocket.

“So I took a knook”: A knook is a jester.

Briar, dudeen, Kapp and Peterson: words describing Pozzo’s pipe. A dudeen, specifically, is a short-stemmed clay pipe. Kapp and Peterson is a fashionable Dublin company that has made pipes for over 150 years.

Effulgence: splendor.

The Net: Lucky’s dance. In the French original, Vladimir identifies Lucky’s dance as ‘la mort du lampiste’, ‘the death of the lamplighter’, rather than ‘the Hard Stool’. In pre-Christian cosmologies the term was associated with the retributive powers of older, harsher gods. The Old Testament Yahweh; the Sumerian gods, Tammuz and Shamash; the Hindu god, Varuna; the early Greek sky gods — all are Gods of the net. . . . But in the East the net is a figure for the cosmos — the ‘Net of Heaven.’ . . . Lao-tzu’s verses (Tao Te Ching, LXXIII) might serve as an epitaph for Godot: . . . The net of heaven is cast wide. Though the mesh is not fine, yet nothing ever slips through.” — John J. Sheedy in his essay, “The Net”.

Pulverizer: word Pozzo uses for his atomizer.

Puncher and Wattman: a ticket puncher and driver of a streetcar.

Qua: in the capacity or character of.
“... who from the heights of apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown.”: *Apathia*: lack of feeling; *Athambia*: imperturbability; *Aphasia*: lack of speech. “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 distractions 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.” — Kristin Morrison, “The Ironic Function of Storytelling,” from *Readings on Waiting for Godot*.

**The Divine Miranda**: the virtuous Miranda of *The Tempest*, which could be equated with the Church’s worship of the Virgin Mary.

**Acacacacademy of Anthropopopometry of Essy-in-Possy of Testew and Cunard**: describes Lucky’s contempt for academics by using scatalogical plays on words. Essy-in-Possy: esse means ‘to be’ and posse means ‘to be able’. In this case, *not* to be able to measure man. Testew and Cunard: plays on words for the sexual organs.

**Fartov and Belcher**: means what you think.

**Conating camogie**: sports. Camogie is hurling played by women.

**Feckham Peckham Fulham Clapham**: Peckham, Fulham and Clapham are all boroughs of London. Feckham is a nice way of saying ‘fuck ‘em’.

**Bishop Berkeley**: (pronounced BARK-lee) Irish-born Anglican Bishop and philosopher. He is best known for his motto, *esse est percipi*, “to be is to be perceived”. The theory states that individuals can only directly know sensations and ideas of objects, not abstractions such as “matter”.

**Connemara**: In 1947 a Connemara farmer found a fully intact skeleton clad in Viking armor. Connemara was known as a place of extreme poverty.

**Steinweg and Peterman**: German names meaning “stone way” and “stone man”. There is much alluding to stones in Lucky’s speech. Connemara has a stony landscape and Lucky refers to the “earth abode of stones” four times.

**suc-ce-da-ne-a**: pronounced suck-see-DAY-nee-a. One who, or that which, succeeds to the place of another; that which is used for something else; a substitute; specifically (Med.), a remedy used as a substitute for another.

**Half-hunter**: In pocket watch lexicon a “hunter” or “savonette” type watche usually has a front cover. In auction descriptions, you may find the abbreviation HC for “hunting
case.” If the front cover has a circular opening that allows one to see the position of the hands (although the numerals are not visible) without opening the case, the watch is called a demi-savonnette or a half-hunter.

**Deadbeat escapement:** The escapement is the mechanism between the train and the regulating organ, i.e., the balance or pendulum. In a clock with deadbeat escapement a pendulum continues to swing even after the teeth have locked, and with the verge and the anchor, this reverses the direction of the gear train. The traditional form of gears in clocks only works well going forwards so the recoil introduces high loads into the system, leading to friction and wear. In Graham's escapement the pallets are curved about the same axis that they turn on: there is no recoil, so the locking face of the pallets provide no impulse. The impulse is provided by putting an angled plane surface on the end of the pallet so that as the escape wheel is released its tooth pushes along this wedge, impulsing the pendulum. This was the first escapement to separate the locking and impulse actions of the escapement. The escapement was adopted widely for precision and high-quality clocks. For an animated illustration of deadbeat escapement go to the following web page: http://www.nawcc.org/museum/nwcm/galleries/beeler/77_42_2.htm

**Fob:** A small pocket at the front waistline of a man's trousers or in the front of a vest, used especially to hold a watch. Also, A short chain or ribbon attached to a pocket watch and worn hanging in front of the vest or waist.

**“I mind the goats, Sir” . . . “He minds the sheep, Sir”:** This is a twist on the parable of the sheep and the goats, from Matthew 25:32-41: “And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats. And he shall set the sheep on his right hand but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.’ . . . Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire
prepared for the devil and his angels.’’ Beckett has the keeper of the goats (or the
damned) treated kindly by Godot, while the keeper of the sheep (or the saved) is
punished.

ACT II

The Macon Country: (pronounced Mah-CAWN) In the Burgundy area of France,
Macon is a lively and busy port city located at the west bank of the Saone river. The
area’s vineyards are terraced into the vast Maconnais upland, and produce the renowned
Maconnais vintages, including whites such as Macon-Villages, Chardonnay, and Pouilly-
Fuisse, as well as wonderful reds made from the Gamay grape.

The Cackon country: a pun on the French word caca, a child’s word for excrement.

“Let’s just do the tree, for the balance”: A yoga position where one stand on one leg,
puts the foot on the standing leg and holds the arms in a prayer position.
**Caryatid**: (pronounced ca – ree – A – tid) A supporting column sculptured in the form of a draped female figure.

**Memoria praeteritorum bonorum**: (pronounced me-MAW-ree-ah pray-the-ri-TAW-room baw-NAW-room) The past is always recalled to be good.

“**Blind Fortune**”: Fortune was commonly represented as a blind woman, sometimes beautiful, sometimes ugly, turning a wheel on which perched foolish men at various stages in the cycle of prosperity. Fortune's victims are here portrayed as asses in this illustration from a translation of Boccaccio’s *The Fates of Illustrious Men*.

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**Theatre of the Absurd**

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

“The Theatre of the Absurd” or “Le Théâtre de l'Absurde” is a phrase used in reference to particular plays written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, as well as to the style of theatre which has evolved from their work. 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*. The 'Theatre of the Absurd' is thought to have its origins in Nanoism, nonsense poetry and avant-garde art of the 1920's - 1930's. Despite its critics, this genre of theatre achieved popularity when World War II highlighted the essential precariousness of human life. The expression “Theater of the Absurd” has been criticized by some writers, and one also finds the expressions “Anti-Theater” and “New Theater”.
According to Martin Esslin, the four defining playwrights of the movement are Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov, although each of these writers has entirely unique preoccupations and techniques that go beyond the term “absurd”. Other writers often associated with this group include Tom Stoppard, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Fernando Arrabal, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee and Jean Tardieu. Playwrights who served as an inspiration to the movement include Alfred Jarry, Luigi Pirandello, Stanislaw Witkiewicz, Guillaume Apollinaire, the surrealists and many more.

The “Absurd” or “New Theater” movement was, in its origin, a distinctly Paris-based (and left bank) avant-garde phenomenon tied to extremely small theaters in the Quartier Latin; the movement only gained international prominence over time.

In practice, The Theatre of the Absurd departs from realistic characters, situations and all of the associated theatrical conventions. Time, place and identity are ambiguous and fluid, and even basic causality frequently breaks down. Meaningless plots, repetitive or nonsensical dialogue and dramatic non-sequiturs are often used to create dream-like, or even nightmare-like moods.

**Existentialism**
From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Existentialism is a philosophical movement that views human existence as having a set of underlying themes and characteristics, such as anxiety, dread, freedom, awareness of death, and consciousness of existing. Existentialism is also an outlook, or a perspective, on life that pursues the question of the meaning of life or the meaning of existence. It is this question that is seen as being of paramount importance, above both scientific and other philosophical pursuits.

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the “father of existentialism,” asserted that "truth is subjectivity": human beings can be understood only from the inside, in terms of their lived and experienced reality and dilemmas, not from the outside, in terms of a biological, psychological, or other scientific theory of human nature. Existentialism tends to view human beings as subjects in an indifferent, objective, often ambiguous, and “absurd” universe in which meaning is not provided by the natural order, but rather can be created, however provisionally and unstably, by human beings’ actions and interpretations.
ON THE NAMES USED IN *GODOT*

**Godot:** We might as well start with the biggest question in the play: Who is Godot and what does that name mean? A common explanation was that Godot was God, with the French suffix ‘-ot’ added to be used as a diminutive, such as the French use when calling Charlie Chaplin ‘Charlot’, thus making the name possibly mean ‘a small god’. However, since the play was written originally in French, the name bears no resemblance to the French word for God — *Dieu*.

Lois Gordon, in her book *Reading Godot*, offers quite a few explanations of the etymology of the name:

Of a dozen common French words and phrases that begin with *g-o-d*, nearly every one has some teasing connection to the story and theme of Beckett’s play, *Godillot* is French for ‘hobnailed boot’ or ‘shapeless old shoe’; and *godasses* are ‘military boots’. *Godailler* is ‘to go pub-crawling’, and *goddam* is French slang for ‘an Englishman’ . . . *Goder* means ‘to pucker’, or ‘gather cloth into folds’, but it is also slang for having an erection. *Godiller*, the word for ‘a scull’, or ‘small racing boat’, has a vulgar connotation: ‘to fornicate’. And *godenot* is ‘a juggler’s puppet’, ‘a joker’, a ‘misshapen little man’.

Closest in sound is *godet*, the name of a popular cognac, but also the French word for ‘a wooden bowl’ or ‘mug’, which in different usages refers to the bowl of a pipe (smoked by Pozzo who carelessly refers to Godot as Godet) and a small glass of wine (which washes down Pozzo’s chicken). In the French original, Vladimir identifies Lucky’s dance as ‘la mort du lampiste’, ‘the death of the lamplighter’; and as Frederick Busi has helpfully noted, a lamplighter is the person charged with keeping town lights illuminated, a job which used to require small receptacles called *godets* filled with combustible materials and wicks. Inevitably, as Colin Duckworth has concluded, the receptacle called a *godet* might in the broad sense hold any meaning put into it.

Richard Gilman remarks that “the search for the identity of the Godot of the title, as a way of uncovering the play’s meaning, . . . became a minor critical industry in France and elsewhere. Richard Coe and others have found the source of the name in a well-known French racing cyclist, Godeau; Eric Bentley has pointed out the existence of an obscure play of Balzac’s in which someone named Godeaux is expected throughout the evening but never arrives.”

It was Roger Blin, the director of the original production, that said that Beckett told him the name comes from the French slang word for boot — *godillot*. It was chosen simply because of the importance in the play of boots and shoes as physical properties.

The name Godot is pronounced in Britain and Ireland with the emphasis on the first syllable (i.e. ‘GOH-doh’ or ‘GAW-doh’); in North America it is usually pronounced with an emphasis on the second syllable (i.e. ‘guh-DOH’). Beckett himself said the emphasis should be on the first syllable, and that the North American pronunciation is a
mistake. Etymologically the name is French, which places equal emphasis on both syllables – ‘goh-doh’.

**Vladimir:** A Russian name meaning “ruler of the world.”

**Estragon:** French for the herb tarragon.

**Pozzo:** Italian for ‘well’ or ‘hole’.

**Lucky:** It has been noted by scholars that this ironic choice of name would more likely to be used for a household pet. Could, however, this name be a play on the French word *laquais*, meaning lackey? Beckett originally wanted him dressed as a railway porter but accepted Roger Blin’s suggestions.

**THE NAMES AND THEIR NUMERICAL VALUES**

The very names of the four main characters indicate their pairing: Pozzo and Lucky contain two syllables and five letters each; Estragon and Vladimir contain three syllables and eight letters each; but they address one another only by nicknames—Gogo and Didi, childish four-letter words composed of repeated monosyllables. Even the fifth character, the nameless boy, has a brother.

According to scholar Michael Worton, “Beckett was fascinated by mathematics (hence his love of chess) and especially by the paradoxes that can be made by (mis-)using mathematical principles. He knew that in mathematical theory the passage from 0 to 1 marks a major and real change of state, and that the passage from 1 to 2 implies the possibility of infinity, so two acts were enough to suggest that Vladimir and Estragon and Pozzo and Lucky and the boy will go on meeting in increasingly reduced physical and mental circumstances but will never *not* meet again.”
ON CROSS-TALKING

VLADIMIR: You're right, we’re inexhaustible.
ESTRAGON: It's so we won't think.
VLADIMIR: We have that excuse.
ESTRAGON: It's so we won't hear.
VLADIMIR: We have our reasons.
ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.
VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.
ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
VLADIMIR: Like sand.
ESTRAGON: Like leaves. Silence.
VLADIMIR: They all speak at once.
ESTRAGON: Each one to itself. Silence.
VLADIMIR: Rather they whisper.
ESTRAGON: They rustle.
VLADIMIR: They murmur. Silence.

Cross-talking, which is used quite a bit between Didi and Gogo, comes from the music hall tradition, most specifically from Nat Mills and Bobbie MacCauley, a husband-and-wife team popular in variety shows of the 1930s. Beckett was quite familiar with their routines:

NAT: Listen — you can talk, but at the right time.
BOBBIE: Well, who’s talking now?
NAT: Me.
BOBBIE: Oh no — I’m ‘me’.
NAT: No — I’m ‘me’.
BOBBIE: Then who am I?
NAT: You’re ‘you’.
BOBBIE: I can’t be you — I must be me!
NAT: You’re only ‘me’ to you! I’m ‘me’ to me and I’m ‘you’ to you.
BOBBIE: What relation does that make me to Aunt Polly?
NAT: Aunt Polly my foot!
BOBBIE: Oh — I’ve got two.
NAT: Two what?
BOBBIE: Two feet. Give me one more and I’ll have a yard.
NAT: You’ve got hold of the wrong end of the stick.
BOBBIE: What stick?
NAT: When I say, ‘You’ve got hold of the wrong end of the stick’, I don’t mean there is a stick, I mean there isn’t a stick!
BOBBIE: You’re talking through your hat.
NAT: What hat?
BOBBIE: When I say, ‘You’re talking through your hat’, I don’t mean there is a hat, I mean there isn’t a hat!
NAT: Oh, let’s — get — on — with — it.
That is not to say that this form of comedy was solely used in English music hall. Vaudeville comedians used it as well. Here is a variation done in the film *Stormy Weather* by Flournoy Miller and Johnny Lee. In the routine, called “Bum Garage”, the two are dressed in modified tramp costumes and wear blackface. They are in a jalopy, which Lee is driving, and it breaks down as soon as they hit the stage:

**LEE:** I just had it worked on.
**MILLER:** Well who worked on it?
**LEE:** The man who’s got the garage around . . .
**MILLER:** Well he ain’t no good. The man you want’s the one what’s worked on [starts to point offstage] . . .
**LEE:** I had him [pause]. He’s the one that ruined it.

. . .

**LEE:** I worked with her [Miller’s girlfriend’s] brother, and one day on the job, the first thing I know’d . . .
**MILLER:** That was your fault. Now what you should have done was . . .
**LEE** (emphatically): I did!
**MILLER** (enthusiastically): You see dat?
**LEE** (uncertain): Uh huh?
**MILLER:** Now dat’s why I like talking to you . . .
**LEE** (smiling): Yeah.
**MILLER:** Cause you an’ I can seem to ‘gree with one another.

The men later make a date to go for a drive:

**MILLER:** That’ll be great! Can you make it on . . .
**LEE:** Nah. I’ll be busy den.
**MILLER:** Well, when can you make it?
**LEE:** Less see . . . The best day for me . . .
**MILLER:** That suits me. What hour?
**LEE:** Any time between . . .
**MILLER:** That’s a little early, but we’ll be there.
**LEE:** Alright, I’ll be seeing you.

[Lee attempts to get back in the car, resulting in a series of small explosions, and Miller utters a nonsense salutation and exits, leaving Lee standing alone next to a heap of wreckage.]

**LEE** (mournfully): Bum garage . . . Bum garage . . . [curtain].
“For Roger Blin, the ideal cast would have been Chaplin as Didi, Keaton as Gogo and Laughton as Pozzo.” —Ruby Cohn, Waiting

As for Lucky, he combines elements of the downtrodden Irish peasant and the French laquais. (Beckett originally wanted him dressed as a railway porter but accepted Roger Blin’s suggestions.)
—from a review of a December 1999 Belfast production, London Daily Telegraph

. . . As for the symbolism in the plays, you mustn’t show it. When I got hold of Godot I said to myself: "Oh, I see, I see, great! It’s a circus. We’ll have a bench in red velvet and a mattress and a kind of metal cross beam. And then we’ll unroll a canvas with the word sky written on it; and then the actors Estragon and Vladimir will come on carrying the tree in a box; and then they’ll come on in robes, rubbing powder on their feet in a corner so as not to slip on the waxed floor; then they’ll take off their robes and throw them into the wings, and the action will start."

Well, I thought about that for three days. And then I said, "No, it’s impossible." If you start in a clown mode, a circus mode, in the second part there are things that clowns couldn’t say. But the circus element is there. That’s why Estragon and Vladimir have red and white blotches in their makeup. Lucky and Pozzo, too. But 90 percent of the directors of Godot have fallen into that trap. I retracted it later. I said: "No, nothing. A tree, a little tree." And I have friends who used a tree when they staged it in Geneva. They cut down a real little tree, and they stuck it onstage. That’s the least realistic presentation I’ve seen. It’s not really important in the end. But yes, it is at the start. In Poland they did a whole thing using folk imagery—loads of meaningless things—and they all said to me, "But it’s a circus." No, no, at least not for me.

In the first place, with Beckett everything is more or less gray, and then, had he wanted it to take place in a circus, he would have written: "The action takes place in a circus. Vladimir and Estragon . . . go round in a ring. There is a stand with a tree in it, and so on." He would have written it.

You said that for you Lucky is the most evil.

I mean he’s the character who is lucid at times and who is in a state of total servitude. But he unburdens himself in the end. He finally manages to unburden himself through words, in a speech that is in no way without meaning, a speech that has a very, very real but broken meaning. You can follow the whole speech in relation to hygiene, in relation to a number of things. Lucky’s speech is actually very clear. But it’s broken up, like a puzzle.

Gerry McCarthy  Emptying the theatre: On Directing the Plays of Samuel Beckett
Beckett’s letter to Roger Blin, January 1953:

There is one thing that disturbs me, that’s Estragon’s frock. I naturally asked Suzanne if it falls well. She tells me that he stops it halfway. He absolutely must not, nothing could be more wrong. He’s really too preoccupied at that moment, he doesn’t even realise it has fallen. As for the laughs that it is falling all the way might provide, to the great detriment of this touching final tableau, there is absolutely nothing to object to there, they would be on the same order as the preceding ones. The spirit of the play, to the extent that it has one, is that nothing is more grotesque than the tragic, and it must be expressed up to the end, and above all at the end. I have many other reasons for not wanting to skip this stage business, but I’ll spare you them. Just be kind enough to restore it as indicated in the text, and as we had agreed upon in rehearsal, and have the trousers fall completely around his ankles. This must seem stupid to you, but for me it is essential.

During a London rehearsal of Godot, Beckett is alleged to have told one of the actors that he was not boring the spectators enough.

John Fletcher  Action and Play in Beckett's Theatre
from Frederick J Marker and Christopher Innes  Modernism in European Drama: Ibsen, Strindberg, Pirandello, Beckett

Klaus Herm (Lucky in Beckett’s Berlin production)

In his rehearsal diary for Godot, Walter Asmus wrote that Beckett started out by reading Lucky’s whole monologue aloud, very precisely. Was that, for example, okay with you? That doesn’t always happen with directors.

Yes, it does sometimes. But here it so happened that the other actors were still busy with another production, so I was alone with him right away at the first rehearsal. Beckett said, "Under the circumstances, we’ll start right in with this sentence, if that’s all right with you." Well, I was flabbergasted. I thought I’d at least have some time to acclimatise myself. And he went on to divide the sentence this way: "From here to there it’s the indifference of Heaven, and from here to there it’s the shrinking of Man, seen spiritually I mean, and from here to there it’s the petrifaction." In my preparatory work, I’d already chosen signposts for myself, and it happened that they coincided exactly with what Beckett said. Naturally, that gave me a pretty good feeling, and I thought, "Aha, I already know what he means."

Can you say a bit more about your approach to Lucky? What work did you do on your own?
Since I knew in good time that I’d be playing the rôle, I learned the sentence early and "carried it around" with me. And I wondered, why is he called Lucky, the happy one? He walks on the rope, must carry constantly, is tormented, why happy? Well, it’s because he’s the only one of the four who has a concrete task, or who presents himself with a task. He exists because he does something. Pozzo says, "In reality he carries like a pig. It’s not his job." But he does it. That is a declaration of existence. And one naturally extrapolates from that and asks, why do we live? Why are we here, anyway? You’d die if you have no raison d’être, so Lucky clings to his task. That’s why he kicks Estragon when he wants to take the bag away; he’s defending his task.

You speak Lucky’s monologue much slower and more sensibly than most other actors. Why is that?

Because Lucky wants to express himself clearly. That’s his desperate attempt, now that he is obliged to talk: to clear something up. And when one wants to put a thing especially clearly, one invariably ends up rambling without end. So he’s always trying to reorganise, concentrate on the next point. His aphorisms overwhelm him; he’s overrun by them. A lot of people said at the time, "Great, you needn’t be afraid if you ‘go up’. Just say anything, then." But I thought, there’s no period or comma in the sentence—it’s written without punctuation—so if you say one syllable differently, one small word, leave out an "and", it’s like a nuclear explosion. That’s the problem with this sentence: you can’t peel off the tiniest piece or the whole awesome structure collapses.

— Jonathan Kalb Beckett in Performance

Jan Jönson

[During] his first meeting with one of the officers at San Quentin. "What is the name of the play you are doing?" the officer wanted to know.

"The name of the play is Waiting for Godot."

"Waiting for what?"

"Godot."

Perplexed, the officer turned to two big guards standing nearby. "Do I know him?" he inquired of them. And turning back toward Jönson: "Is Godot coming? IS he in the play?"

"No, he’s not coming."

"Then who in the hell are you waiting for? Should everybody wait here?"

"After the performance, I was cleaning up, and the guards came and put the men up against the wall and made them strip. I saw these guys standing there totally naked, and it was a shock. I started to scream, ‘What are you doing?’"
"I saw this squad come with plastic gloves and start looking all over their bodies for drugs. And on top of each of the men’s clothes was the red rose. Spoon was standing there, and when the guy came up behind him he said, ‘You have my body, but not my soul.’"
—Lois Oppenheim Directing Beckett

“Friendship is a function of [man’s] cowardice . . . the negation of that irremediable solitude to which every human being is condemned. Friendship implies an almost piteous acceptance of face values. Friendship is a social expedient, like upholstery or the distribution of garbage buckets.” — Beckett writing on Proust

In Proust [Beckett] asserts a key idea behind his own work: the best part of ourselves remains hidden during periods of waking consciousness and returns only in privileged moments, such as when “we escape into the spacious annex of mental alienation, in sleep or the rare dispensation of waking madness.” There can be little doubt that, from Beckett’s point of view at least, Vladimir’s friendly gesture of encouraging Estragon to calm down after his nightmare is really a way of depriving him of a gift that should be positively valued.

Beckett’s variations on the initial argument, first moving it to a different location then transforming it into reconciliation, exemplify the two distinct ways in which he uses the repetitions of different to organize the scenic space of Godot. On the one hand, an area of the stage is the repeated setting of episodes having different connotations; each later use of this space acquires significance by recalling early episodes for which it served as the setting. On the other hand, the same gestures or dialogue is moved to different parts of the stage, in which case the effect of sameness is counterbalanced by the change of place.

— Thomas Cousineau, Waiting for Godot: Form in Movement
NOTABLE PRODUCTIONS

WORLD PREMIERE
THÉÂTRE DE BABYLONE, PARIS, 1953,
DIRECTED BY ROGER BLIN
Jean Martin (Lucky), Lucien Raimbourg (Vladimir), Pierre Latour (Estragon), Roger Blin (Pozzo)

FIRST BRITISH PRODUCTION:
THE ARTS THEATRE, LONDON, AUGUST 1955,
DIRECTED BY PETER HALL
Paul Daneman (Vladimir), Peter Woodthrope (Estragon), Peter Bull (Pozzo),
Timothy Batesman (Lucky)

FIRST IRISH PRODUCTION:
PIKE THEATRE, DUBLIN, OCTOBER 1955
DIRECTED BY ALAN SIMPSON
Dermot Kelly (Vladimir), Austin Byrne (Estragon), Nigel FitzGerald (Pozzo), Donal Donnelly (Lucky)

FIRST AMERICAN PRODUCTION
JANUARY 3, 1956
COCONUT GROVE PLAYHOUSE, MIAMI
DIRECTED BY ALAN SCHNEIDER
Bert Lahr (Estragon), Tom Ewell (Vladimir), Jack Smart (Pozzo), Charles Weidman (Lucky).

Billed as “the laugh sensation of two continents/”

FIRST BROADWAY PRODUCTION
April 19, 1956
John Golden Theater
Directed by Herbert Berghoff
Bert Lahr (Estragon), E.G. Marshall (Vladimir), Kurt Kaznar (Pozzo), Alvin Epstein (Lucky)

Learning from his mistakes in Miami, producer Michael Myerberg takes out ad asking for “70,000 intellectuals” to come see this play.

BROADWAY REVIVAL
January 21, 1957 (ran six performances)
Ethel Barrymore Theater
Directed by Herbert Berghof
Earle Hyman (Vladimir), Mantan Moreland (Estragon), Rex Ingram (Pozzo), Geoffrey Holder (Lucky)
WEST BERLIN 1975
SCHILLER THEATER
DIRECTED BY SAMUEL BECKETT
Cast: Horst Bollman (Estrago), Stephan Wigger (Vladimir), Klaus Herm (Lucky), Carl Radatz (Pozzo),

This production is both praised for choreographic precision and criticized for lack of spontaneity and vitality.

CAPE TOWN PRODUCTION, 1980
DIRECTED BY DONALD HOWARTH
John Kani (Vladimir), Winston Ntshona (Estragon), Bill Flynn (Pozzo), Peter Piccolo (Lucky).

Didi and Gogo were black actors and Pozzo and Lucky were white actors. The simple fact of the casting, at the height of apartheid in South Africa, made a powerful statement about the relationships between black and white. Winston Ntshona played Estragon as a simple, unemployed worker, while John Kani gave Vladimir a much more intellectual air, carrying a large black Bible and wearing a pair of steel-framed spectacles. Pozzo was a bulky figure, dressed to suggest a Boer farmer, and Lucky was a frail, bent slave, treated with extreme contempt by his master.

HAIFA PRODUCTION, 1984
DIRECTED BY ILA RONEN
Yussef Abu-Varda (Vladimir), Murham Koury (Estragon), Ilan Toren (Pozzo), Doron Tavory (Lucky).

Set on a construction site (Palestinians were the majority of the people working in construction, and were bussed each days from the Arab territories into Israeli territories to work). Done in Arabic and Hebrew with Didi, Gogo, and Lucky as Palestinians and Pozzo as an Israeli contractor.

LINCOLN CENTER THEATER, NOVEMBER 1984
DIRECTED BY MIKE NICHOLS
Steve Martin (Vladimir), Robin Williams (Estragon), F. Murray Abraham (Pozzo), Bill Irwin (Lucky), Boy (Lukas Haas)

Brought Godot to the nuclear age, set in the middle of a Nevada desert, surrounded by dust, old tires, and bleached bones. Using three performers known for their comedy, one of which was a McArthur award-winning clown, was highly effective. Abraham’s Pozzo was played as a Mafioso opposite Irwin’s tick-ridden Lucky.

PRODUCTION IN SARAJEVO, 1993
DIRECTED BY SUSAN SONTAG

Because of the great interest in the theatrical community in this production, Sontag cast multiple “couples” as Didi and Gogo: two males, two females, and a male and female couple. Her Pozzo was Ines Fanˇcovi´c, described by Sontag as ‘a stout older woman wearing a large broad-brimmed black hat, who sat silently, imperiously, in the corner of the room’, while her Lucky was Admir (‘Arko’) Glamoˇcak, ‘a gaunt, lithe man of thirty. Because of the lack of electricity rehearsals were held in the dark with candlelight and flashlights. Sontag commented on Lucky’s ‘Think’, for example: ‘I wanted Arko to deliver Beckett’s aria about divine apathy and indifference, about a heartless, petrifying world, as if it made perfect sense. Which it does, especially in Sarajevo.’
INFLUENCES

ALBERTO GIACOMETTI

PAUL CÉZANNE
“Friendship is a function of [man’s] cowardice . . . the negation of that irremediable solitude to which every human being is condemned. Friendship implies an almost piteous acceptance of face values. Friendship is a social expedient, like upholstery or the distribution of garbage buckets.” — Beckett writing on Proust

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SAMUEL BECKETT CHRONOLOGY
From *Waiting for Godot: Form in Movement*, by Thomas Cousineau

1906  Samuel Beckett born on Good Friday, 13 April, in Dublin into a respectable Protestant family. Admits to a happy childhood, but with qualification that he “had little talent for happiness.” Studies French as a child, but without any special interest.

1920  Sent to Portora School, one of the most prestigious Protestant boarding schools in Ireland. Shows more interest in sports, especially cricket, than in academic subjects.

1923  Enrolls in Trinity College, Dublin. Comes under the influence of Rudmose-Brown, professor of French and Italian, which becomes his special area of academic interest. Introduced to Dublin literary life; admires Sean O’Case but prefers continental drama.

1926  First visit to France, a bicycle tour of the Loire Valley. Parents find him increasingly a “stranger in their midst.” Studies German, whose precision and rigidity he admires.

1928  Graduates first in his class in modern languages from Trinity; awarded two-year teaching appointment at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. Introduced to James Joyce’s circle: “Joyce had a moral effect on me; he made me realize artistic integrity.”

1929  Writes, at Joyce’s urging, an essay on *Finnegan’s Wake*. Studies Schopenhauer and Descartes, who are to leave a lasting imprint on his work. His first short story, “assumption,” published in *transition*.

1930  His poem on Descartes and time, *Whoroscope*, wins literary prize. Commissioned to write book on Marcel Proust’s novel, *Remembrances of Things Past*. Reads and admires Jules Renard because “He always speak so well about chewing and pissing and that kind of thing.” Awarded appointment to the faculty at Trinity College but dislikes teaching intensely: “I did not enjoy all those women mooning about.” Confinement in Ireland leads to psychosomatic illnesses, which will be alleviated only by return to Paris.

1931  Begins writing an unfinished novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*.

1933  Life in Dublin complicated by illness and difficulty of deciding on a life’s work. Death of Peggy Sinclair, a cousin to whom he had once been romantically attached. Father dies of a heart attack. Turned down for a position as assistant curator at the National Gallery. Considers going to Russia to study cinema with Sergei Eisenstein, who does not, however, reply to letter offering his services.

1936  Considers becoming a commercial airline pilot: “I do not feel like spending the rest of my life writing books that no one will read. It was not as though I wanted to write them.” Begins meeting people in Dublin theatrical world. *Murphy*, first completed novel, accepted for publication.

1937  Goes to Germany to look at paintings; notices that Nazis have removed “decadent” modern paintings from museums. Returns to Paris in the last week of October: “I came back to Paris and lived in a hotel for some time and then decided to settle down and make my life here.” Hospitalized after being stabbed by an underworld character, he is visited by a young pianist whom he will later marry.

1939  On vacation in Dublin, he returns immediately to Paris after hearing of France’s declaration of war against Germany.

1940- Becomes politically involved because he “was so outraged by the Nazis, particularly by their treatment of the Jews, that I could not remain inactive.”

1942  Pursued by the Gestapo for his Resistance activities, he escapes with his wife to the south of France.

1945  Awarded Croix de Guerre: “A man of great courage . . . he continued his work well past the limit of personal security. Betrayed to the Germans, from 1943 he was forced to live clandestinely and with great difficulty.” Writes *Mercier and Camier*, a novella containing characters and situations resembling those of *Godot*.

1946  Begins what he calls “the siege in the room,” his most productive creative period, during which he will write the trilogy of novels (*Molly, Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*) and *Waiting for Godot*. Surprised by words that spring directly from his unconscious, he has little memory of writing them.

1948  Writes *Waiting for Godot*, in French, from 9 October to 29 January 1949, “as a relaxation, to get away from the awful prose I was writing at the time.” Finds writing for the stage a “marvelous, liberating diversion,” much like playing chess.

1950  His wife brings manuscript of *Godot* to Roger Blin, who begins trying to arrange its production.

1951  Publication of *Molly* and *Malone Dies*. Writes nothing new, devoting himself to obtaining a production for *Godot*.

1953  Opening of *Godot* on 5 January at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris. Publication of its English translation.
1954  Begins writing *Endgame*; completed in 1956, first performed in 1957.

1955  Goes to see London production of *Godot* with Alan Schneider, who is preparing Miami opening: disturbed by clutter, lack of simplicity. Irritated by misunderstandings to which play is subjected: “Why do people have to complicate a thing so simple I can’t make out.”

1956  American opening of *Godot* in Miami before an audience misled by its billing as “the laugh sensation of two continents,” Opens more successfully in New York.

1957  Herbert Blau directs *Godot* at San Quentin Prison; reputedly obscure and intellectual play draws perceptive and enthusiastic reviews from inmates. “All That Fall,” his first radio lay, broadcast on the BBC. *Act Without Words I*, a mime with music by Beckett’s cousin, John Beckett, performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London.

1958  *Krapp’s Last Tape*, his first postwar writing in English, performed at the Royal Court Theatre.

1959  First broadcast of “Embers,” a radio play, on the BBC.

1960  Writes last novel, *How It Is*. Goes to Dublin to receive and honorary degree from Trinity College.


1962  Irish actor Jack MacGowran performs one-man show *End of Day*; Beckett tells him that in cases where multiple meanings are possible, he should choose the most obvious; he is very tired of “symbol-hunting scholars” who seemed to be breathing down his neck all the time.

1963  Goes to Germany to assist production of *Play*; is so impressed by professionalism and technical perfection of director, actors, and crew that he decides to direct all of his plays that are planned for Germany. Wants to return to his important work, that is, prose fiction. Goes to the United States to help Alan Schneider with production of *Film*; finds New York less terrifying than he had expected.

1965  French production of his first television play, *Eh Joe*.

1967  Directs *Endgame* at the Schiller Theater. Will return to the same theater in 1969 to direct *Krapp’s Last Tape* and in 1971 for *Happy Days*.

1969  On vacation in Tunisia, learns that he has been awarded the Nobel Prize for “a body of work that, in new forms of fiction and the theatre, has transmuted the destitution of modern man into his exaltation.” Refuses to be represented in Sweden by the Irish ambassador.
1974  Rejects request from Estelle Parsons and Shelley Winters to perform in *Godot*, insisting that the roles must be played by men.

1975  Begins rehearsing *Godot* at the Schiller Theater in late December. This production is both praised for choreographic precision and criticized for lack of spontaneity and vitality. Direct Pierre Chabert in *Krapp's Last Tape* and Madeleine Renaud in *Not I* at the Théâtre d’Orsay in Paris.

1979  Directs *Happy Days* at the Royal Court Theatre. Writes *A Piece of Monologue* for English actor David Warrilow; first performed in New York in 1980.

1980  Writes *Rockaby*, directed by Alan Schneider and performed by the English actress Billie Whitelaw the following year in Buffalo, New York.

1981  Writes *Ohio Impromptu*, performed the same year at a Beckett symposium sponsored by Ohio State University.

1982  *Catastrophe*, dedicated to Czech dissident playwright Vaclav Havel, performed at the Avignon Festival.

1988  Supervises production of *Godot* codirected by Walter Asmus, his assistant at the Schiller Theater, and performed by actors from the San Quentin Drama Workshop, founded by ex-convict Rick Cluchey, who saw the first San Quentin production as an inmate.

1989  Suzanne dies 17 July, and Beckett dies 22 December.