

Waiting for Godot: Something to Be Done



Waiting for Godot at Counter-Productions Theatre Company: (L-R) Geoff Leatham as "Estragon," Dan Fisher as "Vladimir" (Photo: Counter-Productions Theatre Company)

Waiting for Godot by Samuel Beckett is one of the notoriously polarizing plays of the 20th century: People either love it or hate it. Personally, it is one of my favorite plays because it is the epitome of theatrical form: It cannot be explained, but only experienced. It is impossible to get any sense of the play from merely reading the script: A director must transform the work in the process of putting it onto a stage with real actors.

That claim could in theory be made about any script, even about Shakespeare – as John Barton, co-founder of the Royal Shakespeare Company, asserted in his legendary tutorial series "Playing Shakespeare" – but Shakespeare is more widely read than performed. The best and most accessible examples of work that cannot be read and dissected but must be seen directly are the vaudeville-inspired comedians of cinema: Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, the Marx Brothers, and – most influentially for *Godot* – Laurel and Hardy.

Understood this way, the most common criticism of *Godot*, that it is impossible to summarize or identify a plot, would be immediately recognized as ridiculous if applied to, for example, Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*: "People are stuck in a cabin during a snowstorm, one of them tries to eat his shoe, which results in someone turning into a giant chicken, which is later reprised by dancing bread rolls, and a bear randomly shows up." Likewise, there is the infamous claim that *Godot* is "about nothing" – 40 years before Jerry Seinfeld co-opted the phrase – but this is untrue because a lot does happen.



Waiting for Godot director Valerie Remillard with her 8 year-old daughter Annika (Photo: Counter-Productions Theatre Company)

I noticed a very young girl in the audience on opening night, much younger than would be typical for this supposedly inaccessible and *avant-garde* play, and at intermission I wandered over to her (and to the adults accompanying her) and asked whether she thought the play made sense. She said it did, which may have been the politically correct response because she turned out to be Annika, the 8-year-old daughter of the director, but it led me to the profound realization that the play would make *perfect* sense to an intelligent 8-year-old: At that age, one spends a lot of time being bored and trying to pass the time, which is exactly what the characters do. I once quoted child development expert Janice O'Donnell saying, "It's really good for kids to be bored, because they have to think of something to do." It has been my observation that boredom is a mark of increasing intellectual capacity: a 6-year-old is more often bored than a 4-year-old because they are capable of doing more, while a 2-year-old is never really bored, so perhaps boredom is the defining human condition.

Director Valerie Remillard "gets" the play and has crafted an excellent presentation that faithfully captures the essence of *Waiting for Godot* as a masterpiece of theater. Acknowledging that any attempted summary totally loses the tone of the play, what we see is two shabbily dressed men in bowler hats, "Vladimir" (Dan Fisher) and "Estragon" (Geoff Leatham), on a minimal set consisting of a tree and a place to sit (in this production, ironically, a tree stump), where they are waiting for Godot. "Pozzo" (Steven Zailskas) and his slave "Lucky" (Stevie Smith) pass through and then leave. A young boy (Connor Remillard Myette, the son of the director) shows up and explains that Godot is not coming today. In the second act that takes place on the following day, pretty much the same thing happens all over again, except that the tree has leaves, Pozzo is now blind and dependent upon Lucky, and a young boy who claims to be different from but who looks exactly like the boy seen at the end of the first act likewise says that Godot is not coming today.

The play is hilarious, combining clever wordplay, witty dialogue, absurd situations and physical acrobatics; the four principal roles are among the most challenging in all of theater because of these disparate demands. It seems that just about every (male) comic actor has either appeared in *Godot* at some point or expressed the desire to do so, and notable Vladimir/Estragon stage pairings have included Steve Martin/Robin Williams and Patrick Stewart/Ian McKellen. The director of the original production, Roger Blin, ended up stuck playing Pozzo when before the first performance the actor expected to take the role quit over money; Blin supposedly said that all of the shouting needed for the

role was hurting his testicles and interfering with his sex life.

The AS220 Black Box is an ideally intimate setting for *Godot* with no audience member more than a few feet away from the action on the traditionally sparse set, with seating on three sides of the house. Leatham as Estragon is truly outstanding, getting everything right, especially the body language and facial expressions of a character who is not as verbal as his compatriot. Fisher, a very good actor (who won a 2017 *Motif* award as the male lead in *Rabbit Hole* for the Community Players) is effective as Vladimir, although a bit too loud for the small room. Zailskas as Pozzo is even louder, but we care less what that character says than how he says it, so his barked commands work well. Smith as Lucky has perhaps the most technically difficult role, playing almost a mute and stoic piece of furniture for nearly all of his time on stage and only speaking once. The respective pairs, Fisher/Leatham and Zailskas/Smith, interact well together. Remillard Myette as the boy (or boys) does a very creditable job with the small but essential role.

There is a vast literature on interpretations of *Godot*, encompassing Christian and anti-Christian religion, Freudian and Jungian psychology, and a kitchen sinkful of esoteric and obscure "isms." The undeniable fact is that no one really knows what *Godot* is about, and the playwright himself clearly believed that the core of his art lay in the ambiguities resulting from the absence of information, saying that everything he knew about the characters was in the text and if he knew anything more about the characters then he would have put it in the text. That *Godot* is more hole than doughnut has made it an easy target of parody if not outright ridicule. Beckett evolved his unique literary voice by distinguishing his style from that of his mentor James Joyce, whom he assisted during the writing of *Finnegans Wake*. In almost exactly the opposite way, Joyce grounded his art in fanatically perfectionist control of his work, leaving no missing pieces or rough edges in stuffing his characters full to overflowing so that we the readers know more about them than they could possibly know about themselves.

By far the best biography of Beckett, in my opinion, is by James Knowlson of the University of Reading, whose 20-year friendship with the playwright led to the donation of notebooks, manuscripts and other archival material that became the world's leading Beckett archive. Knowlson's title taken from a passage in Beckett's notebooks is *Damned to Fame*, neatly encapsulating the playwright's avoidance of publicity of any kind, even sending a representative to accept the 1969 Nobel Prize for Literature because he could not bring himself to go in person. As Beckett's health was failing, Knowlson told him that he was going to write a biography and asked for his co-operation. Beckett uncharacteristically agreed and granted many interviews in the six months that remained to him before his death in 1989. Knowlson's book, published in 1996, is one of the most satisfying literary biographies I've read, with intriguing details such as Beckett's going to see Buster Keaton perform live in Paris and Beckett's anger at a journal, worried about legal censorship by the authorities, removing a half-page from a work he wrote about a person unable to masturbate because he had no hands.

Because of their unique collaboration, Knowlson's interpretation of *Godot*, while no more coherent than that by anyone else, is certainly better informed. Knowlson holds that the influences that led to *Godot* were numerous absurd occurrences in Beckett's real life.

Beckett, an Irish-born expatriate who lived his adult life in France - and wrote *En attendant Godot* originally in French - made his final break with Ireland, according to Knowlson, after he testified as a witness in a libel case brought by his twin uncles Harry and William Sinclair against the author of a book that, although not naming them, heaped abuse upon them as the "two Jews... in Sackville Street" and their late grandfather Morris Sinclair who had been president and treasurer of the Jewish

congregation of Dublin, calling him "an old usurer." William was on his deathbed when Beckett promised to support their libel case, and died before the trial. On the witness stand, the cross-examination consisted mostly of attacking Beckett's character, forcing him to acknowledge that his book on Marcel Proust had been banned in Ireland due to its frank treatment of sexuality, forcing him to acknowledge authorship of the short story collection titled *More Pricks than Kicks*, forcing him to admit to privately printing a book titled *Whoroscope* for fear that open circulation would result in censorship, and finally asking him whether he considered himself a Christian, a Jew, or an atheist, to which Beckett answered "none of the three." Counsel for the defense in closing argument said he "would like to know why, of all the respectable people he knew, Mr. Sinclair should select that 'bawd and blasphemer' from Paris" as a witness, and the judge told the jury in summing up that Beckett "did not strike me as a witness on whose word I would place a great deal of reliance." The Nov 24, 1937, edition of *The Irish Times* duly reported the trial under the sub-head "Bawds and Blasphemers." Although Beckett's uncle won his libel case, his own reputation was in tatters, clearly contributing to his lifelong horror of publicity and leaving him feeling that he had been run out of his native country because it was a nation of prudes.

Shortly afterward, on Jan 5, 1938, Beckett was randomly stabbed in the chest on the street in Paris, the knife just missing his lung and his heart. His life was quite likely saved by James and Nora Joyce stepping in and engaging doctors at their own expense. The bizarre stabbing led to a reversal of Beckett's treatment in the Irish press due to a sense of national insult; one headline read "Irishman stabbed in Paris," and the Irish ambassador to France and his wife paid a call in hospital. The attacker was a professional pimp with a long record; Beckett wanted the charges dropped to avoid the publicity, but the police prosecuted the case over his objections. When Beckett asked the defendant why he stabbed him, the answer was a line that would have fit into *Godot*, then well over a decade in the future: "I don't know why, sir. I'm sorry." Beckett wrote of his convicted attacker, sentenced to two months, "There is no more popular prisoner in the Santé [Prison]. His mail is enormous. His poules [prostitutes] shower gifts upon him. Next time he stabs someone they will promote him to the Legion of Honour." Beckett was never even able to get back the clothes he was wearing at the time of the stabbing, which the police seized as evidence.

Beckett broke with Ireland even further during World War II, the extent of which only became clear as the British government declassified secret documents years after Knowlson published his biography in 1996. While Ireland was neutral in the war, Beckett in Nazi-occupied France joined a cell of the British Special Operations Executive, the covert arm of the secret intelligence service. He was nearly captured by the Gestapo in 1942 when the cell was betrayed by a Catholic priest, and after the war the French government awarded him the *Croix de Guerre* and the *Médaille de la Reconnaissance Française*.

While there is a danger in trying to read behind a text into the life of its author, in at least general terms Beckett's personal and repeated brushes with absurdity inform the worldview that gave rise to *Waiting for Godot*: It's not just a bunch of guys and a tree.

Waiting for Godot, by Samuel Beckett, directed by Valerie Remillard, performed by Counter-Productions Theatre Company at AS220 Black Box, 95 Empire St, PVD. Handicap accessible. Through Oct 29. About 2h45m including intermission. Tel: 401-419-2205 E-mail: counterp2016@gmail.com Web: cptcri.com Facebook: facebook.com/events/1934226830166324 Tickets: brownpapertickets.com/event/3089079