



Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival



*Waiting for
Godot*

The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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Waiting for Godot

Contents

Information on the Play

Synopsis	4
About the Playwright	5

Scholarly Articles on the Play

A Play in Which Nothing Happens Twice	8
A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Grave	10

Synopsis: *Waiting for Godot*

In all fairness, *Waiting for Godot* can hardly be summarized. One wag did it this way: “And it came to pass, nothing came to pass.” Cliff’s Notes, that erstwhile Bible of literary students, offers this:

ACT I:

- (1) Vladimir and Estragon Alone
- (2) Arrival of Pozzo and Lucky: Lucky’s Speech
- (3) Departure of Pozzo and Lucky: Vladimir and Estragon Alone
- (4) Arrival of Boy Messenger
- (5) Departure of Boy Messenger: Vladimir and Estragon Alone

ACT II:

- (1) Vladimir and Estragon Alone
- (2) Arrival of Pozzo and Lucky
- (3) Departure of Pozzo and Lucky: Vladimir and Estragon Alone
- (4) Arrival of Boy Messenger
- (5) Departure of Boy Messenger: Vladimir and Estragon Alone

In conclusion, *Waiting for Godot* can hardly be summarized; only outlined.

The plot—i.e., the sequence of events—is not at issue here. What matters is what the director does with the plot—and setting, and lighting, and characters, and costuming. The main issue may be futility; it may also be security based upon the predictability of daily existence. Or it may be farcical hilarity engendered by the uselessness of unthinking repetitiousness in a world of brilliant, but unrealized, possibilities. Or anything in between.

In a black-and-white world of ragged tramps, on the assumption (denied by Beckett) that Godot signifies God, this play has been called the ultimate existential tragedy—if such is possible. (In the language of the play, French, God—or Dieu—in no way resembles Godot. It is only coincidental that English shows a connection.) In a colorful world of unimaginative repetitions, it may be boring or pitiful or hilarious, depending upon the characters’ attitudes of “that’s all there is, folks,” “shouldn’t there be more,” or “ain’t it grand?” Or in a magical world of potentially unlimited possibilities, it might be the quiet exhilaration of enduring transitory, though incomprehensible, trials.

A major obstacle to agreement on what is happening and why, is the nebulous identity of Godot. Some critics say “an entity”; others settle for an abstraction. Some identify him with God; others insist on a-sexual, a-physical, a-spiritual idea-ness. Beckett himself said if he had known who or what constituted Godot, he would have said so.

About the Playwright: Samuel Beckett

By James Mills

From *Midsummer Magazine*, 1990

Samuel Beckett claimed to have been born on Good Friday, April 13, 1906. Originally known as Becquet, his French Huguenot ancestors moved to Ireland in the seventeenth century for religious and economic reasons. He was of middle class stock, his father, William (Bill) Frank Beckett, Jr., being a contractor, and his mother, Mary (May) Roe, the daughter of a gentleman. Sam was raised in Cooldrinagh, a three-story Tudor house located to the south of Dublin.

He and his mother argued constantly from his early youth until her death. However, the dislike that he felt for his disciplinarian mother was somewhat compensated for by the love that he felt for his easy-going father. While Frank, his older brother, was an obedient child, Sam was not, always doing daring things which earned him frequent beatings from his mother. On one occasion, he dropped a lighted match into a can of gasoline as he peered into it to see what would happen.

The result was a pair of badly singed eyebrows and a severe beating from his mother (Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett*. Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich: New York, 1978, 15). The conflict with May created a great deal of anguish for Sam as he knew that he was supposed to love her.

He was not a religious person, claiming "I have no religious feeling. . . . For me it was only irksome and I let it go. My mother and brother got no value from their religion when they died. At the moment of crisis it has no more depth than an old school tie" (Tom Driver, "Beckett by the Madeleine," in *Columbia University Forum*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (summer) 1961, 23-24). His last religious emotion was felt at his first Communion. No more.

Throughout his youth he was withdrawn and moody, yet athletic and a leader when involved in sports. He entered Trinity College at age seventeen and eventually earned the coveted Foundation Scholarship in 1926 in Modern Languages for French, Italian, and Spanish. During his college days he was often sick, a heavy drinker, and a lover of films, particularly those of Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and later the Marx Brothers.

His initial interest in France developed from a bike tour on the continent in 1926 and was reinforced by the influence of Alfred Peron, an exchange lecturer in French at Trinity from 1926 to 1928. After another trip to Europe the following year, he returned to wear a French beret and to pepper his speech with Gallicisms.

From 1928 to 1930 he lived in Paris as a lecturer at the Ecole Normale Supérieure during which time he visited his Aunt Cissie in Germany where his exposure to a bohemian lifestyle made its mark on his own casual attire. It was also during this period in Paris that he met James Joyce with whom he maintained a rather fragile relationship until the latter's death in 1941.

Imitating Joyce, Beckett began to wear pointed-toe patent leather pumps which were too small for his feet because he wanted to wear the same size that Joyce wore. The relief he felt upon removing them is echoed later in *Waiting for Godot* where Estragon pulls off his misshapen boots. It was from Joyce that he also learned to use silence as a weapon against critical attacks. It was a time of translating, publishing poems, and the writing of a prose piece titled *Proust* which did quite well. He published his first collection of poems, *Echo's Bones*, in 1935.

He frequently suffered from boils, insomnia, flu-like illnesses, bursitis, pleuresy, and urinary and bladder pains. Often depressed, he dressed sloppily, wearing the same dirty trousers each week and a dirty raincoat several sizes too large for him. In 1933 his father died. The following year he published a collection of short stories titled *More Pricks than Kicks*.

In 1935 he wrote the novel, *Murphy*, which has a mental hospital for its setting and charac-

ters for whom “the crises that occur in their emotions alleviate the reader’s natural revulsion to their infirmities so that they become simply, beings who suffer” (Bair 228). Commenting on Beckett’s view of life, Josephine Jacobsen has noted that “Beckett’s vision of man is bifocal, simultaneously tragic and comic, though predominantly the latter” (*The Testament of Samuel Beckett*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1964, 79).

During the latter part of the decade, Beckett began to write drama, ruptured with Ireland, and moved permanently to Paris. It was on a trip to Germany in 1936 that he came across the name Pozzo (the Italian husband of a Russian lady), which later appears in *Waiting for Godot*. After being turned down by forty-two publishers, *Murphy* was finally published in 1938 but enjoyed only a limited success.

After the outbreak of war, Beckett spent the early years in Paris working in a resistance reseau named Gloria. However, in 1942 he fled to Vichy where he hid in Roussillon, worked with the maquis, and wrote *Watt*, his third and last novel in English. In 1945 Charles de Gaulle awarded him the Croix de Guerre and the Medaille de la Resistance for his efforts in behalf of France. However, the playwright later claimed that “I was fighting against the Germans who were making life hell for my friends, and not for the French nation” (Alan Simpson, *Beckett and Behan*, Routledge and Kegan Paul: London, 1962, 64-65).

The isolated and existential nature of his work has been concisely captured by Frederick Hoffman when he writes that “Beckett’s works are not empty intellectual exercises, but profound explorations of human intellectual dislocation. . . . At the edge of death, the Beckettian self has no visible or tenable means of spiritual or intellectual support” (xli).

The post-war years represented a period of great energy and creativity during which he emerged as an important writer. He celebrated his fortieth birthday in Ireland in drunken debauchery and worked on a trilogy of novels in French, *Molloy*, *Malone meurt*, and *L’Innommable*. Discussing his work with associates he confessed, “I’m not interested in stories of success . . . only failure,” and admitted that he “was doomed to spend the rest of [his] days digging up the detritus of [his] life and vomiting it out over and over again” (Bair 349,352). It was also during this period that he wrote his first novel in French, *Mercier et Camier*, in which he first uses a vaudevillian couple who are the precursors of Didi and Gogo (Vladimir and Estragon) in *Waiting for Godot*.

Speaking about the play, Beckett told one interviewer, “I began to write *Godot* as a relaxation to get away from the awful prose I was writing at the time” (Cohn Duckworth, “The Making of *Godot*,” in *Caseliokon Waiting for Godot*, Ed. Ruby Cohn, Grove Press, Inc.: New York, 1967, 89). He wrote *Godot* from October 9, 1948, to January 29, 1949, and, although he considered it a bad play, it has received more critical attention than any other play of this century.

It consists of two acts of uneven lengths in which Vladimir and Estragon spend time conversing and alternating between hope and despair while waiting for Godot to keep an appointment with them. Pozzo and his slave, Lucky, appear in each act. Pozzo is blind in the second act. A young boy arrives in each to inform Didi and Gogo that Godot will not arrive today, but will tomorrow. A bare tree in act one sprouts leaves in act two, suggesting perhaps the passage of time. The play suggests that something important is to come to life but never does.

It is universal in meaning perhaps because it avoids definition. It is about loneliness, loss, and encounter in a world where black coats, bowler hats, and boots assume significance. It is the first play by a post-war playwright to use everyday colloquial French in a dramatic form. Rejected by a number of publishers, it was finally published in French on November 17, 1952, and produced by Roger Blin in 1953. According to Deirdre Bair, Beckett. “wanted to create

a circus-cum-vaudeville) atmosphere in a dramatic experience of total simplicity on which he would superimpose a pastiche of his ordinary, everyday thought and conversation. Above all, he wanted it to be good commercial theater, traditional yet different and effective” (385).

Meanwhile, his mother died and the publication of his trilogy of novels received a favorable response.

Interestingly, Beckett did not attend the opening performance of *Waiting for Godot* in 1953 at the Theatre de Babylone for which it received positive reviews and went on to make him famous. Although the American and London productions were not initially well received, they too soon became important successes for him.

By the end of the 1950s, *Endgame* and *Without Words* were published, and he was working on *Krapp's Last Tape*, his first post-war writing in English which he did for actor, Patrick Magee. In 1959 he was awarded an honorary doctorate by Trinity College.

On March 22, 1961, he quietly married his long-time friend, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, in England, and in May was named to share the annual Prix International des Editeurs with Jorge Luis Borges.

Throughout the early 1960s he wrote, translated, and directed. One of his most interesting works was a play he did in 1962 titled *Play*, in which the characters speak in flat voices and remain unaware of each other on stage. In 1965 he did a film titled *Film*, which starred Buster Keaton and went on to win the Diploma de Merito in Venice and was named the Outstanding Film of the Year at the London Film Festival.

In an insightful discussion of Beckett's work, his analyst, Geoffrey Thompson, once observed that he “found he was unable to see Beckett's plays as anything other than manifestations of severe depression and possible psychosis” (Bair 457). Beckett himself felt that the best play was one in which there were no actors, only the text. All that he wanted on stage, he said, was “a pair of blubbering lips” (Aldan Higgins, “Beckett in Berlin,” *Atlantis*, No.1 (March) 1970, 54).

During the latter part of the decade when he was doing theatre, cinema, and television, he suffered from a blurring of the eye which was diagnosed as glaucoma. In the winter of 1967-1968 he was ill again with a virus, colds, bursitis, and a lung inflammation. He turned down the nomination for the chair of poetry at Oxford and traveled abroad for health reasons to Madeira and Tuimisia where he was vacationing in October of 1969 when word came that he had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He did not attend the ceremony and refused to permit the Irish ambassador to accept the award for him. Instead, he sent his publisher, Jerome Undoni.

He finally had an eye operation in 1970 but continued to vacation, particularly in North Africa, and to work on new prose, drama, translations, and poetry. In 1978 the prestigious Comedie Francaise included *Waiting for Godot* in its repertoire. However, when Shelly Winters and Estelle Parsons asked to perform the play, he rejected their offer claiming that he wanted no women in it in order to maintain its masculinity.

In honor of his seventieth birthday in 1976, the Royal Court Company mounted a Beckett festival. He published his last work, a novella titled, *Stirrings Still*, in 1989, not long before his death in December. A recent performance of *Waiting for Godot* in New York at the Lincoln Center starring Robin Williams and Steve Martin as the two tramps sold out.

The play has now been translated into twenty languages and is considered a classic in French literature.

Perhaps Beckett has best summarized his life and work in a remark he once made to a friend: “I couldn't have done it otherwise. Gone on, I mean. I could not have gone through the awful wretched mess of life without having left a stain upon the silence” (Bair 640). Now that he has gone on, he will be best remembered for his masterpiece, *Waiting for Godot*.

Waiting for Godot: *A Play in Which Nothing Happens Twice* From Insights, 1990

Translated into over a dozen languages, *Waiting for Godot* has been performed in little theatres and large theatres, by amateurs and professionals, on radio and television. Scarcely four decades old, *Waiting for Godot* has sold over a million copies in the original French and nearly that many in Beckett's own English translation. Starring Steve Martin and Robin Williams, it was a smash hit at the Lincoln Center Theatre, with tickets available by lottery only. Quite an achievement for a comic drama in which absolutely nothing happens. (One reviewer, in fact, called it a two-act play in which nothing happens twice.)

Waiting for Godot contains clowning of the highest degree, which attracts audiences, and likely the play's enigma contributes to its appeal. Its symbolism is obscure or non-existent; its "message" is individual to each audience member, and the "nothing happens" becomes our daily existence.

On a lonely country road near a tree, two elderly men, half-tramp-half-clown, amuse themselves with conversation that alternates between hope and despair as they wait for someone by the name of Godot who has, they believe, given them to understand that their patience at the rendezvous will be rewarded. Pozzo and Lucky, master and slave, enter and leave, and as the play ends, Vladimir and Estragon are still waiting.

The tramps are essentially without identity; although they appear on the cast list as Vladimir and Estragon, they address one another as Gogo and Didi, and when Godot's messenger arrives to announce that he, Godot, cannot come that day, he addresses Vladimir as "Monsieur Albert."

The play is particularly fertile ground for symbol-seekers. Perhaps Godot is God, Christianity, rebirth, redemption, hope and despair. After all, Didi and Gogo have memories of a proper Protestant Bible, and the barren tree of the first act sprouts a few leaves in the second act. Maybe God has come and gone and not been recognized.

Perhaps *Waiting for Godot* is an allegory of French resistance to the Germans. It was written in 1949; Samuel Beckett had survived World War II in France, and the play was originally written in French. Perhaps the play symbolizes Irish resistance to the English, or Beckett's relationship to James Joyce, or any number of other possible meanings.

To all of these postulations, Beckett has emphatically denied symbolic explanation. The tree sprouting leaves, he says, is not to show hope or inspiration, but only to record the passage of time. At the time of first production, when Beckett was pressed hard for an answer, he snapped, "If I knew who Godot was, I would have said so in the play." Or "If Godot were God, I would have called him that." We shall not likely find out who Godot is, and shall waste our time trying.

On the other hand, nothing can be clearer than what Didi and Gogo are doing. They tell us a dozen times: They are waiting for Godot, and we are to leave it at that.

So what do we have left? Objectively, Didi and Gogo would like to die, but they are unable to kill themselves because the will to live (over which they have no control) is stronger than the will to die. They wearily occupy themselves with spinning out the skein of life. Their wordplay is all that separates them from nothingness; it is their only weapon against the void, enabling them to bear the unbearable wait; this ludicrous activity is intensely vital. They have miraculously preserved tenderness and humor: a solicitude that never becomes aggressive, a kind of desperate compassion that bathes the nameless desert

of human relations.

“What we are doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is dear. We are waiting for Godot to come.”

The play is about waiting. This waiting is as likely to be the height of foolishness as the absolute of virtue. But man, no matter how tattered and inarticulate, is still there; he has not yet walked off and left the stage to darkness. Even if Godot never comes, the wait might as well include laughter.

Waiting for Godot: A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Grave

By David Kranes

From Souvenir Program, 1990

Have you heard the one about the two tramps who were killing time? Or was it filling time?

Is Samuel Beckett the stage poet of gloom? Or is he a baggy-pant burlesque comedian? (Bert Lahr acted in *Godot*; Buster Keaton in his Film.) Does the spirit involuntarily lift in the gaunt Irishman's grove of denuded trees. . .or fall? Does the flesh fall and the voice arise?

"We give birth astride the grave," Beckett utters at one point. Some critics arm themselves with the word birth; others with the word grave. Perhaps more of them ought to have chosen the word astride.

Samuel Beckett, who always loved the shape and play of language, was fond of the epigram from St. Augustine: "Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned."

During this past year, in response to Beckett's 1989 death, remembrances by writers such as Mel Gussow of the *New York Times* stress his quiet and reflective caring, his interest in others. And perhaps those finding only morbidity forget that in 1941 and 1942, Beckett worked in the French Resistance and that in 1945 he worked for the Irish Red Cross in Normandy.

"...you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on," Beckett's novel, *The Unnamable*, ends. In one of Beckett's last plays, *Not I*, a pinspot isolates only a mouth on stage, the rest of the body in darkness. How utterly bleak, the gloom-seer cries—taking the image and the title literally, unaware probably of his or her own pun in a play about a voice: how utterly bleak. "In the beginning was the pun," says the titular character in Beckett's novel, *Murphy*. "I think (hiccough)...I am," from another play. In fact, playing with the title—"Not I/(eye)... rather, mouth, the mouth self-confesses to being a "mouth on fire," a "stream of words" which "can't stop...no stopping it." Bleak? How utterly alive!

"Fear not; one of the thieves was saved."

It would seem we are on the playful and precarious edge of irony here...or even astride it. The final stage gesture of the Auditor in *Not I* is that of "helpless compassion." The helpless falls; the compassion rises.

In a 1949 dialogue with Georges Duthuit, Beckett spoke to the subject of his own voice: its gravity; its undying instinct:

"...the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express."

and one notes that, in each phrase, the first word is no; the last word, express.

You are about to enter the world of Samuel Beckett's most produced play, *Waiting for Godot*, and will hear the following opening exchange (note the first words of each character):

Estragon: Nothing to be done.

Vladimir: I'm beginning to come round to that opinion.

Nothing. . . .I'm beginning.

Perhaps, now that Samuel is no longer with us, he can be more with us. Perhaps he needed to die so that we might “come round to” a more lively opinion and not take him so...well, utterly gravely.

Have you heard the one about the two tramps who were waiting for God? Oh!

And while you're at it, remember Beckett's final words to his novel, Watt: “no symbols where none intended.”