



# Waiting for Godot

by Samuel Beckett  
Directed by  
Bonnie J. Monte

Know-the-Show  
Audience Guide  
researched and written by  
the Education Department of

The  
**SHAKESPEARE**  
Theatre of  
New Jersey





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# Director's Notes

## - Bonnie J. Monte

I have on more than one occasion encouraged you, our audience, to avoid the urge or attempt to understand a particular play as you are viewing it. Instead, I have encouraged you to simply experience it, let it wash over you, and resist trying to decipher its meaning or variety of meanings until after it has ended. I advocate the same approach as you watch *Waiting for Godot*.

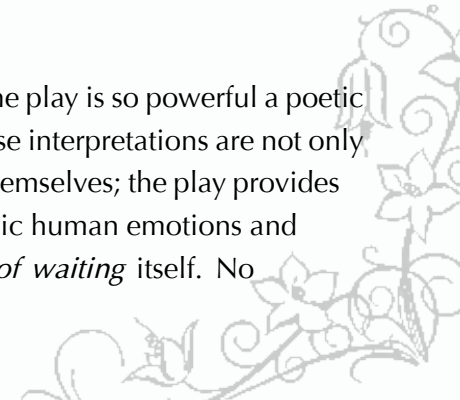
Like all great works of art, the breadth and depth of what *Godot* contains cannot easily be deciphered, defined, categorized, or summed up in convenient, tidy, or satisfactory fashion. It is so all-encompassing in regard to the phenomenon of human existence that brevity in defining it is futile. More significant is the fact that its brand of universality is such that each of us will experience it and define its meaning in completely different ways – all of which are valid.

One can, however, sum up the play's basic plot easily: It is a story that takes place over the course of two days. Two men are waiting for someone named Godot to show up. While they wait, they encounter three other beings. That's it. Of course, a flood of questions ensue: Why are the two men waiting for someone named Godot? Who is Godot anyway? Who are the two men? Who are the other people who show up and what do they signify? Where is this place in which the characters seem consigned to wait? Each question leads to even more uncertainties and queries. My cast and I have spent weeks together musing over the seemingly infinite array of questions that the play provokes; we have read essay after essay about the play's meanings, connotations, and implications; and while

we've gleaned the massive scope of its depiction of eternal truths and observations about the universal human experience, the play defies any kind of final or definitive explanation, interpretation, or revelation. This is not a fault or weakness of the play; it is rather what makes it such a brilliant and staggering piece of dramatic literature. The play's ability to represent or mean something different to each and every viewer can surely be frustrating in some ways, but therein also lies its power, beauty, and almost mystical quality. *Godot* will be what you want it or need it to be.

When the play was performed for prisoners at San Quentin for one night only, back in 1957, the actors performing it were shocked at the astounding reception it received there. The inmates understood the piece immediately and viscerally. For them, it needed no explanation; it was about *them*. It was their daily existence brought to life on stage. They went crazy over it. It defined them and their plight, gave voice to their existence in a way that nothing else had or could, and it described their endless wait for freedom. When the play was presented in Algeria in the 1960's, the landless fellaheen at the time saw the play as a metaphor for their long-awaited allocations of land; and in Warsaw in 1956, the play was a parable about the promise of Poland's national independence from Russia.

The great drama critic Martin Esslin wrote, "The play is so powerful a poetic metaphor, so archetypal an image, that all these interpretations are not only equally acceptable, they all equally *impose* themselves; the play provides an existential reconstruction of one of the basic human emotions and situations – it is a poetic image of the *act of waiting* itself. No





wonder everyone immediately thinks of whatever it is that one has been waiting for in one's own personal, spiritual, or political life." And I would also add, "or after-life."

An Irishman, Samuel Beckett originally wrote *Waiting for Godot* in French. The English translation is his own. He continued to work on it for years, and made various changes and edits here and there. So while there are slight variations in a number of editions, what you hear tonight are his own words, not that of an independent translator's.

The play is rife with biblical references; it often feels like poetry rather than prose; its symbolic allusions are constant and also defy definitive clarity. The play pays homage to Beckett's love for Chaplin, Keaton, and other comedic giants. It has been called a comedy, a tragi-comedy, an existentialist diatribe, a poetic vision of life, a nihilistic tragedy, a life-affirming metaphor, and the list goes on. A chimera is a thing that is hoped for or wished for but is in fact illusory or impossible to achieve. Defining *Waiting for Godot* in either brief or lengthy form is a chimera, and indeed the play itself seems to be about a universal chimera – the wait for something better, or for someone or something that will put us in a better place – but that "thing" is as elusive as the search for meaning itself.

No matter what you need or want the play to mean for you, there is also one undeniable aspect to the piece that cannot be ignored. Like Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, *Waiting for Godot* seems to say that we humans waste an awful lot of time pining for the past, waiting for the uncertain promises of the future, and we waste the experience of the present – of just being present in the moment. We let life go by and forget to live while in anticipation of what's to come. We can also not ignore the sense of hope that permeates *Godot* in equal measure to its atmosphere

of despair. And while we may waste the experience of living, our will to live is indefatigable. Things do change, even if in infinitesimal ways. The life force is hard to snuff out even in the face of a seemingly indifferent, incomprehensible, randomly whimsical and fickle universe.

My words touch just on the tip of the vast iceberg that is *Waiting for Godot*. The relationships of the characters, its minimalism, the influence of the devastation of World War II (Beckett was a member of the Resistance), its religious, societal, and political overtones, all are compelling paths to explore. Last but not least is the play's glorious array of opposites. For everything bad there is something good. For every Cain there is an Abel. Each dark night is followed by a new day. For every cruel act there is one of compassion. Tears are countered by laughter; moments of sorrow by moments of joy. Every second of despair is balanced by one of hope. *Godot* is not a nihilistic vision of life, it is simply a vision of life as it is.

**"In the middle of the journey of our life  
I came to myself within a dark wood  
where the straight way was lost."**

Dante Alighieri



# Samuel Beckett

## About the Playwright

Sam, as his friends called him, and he had many friends, was by all accounts a “witty, resilient man whose reflex response to adversity was often humor and the determination to go on.” James Knowlson, authorized biographer of Beckett, continues: “His work was his prime concern and his prime reason for keeping going: weighing every word, balancing every phrase, listening for every false note. This did not prevent him, however, from giving his understanding and undivided attention to his many friends.”

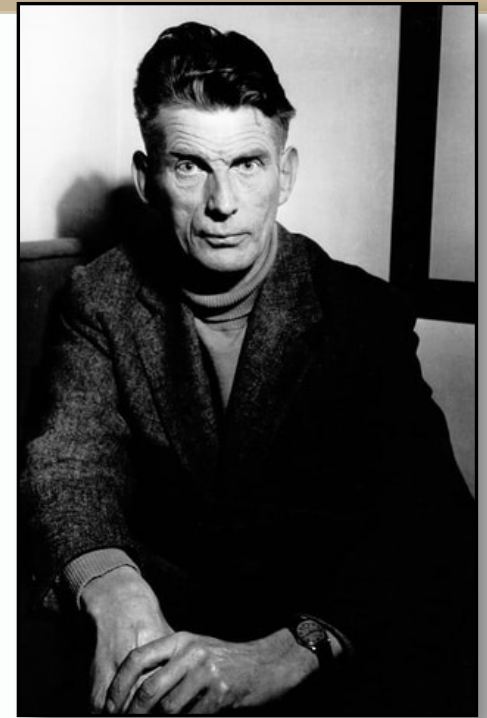
Samuel Barclay Beckett was born on Good Friday, April 13, 1906 in the Dublin suburb of Foxrock. Members of the Church of Ireland, Beckett’s family placed him and his brother in a private Protestant school, Earlsford House. This particular school was headed by a Frenchman named Lepelon and is likely where Beckett’s lifelong interest in the French language and culture began. In his next school, Portora Royal School, Beckett had a French teacher named Miss Tennant who fostered his interest in the language. This school also set rigorous physical standards such as long runs before breakfast, compulsory rugby and cricket, and more “hearty” pastimes, of which Beckett, a natural athlete, excelled.

**“Words are all  
we have.”**

- Samuel Beckett

At Trinity College in 1923, Beckett met Professor Thomas B. Rudmose-Brown. It was also in his time at Trinity that Beckett found the Abbey Theatre and

Portrait of Samuel Beckett  
by Brassai, 1957.



attended shows regularly. With Brown, Beckett began diving into French literature and the professor arranged for Beckett to study and teach in Paris in 1928.

He found himself surrounded by friends in Paris. One friend in particular had a lasting impact on Beckett: his fellow Dubliner, James Joyce. Beckett became a close friend of Joyce, spending lots of time with the writer and his family. Though greatly influenced by Joyce, Beckett produced work that was almost intentionally distinct from “Joycean” literature.

In 1930 at age 24, Beckett’s ninety-eight line poem “Whoroscope” was published. The prize-winning poem, in the academically obscure style of T.S. Eliot, spurred an invitation from Thomas MacGreevy for his next work, an essay on Proust. At the same time, he was working with Joyce to finish “Work in Progress”, which later became “Finnegan’s Wake”.

Beckett returned to Trinity College as a Lecturer in French from 1930 to 1931, then left for Germany for a stay before returning to France and focusing on his novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, influenced by Beckett’s own experiences, his love of languages, and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.



**“James Joyce was a synthesizer, trying to bring in as much as he could. I am an analyzer, trying to leave out as much as I can.”**

- Samuel Beckett

He returned to his parent’s home in 1932 and was there a year later when his beloved father, Bill, passed away from a heart attack. His father’s final words to him were “Fight, fight, fight... What a morning.” His father’s passing left Beckett

devastated and depressed. He moved to London to begin two years of psychotherapy with Dr. Wilfred Bion. Through therapy and invested research, Beckett spent these two years developing a new sense of self. His literary works at this time indicate a shift for the writer.

Traveling around Germany for most of 1936, Beckett discovered how dangerous Germany was becoming under the Nazi influence, and returned to Ireland around 1937. After a falling out with his mother, Beckett left Ireland once more, never to live there again. He returned to Paris.

Walking home one night in December, Beckett was stabbed and ended up in the hospital where James Joyce arranged for a private room and treatment by his own doctor, Thérèse Bertrand-Fontaine. Beckett had many friends visit him in the hospital. One of these friends was a French woman named Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, whom Beckett had gone out with a few times before the stabbing.

After his recovery, Beckett began seeing Suzanne more regularly, started assisting Joyce more rigorously, and found more commercial success as a writer in his own right. This is also the period Beckett began to write poetry in the French language he loved so much.

At the outbreak of the war in 1940, Joyce was nearly totally blind and had lost his close friend and secretary to the Gestapo. Beckett and other friends helped Joyce out with reading, writing, and translating until Joyce, after a difficult time making it out of Nazi-occupied Paris, fled to Zurich and, being very sickly, died a few weeks later.

For the next few years, Beckett worked for the French Resistance, where he sorted, classified, typed, microphotoed, and sent to Allied Headquarters any and all written and verbal materials brought to him by agents. When one of Beckett’s fellow Resistance members was caught by the Gestapo, Beckett and Suzanne found themselves on the run. After making it to Roussillon in the Unoccupied Zone, Beckett worked as a farm laborer while he continued to write and soon started with the France-stationed Irish Red Cross to work as a storekeeper and interpreter at a hospital in Saint Lô. His stint at the hospital was partially to ensure that he, as a foreigner, could return to France after the war.

In 1947, Beckett was back in Paris, writing works mostly in French, and beginning to write plays. The first, called *Eleutheria*, was not to be performed until 2005. When Beckett finished his second play, *Waiting for Godot*, in 1948/49, Suzanne began working to get the plays produced. After many unsuccessful attempts over the years, she met Robert Blin, who wanted to mount *Godot* in



Samuel Beckett towards the end of his time with the French Resistance in the mid 1940s





the newly constructed Théâtre de Babylone in 1953. Blin had obtained a state grant to present the premiere production of a first play of any author writing in the French language.

From 1954 when Beckett's brother died, to 1968, Beckett vacillated between times of depression, commercial success, busy theatre seasons, and happiness. He married Suzanne in 1961, began writing radio plays, and had international broadcasts and premieres of his work.

By 1968, Beckett was struggling with a bout of depression when he became extremely ill with an abscess on his lung. Beckett became even more reclusive and when his publisher, Jérôme Lindon, telegraphed this warning to him on October 23, 1969, Beckett wasted no time taking heed:

*Dear Sam and Suzanne. In spite of everything, they have given you the Nobel Prize – I advise you to go into hiding. With affection.*

Beckett did go into hiding, retreating from Paris to a holiday in Tunis where he had to sneak down back staircases of the hotel in order to go for a swim. There is a famous video "interview" of Beckett at this time from a Swedish television crew, in which Beckett allowed the interview to take place so long as no questions were asked. A video of this interview can be found in the "Explore Online" section of this guide.

From 1969 onwards, Beckett and Suzanne went back and forth between Paris and remote holiday destinations. Beckett would occasionally travel for performances of his works, but mostly he continued to write. He published many novellas in this time. In 1986, Beckett was diagnosed with emphysema and moved into Le Tiers Temps nursing home. Suzanne passed away on July 17, 1989. Beckett passed away a few months later on December 22.

## Beckett: Apolitical or No?

"Beckett has often been labeled apolitical, and his attitudes have sometimes been misunderstood or misinterpreted. When, as an Irishman, he could have been neutral in World War II, he chose to join a Resistance cell of the British SOE and won the *Croix de Guerre* and the *Médaille de la Reconnaissance française*. He was deeply committed to human rights; he firmly and totally opposed apartheid and was hostile from an early age to all forms of racism; he supported human rights movements throughout the world, including Amnesty International and Oxfam; he supported the freedom movement in Eastern Europe; and, although as a foreigner living in France and wary of having his residential permit withdrawn, he was involved in a number of specific political cases."

- James Knowlson, biographer



Beckett in 1976



# Waiting for Godot

## A Synopsis

**SPOILER ALERT: The following includes spoilers about the play.**

### ACT I

Estragon sits near a leafless tree and is attempting to take his boots off when Vladimir approaches. The two know each other and are surprised and happy to meet up. Estragon shares the story of his previous night spent lying in a ditch after being attacked by a group of people who may or may not have attacked him before. Vladimir and Estragon talk about many different things without going into depth about anything. Estragon does manage to get his boot off, but does not seem to find what he was looking for. The pair begin discussing a man named Godot, for whom they are waiting. They are not quite sure if they have ever met Godot or if Godot will ever arrive.

Suddenly two men appear on the road - Pozzo and his silent slave Lucky. They stop and Pozzo introduces himself. Lucky, bound by a rope, is weighed down, carrying an assortment of bags and other items. Pozzo tells Vladimir and Estragon that he is on his way to the market to sell Lucky but before he continues his journey, Pozzo shows off Lucky's "tricks." When Pozzo gives Lucky his hat and says "Think!" Lucky begins to spew what seems to be long-winded, nonsense phrases, gradually becoming more alarming. Pozzo yells to Vladimir and Estragon to remove Lucky's hat and when they do, Lucky is instantly muted. Over the course of his time with Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo loses his pipe, vaporizer, and watch. When Pozzo and Lucky leave, Vladimir and Estragon continue waiting for Godot.

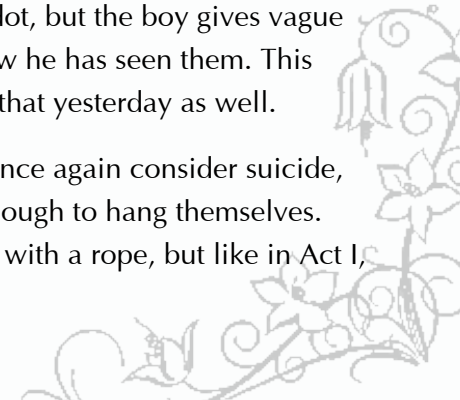
The next visitor on the road is a boy who says he is a messenger from Godot. The boy tells the pair that Godot will not be arriving this evening, but will come tomorrow. Vladimir asks the boy many questions but the boy does not reveal much. Vladimir and Estragon consider suicide, but do not have a rope to hang from the tree. They decide to bring one when they return tomorrow. Finally, night falls. Vladimir and Estragon state that they will leave, but do not. The act ends.

### ACT II

We see that the tree has grown a few leaves and the act begins with Vladimir singing a violent nursery rhyme. Estragon enters and it comes to light that Estragon was beaten again and barely remembers Pozzo and Lucky from the previous day. Estragon and Vladimir even argue about whether it was the previous day that they encountered Pozzo and Lucky. They are once again waiting for Godot and conversing when Pozzo and Lucky arrive again. Pozzo is now blind and Lucky is now mute. Pozzo falls over and cries for help. Estragon mistakes him for Godot and can barely recall meeting him. Pozzo insists that he has not met Vladimir and Estragon before, confusing the pair, who cannot agree on when they met Pozzo and Lucky previously. Vladimir and Estragon abuse Pozzo and Lucky but eventually help to get them back on their feet and on their way.

Soon after, the boy reappears and once more reports that Godot will not be coming. The boy, like Pozzo, does not remember meeting Vladimir or Estragon and says he is not the same boy who spoke to them yesterday. Vladimir and Estragon ask the boy about Godot, but the boy gives vague answers and tells them he will let Godot know he has seen them. This infuriates Vladimir, who swears the boy said that yesterday as well.

After the boy leaves, Vladimir and Estragon once again consider suicide, but they do not have a rope long or strong enough to hang themselves. They decide to leave and return the day after with a rope, but like in Act I, they do nothing.







# Who's Who in the Play

## Vladimir, also called Didi

One of the two main characters, Vladimir is the more philosophical of the pair and often takes on the leadership role. Vladimir is concerned with appearances and thoughts. He often takes his hat on and off. Vladimir is prone to fury, becoming violently angry with multiple characters. Of note, Vladimir is the only character that seems able to keep track of the passage of time throughout the play. He also suffers pain from some sort of unspecified kidney or prostate problem.

## Estragon, also called Gogo

Vladimir's constant companion, Estragon often struggles with his boots and comments about how they hurt his feet. He is concerned with eating, sleeping, and not much else. He claims to have been a poet, and matches Vladimir in wordplay. Estragon reports that he gets beaten each night by a gang of anonymous attackers and is comforted by Vladimir the next day. Estragon does have some memory of previous events, but cannot keep track of the passage of time and needs Vladimir's help in recalling things.

## Godot

The title character, Godot, does not ever make an appearance in the play. We are told by The Boy that he has a white beard and employs the boy and his brother to tend goats and sheep. Other than that, we do not know who Godot is or why Vladimir and Estragon must meet with him.

## Pozzo

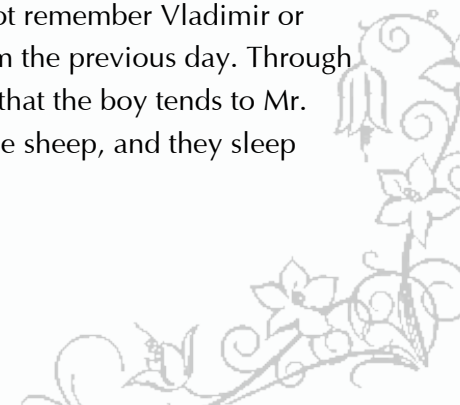
Claiming to be the landowner of the space where Vladimir and Estragon are waiting, Pozzo is a tyrannical figure who constantly loses his possessions, experiences brief moments of agony, and is fond of pontificating. Pozzo, while he can philosophize and speak eloquently, also makes outlandish claims. Pozzo treats Lucky, his baggage-carrier, very badly. Pozzo goes blind sometime between his first meeting with Vladimir and Estragon and his second meeting.

## Lucky

Lucky is Pozzo's minion and, according to Pozzo, has been in his service for many years, initially brought on as a tutor. It is said that Lucky used to have invaluable intellect and wit but, more recently, drives Pozzo mad with nonsensical tirades. When Pozzo and Lucky pass by the second time, it is revealed that Lucky has lost his ability to speak entirely.

## A Boy

A messenger from "Mr. Godot" the Boy comes to Vladimir and Estragon at the end of the day to let them know that Godot will not be coming that day, but will come the next. The Boy then asks if they would like to deliver a message to Godot. The Boy returns the next day with the same report but does not remember Vladimir or Estragon. The Boy says that it was not him the previous day. Through questioning, Vladimir and Estragon learn that the boy tends to Mr. Godot's goats, has a brother who tends the sheep, and they sleep together in a hay loft each night.





# Waiting for Godot

## A Production History

*Waiting for Godot* has an extensive production history. The original French text, *En attendant Godot*, was written between October 9, 1948 and January 29, 1949 and opened in Paris on January 5, 1953.

The play has been translated and performed in numerous ways over the years. Some of Beckett's own favorite productions have taken place in prisons. Between 1953 and 1954, an inmate of Lüttinghausen Prison in Germany obtained a copy of the French first edition, translated it himself into German and obtained permission to stage the play. The inmate wrote to Beckett: "You will be surprised to be receiving a letter about your play *Waiting for Godot*, from a prison where so many thieves, forgers, toughs, homos, crazy men and killers spend this bitch of a life waiting ... and waiting ... and waiting. Waiting for what? Godot? Perhaps." Beckett was intensely moved and intended to visit the prison to see a last performance of the play but it never happened. This marked the beginning of Beckett's enduring links with prisons and prisoners.

Beckett himself translated the work into English and continued to cut and change the work for years after its translation and production. The French text and the English text as they are published today contain small but significant changes. While Beckett left a "French air" to the play, the English version is "more vague." The English-language version premiered in London in 1955. The Director, Peter Hall, said in an early rehearsal: "I haven't really the foggiest idea what some of it means ... But if we stop and discuss every line we'll never open."

At the end of 1955, the Evening Standard Drama Awards were held for the first time. Sir Malcolm Sargent, a member of the Board, threatened to resign if *Waiting for Godot* won The Best New Play category. A compromise was worked out by changing the title of the award. *Waiting for Godot* became The Most Controversial Play of the Year. It is an award that has never been given since. By the 1960s, performances were being televised by the BBC.



Bert Lahr, left, and E. G. Marshall in the 1956 Broadway production of *Waiting for Godot*. Ben Mancuso/Impact Photos Inc., via Associated Press.

The United States premiere of *Waiting for Godot* was a disaster.

Because of low ticket sales, the opening was moved from Philadelphia to Miami in 1956. Bert Lahr, famous Vaudeville actor, played Estragon and by all accounts, vandalized the show by stealing gags and overacting. Audiences were baffled and many left after the first act. However, many of the docents of the Coconut Grove Playhouse where the play was mounted were university students and could not get enough of the show. This small but mighty and supportive audience kept the show alive and in 1956 the play landed on Broadway with a mostly new cast and crew. Beckett, at the time, wrote to Alan Simpson about this production.

November, 1955

"The producer is Michael Myerberg and he plans, I am told, to open in Miami, of all ridiculous places, on Jan. 3rd and thence proceed by stages (C'est le cas de le dire) to N.Y. where opening is scheduled for Jan. 22nd approx."



And again on January 6, 1956

"...News from London continues good. But the Miami nobs and their critics seem displeased. No details as yet."



Standing: Director Herbert Blau with cast members with the San Quentin warden (center) .

In 1957, *Waiting for Godot* returned to a prison for a staging at the San Quentin State Prison in California. Beckett formed a deep relationship with the inmate who played Vladimir, Rick Cluchey. Cluchey went on to work on many of Beckett's

plays after his release. Cluchey said, "The thing that everyone in San Quentin understood about Beckett, while the rest of the world had trouble catching up, was what it meant to be in the face of it." The play had a profound impact on the inmates and spurred them to start a drama group in the prison. The high-profile reception of the San Quentin performance helped it become influential, both in the U.S. and internationally. In 1985 Jan Junson staged *Waiting for Godot* with inmates at Kumla, a maximum-security prison in Sweden, and then, encouraged by Beckett himself, Junson worked with prisoners on *Waiting for Godot* at San Quentin in 1988. Since 2003, San Quentin has been home to one of the best known Shakespeare in Prison programs run by Marin Shakespeare Company.

In 1980 a production was performed at the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town. The multiracial cast, approved by Beckett himself, caused some controversy, but the production later went on tour and in 1981, went international to the US and Britain. It was also invited to participate in

the First International Baltimore Theatre Festival but on arrival the play was picketed by anti-Apartheid demonstrators who claimed that it and the Baxter Theatre were "part and parcel of the South African propaganda machine to misrepresent what was taking place in the country", so the performances were canceled.

In November of 2007, two years after Hurricane Katrina devastated southern Louisiana, *Waiting for Godot* was staged in the Lower Ninth Ward and the Gentilly neighborhoods of New Orleans. These neighborhoods were all but wiped out during the storm and many of the images broadcasted in the aftermath of the hurricane were taken there. One image in particular prompted director Christopher McElroen to take *Godot* to New Orleans. "I thought, 'That's Didi and Gogo, floating down the street on a door!'" he said. "Talking to Wendell [Pierce] about it cemented the idea for me." The production was staged by Paul Chan, the NYC-based arts organization Creative Time, and the Classical Theatre of Harlem. It featured New Orleans native Wendell Pierce as Vladimir and J. Kyle Manzay as Estragon.

In 2009 and 2010, a production directed by Sean Mathias, with Sir Ian McKellen as Estragon and Sir Patrick Stewart as Vladimir, opened at the Haymarket Theatre in London's West End. Their performances



Kyle Manzay, T. Ryder Smith, and Wendell Pierce in a version of *Waiting for Godot* staged in New Orleans in 2007. Photo: Lee Celano for *The New York Times*.



received critical acclaim, and were the subject of an eight-part documentary series called *Theatreland*. Roger Rees replaced Stewart as Vladimir for an international tour. In 2013 and 2014, Mathias, McKellen, and Stewart returned to the play at Broadway's Cort Theatre, this time with Billy Crudup as Lucky and Shuler Hensley as Pozzo.

A 2009 Broadway revival of the play starring Nathan Lane as Estragon, John Goodman as Pozzo, John Glover as Lucky, and Bill Irwin as Vladimir was nominated for three Tony Awards.

*Waiting for Godot* has now been translated into twenty languages and is considered both a classic of French literature and a seminal piece of modern theatre.



From left, Bill Irwin, John Goodman and Nathan Lane in the Broadway production of *Waiting for Godot*. Sara Krulwich/*The New York Times*.

## The Pike Theatre Incident

In the 1950s, theatre was being strictly censored in the UK. When *Waiting for Godot* opened in London in 1955, the Lord Chamberlain insisted on many changes and it was not until 15 years later that the uncensored version was played in England.

Conversely in 1955, Alan Simpson of the Pike Theatre in Dublin produced *Godot* to great success, shocking Beckett, who, in a letter dated November 17, 1953, said to Simpson:

“I think you had better read the play before we go any further. I have translated it myself into English, as literally as I could, and am now revising this translation for American publication in the Spring. Frankly, I cannot see how an integral performance would be possible in Dublin, even in such a theatre as yours, because of certain crudities of language, if for no better reason; and I would not consent to their being changed or removed...If finally you feel you can undertake to put on the play as it stands, there should be no difficulty about permission.”

But just two years later, censorship led to the closure of the same Pike Theatre. After *Godot*'s success in Dublin, Simpson planned to produce Beckett's new play, *Fin de Partie* for the 1957 International Dublin Theatre Festival. Beckett wrote regrettably that the translation would not be finished in time. Simpson then decided to do a reading of one of Beckett's radio plays in company with a mime, *All that Fall*. John Beckett, cousin to Samuel, composed the music but was unable to make the trip to Dublin to make necessary adjustments. Unable to work out the logistics for another Beckett play in time for the Theatre Festival, Simpson decided to mount the European premiere of Tennessee Williams's *The Rose Tattoo*. Simpson was arrested for this production and the legal battle led to the bankruptcy and closure of the Pike Theatre.

“Sorry about all your trouble over *The Rose Tattoo*. Bastards, bastards....” wrote Beckett to Simpson in 1957. Beckett went on to ban the performance of his works in Dublin over this incident, the removal of James Joyce's plays, and the censorship of Sean O'Casey's plays during the Theatre Festival.



# Famous Faces in *Waiting for Godot*

*Waiting for Godot* is no stranger to the stars. Some well-known faces have traversed the stage in this play over the years. Here are a few you may recognize.



A young Geoffrey Rush (Vladimir) opposite his then flatmate Mel Gibson (Estragon) in 1979 at the Jane Street Theatre in Sydney.

Ian McKellen (Estragon) and Patrick Stewart (Vladimir) at Theatre Royal Haymarket in 2009.



Nathan Lane (Estragon) and Bill Irwin (Vladimir) in the 2009 Broadway revival.

Kyle Manzay and Wendell Pierce in the 2007 New Orleans production.



In 2014, Hugo Weaving played Vladimir in Sydney opposite Richard Roxburgh as Estragon.



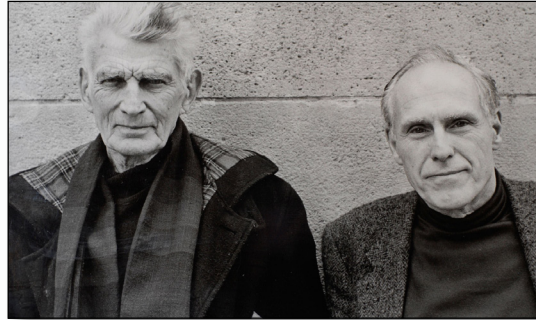
Robin Williams (Estragon), Steve Martin (Vladimir), F. Murray Abraham (Pozzo), and Bill Irwin (Lucky) in the 1988 Lincoln Center production.





# Theatre of the Absurd

Never a formal literary movement, the term “Theatre of the Absurd” first appeared in a work by literary critic Martin Esslin. Esslin’s work, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, concentrated on four Francophone playwrights of the 1950s and 1960s, the writers Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, and Eugene Ionesco, and later Harold Pinter, while also touching on the work of a number of other European playwrights. Esslin felt that each of these playwrights was depicting the human situation as “absurd” in the same way that French philosopher Albert Camus defined it in his 1942 work *The Myth of Sisyphus*: indecipherable, meaningless, and purposeless. Where other playwrights had sought to discuss the “absurd” human condition, Esslin felt, the Absurd playwrights merely presented it to their audience as a given fact.



The playwright Samuel Beckett, left, and Barney Rosset, publisher of *Beckett and Pinter*, in Paris in 1986. Photo: Bob Adelman.

Plays of the Theatre of the Absurd represent a breakdown of cultural certainties. In a world devastated by two world wars and awaiting potential nuclear annihilation, nothing could be depended on. The characters often pass through their plays in a state of confusion, overwhelmed by the irrationality and strangeness of their settings. Language becomes not meaningful communication, but mere attempts to describe the wilderness and confusion of Western culture. In many plays, like in *Waiting for Godot*, language as a rational means of human interaction is destroyed altogether, and characters spout nonsense and have entire conversations without traditional meaning. The playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd completely repudiated the typical logic and causality of Western theatre: one event in a play might provoke any of a

multitude of completely unexpected and out-of-place reactions from the characters, such as Pozzo going blind after losing his watch.

For this reason, the playwrights and other artists of the period frequently rejected traditional forms of art outright. They strove to create art that was strange and shocking to the audience; art that would startle people into questioning their conventional values. The only forerunner to this kind of theatrical havoc was the *Ubu* cycle of plays by Alfred Jarry. These plays, written around the turn of the century, centered on the violent, vulgar, and childish figure of Ubu. The first play was so shocking to the audience when it premiered that it had to be restaged as a puppet play in order to escape being completely shut down. The

Theatre of the Absurd also may have taken inspiration from the nonsense poetry of earlier writers like Lewis Carroll, François Rabelais, and Edward Lear.

Like its one theatrical predecessor, the Theatre of the Absurd did not find initial popularity with everyone. *Waiting for Godot* was more successful than others, but did not go over well with US audiences, many of which walked out after the first act because “nothing happened.”

Today, *Waiting for Godot* is considered one of the greatest plays written in the past century. Although the Theatre of the Absurd came about as a response to a specific epoch in history, today’s theatre still employs devices first used by absurdist playwrights. Edward Albee wrote, “For just as it is true that our response to color and form was forever altered once the impressionist painters put their minds to canvas, it is just as true that the playwrights of The Theatre of the Absurd have forever altered our response to the theatre.”



# Beckett on *Godot*

When a publisher wrote to Beckett asking for his explanation of the play's symbols, he replied: "As far as I know, there are none. Of course, I am open to correction."

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When Sir Ralph Richardson, the British star, asked him if Godot represented God, he replied: "If by Godot I had meant God, I would have said God, not Godot."

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[Beckett] told Alan Schneider, the director of the first American production of the play, that Godot had neither meaning nor symbolism. To Schneider's question, "Who or what does Godot mean," Beckett replied, "If I knew, I would have said so in the play." Schneider also noted that, while Beckett was quite willing to discuss specific details of the play, he thought that his work should speak for itself and was perfectly willing to let its supposed meanings "fall where they may."

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INTERVIEWER: How can you be so preoccupied with salvation when you don't believe in it?

BECKETT: I am interested in the shape of ideas, even if I do not believe in them. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine. I wish I could remember the Latin. It is even finer in Latin than in English: "Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned." That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters.

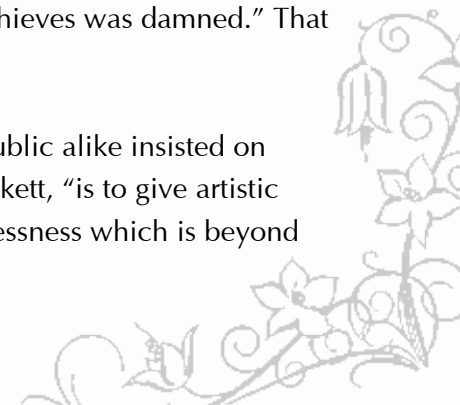
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The early success of the play, [Beckett] told Alec Reid in 1956, was based on a fundamental misunderstanding. Critics and public alike insisted on interpreting in allegorical or symbolic terms a play which strove at all cost to avoid definition. "The end," as Reid quoted Beckett, "is to give artistic expression to something hitherto almost ignored — the irrational state of unknowingness where we exist, this mental weightlessness which is beyond reason."

"I don't know who Godot is. I don't even know (above all don't know) if he exists. And I don't know if they believe in him or not – those two who are waiting for him. The other two who pass by towards the end of each of the two acts, that must be to break up the monotony. All I knew I showed. It's not much, but it's enough for me, by a wide margin. I'll even say that I would have been satisfied with less. As for wanting to find in all that a broader, loftier meaning to carry away from the performance, along with the program and the Eskimo pie, I cannot see the point of it. But it must be possible ... Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo, Lucky, their time and their space, I was able to know them a little, but far from the need to understand. Maybe they owe you explanations. Let them supply it. Without me. They and I are through with each other."

-Samuel Beckett

Part of a note sent to Roger Blin on February 17, 1952 in advance of an abridged version of *45* being performed for radio broadcast.





# Pronouncing *Godot*

## “Name, no, nothing is nameable”

*One of the most enduring controversies surrounding the English version of this play is the title itself. How is Godot pronounced? Here are takes from some of the major players, in no order of importance:*

Sean Mathias, British actor/director: “GOD-oh,” with the accent on the first syllable, is how “it should be pronounced. It has to be, really,” he said. “There’s no other way to do it.”

John Lahr, theater critic and son of Bert Lahr: “[‘GOD-oh’] is too obvious. Beckett is more elusive and poetic, and he wouldn’t hit it on the head like that.” Counterpoint: ‘God’ in French (the original language of the play) is Dieu - so ‘Godot’ is not reminiscent of “The Almighty” *en Français*.

Samuel Beckett, playwright (HEARSAY): “‘Godot,’ from the French ‘godasse’ (boot), puts the emphasis on the first syllable, not the second.” and “If I’d have meant ‘God,’ I would’ve said ‘God.’”

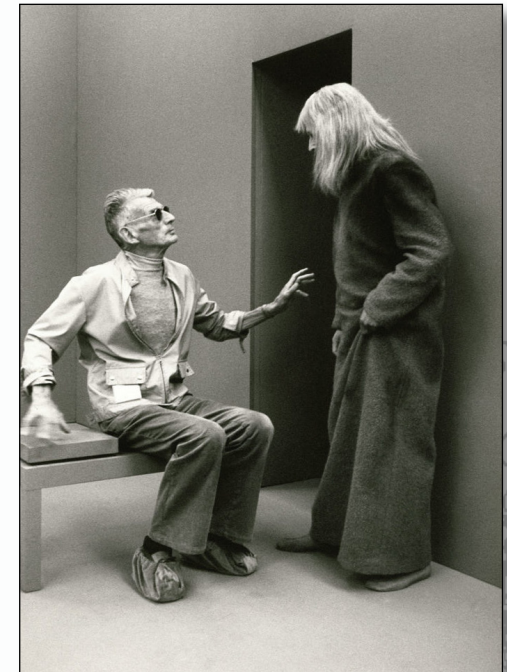
Georges Borchardt, Beckett’s longtime literary agent: “I myself have always pronounced it the French way, with equal emphasis on both syllables. “As the agents for the estate, we do not insist on any particular pronunciation.”

Dr. Mark Nixon, director of the Beckett International Foundation: “The correct way is with stress on the first syllable, but I don’t feel strongly in the sense that I would correct somebody who said it differently.”

According to The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, when *Waiting for Godot* was performed in the 1980s by the San Quentin Drama Workshop, Beckett sought “to counter the natural American tendency to stress the second syllable” and asked his actors “consciously to pronounce it with the stress on the first syllable instead.”

Shane Baker, translator of *Waiting for Godot* into Yiddish: “Actors in this version of the play said ‘god-OH’ because that’s how it’s known in America. I was the translator, but the producer and director wanted god-OH, so there you have it. We did it wrong. Look, I had other battles I had to fight. Saying ‘god-OH’ has become part of the vernacular, and it is too late to talk audiences out of it. The rest of the play is jarring enough. Why upset them?”

Ian McKellen: “Beckett insisted the correct pronunciation was GODot and not GodOT.”



Samuel Beckett and actor Klaus Herm rehearse Beckett’s television play *Geistertrio* (Ghost Trio), 1977.  
© SWR/Hugo Jehle.



# Commentary & Criticism

“Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful.” This line spoken by one of the characters in the play, provides its best summary. *Godot* is a masterpiece that will cause despair for men in general and for playwrights in particular. I think that the opening night at the *Théâtre de Babylone* is as important as the opening of Pirandello [*Six Characters in Search of an Author*] in Paris in 1923, presented by Pitoeff. One can only raise one’s hat — a bowler to be sure, as in the play — and pray to heaven for a little talent. The greatness, the artful playing, a style — we are “somewhere” in the theatre. The music-hall sketch of Pascal’s *Pensées* as played by the Fratellini clowns.

-Jean Anouilh, Playwright

Once the play was shown, correspondence digitised by the British Library shows how Lady Howitt called for the play to be banned over its “lavatory references”. It was subsequently viewed by examiner CW Heriot, who in his report to the Lord Chamberlain said that he had “endured two hours of angry boredom” for “a piece quite without drama and with very little meaning”

-*The Guardian*, The Lord Chamberlain’s Report, 1955

“A classic such as *Waiting for Godot* speaks across generations directly to each audience member.”

-Wendell Pierce, actor 2007 New Orleans

“Beckett didn’t want to theorise,” he remembers. “He said he’d written the play without knowing what was going to come next. He just wrote it, hearing these voices. He simply wanted to communicate the tone of the voice, what was happening between the characters. He said that the laughter and the tears were all that mattered.”

-Director Anthony Page who worked with Beckett on Britain’s first uncensored version of the play in 1964.

“Ultimately, *Waiting for Godot* is a very positive play, which talks about the resilience of human beings. The tree was central to my staging; when it started to sprout leaves in act two, that sent a powerful message to oppressed people - it suggested new life and resolution, an image of hope against all the desolation.

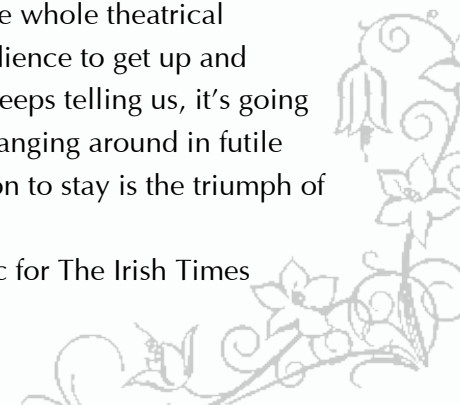
-Benjy Francis, actor/director  
(Directed and starred as Pozzo in an all-black production at the Market Theatre, Cape Town, 1976)

“[One] of Beckett’s most notable characteristics is his ability to make truly funny jokes about the genuinely worst aspects of human existence, and nowhere is this talent more evident than in *Godot*”.

-Anthony Cronin, Biographer

“*Waiting for Godot* is essentially a joke on the whole theatrical experience, an extended invitation to the audience to get up and leave. Nothing is going to happen, the play keeps telling us, it’s going to get more boring... Why do you insist on hanging around in futile expectation? Like Didi and Gogo, our decision to stay is the triumph of hope over experience.”

-Fintan O’Toole, Critic for The Irish Times







# Explore Online



## —WAITING FOR... THE VIDEO GAME

This 2011 computer game was inspired by Beckett’s play. Use the “w”, “a”, “s”, and “d” keys on your keyboard to move, and the “return/enter” key to select. [vectorbelly.com/waitingforgrodoudou](http://vectorbelly.com/waitingforgrodoudou)



## —THE MOST BECKETT-ESQUE INTERVIEW WITH BECKETT

After winning the 1969 Nobel Prize in Literature, Swedish Television called for an interview. Beckett agreed only with the strange stipulation that the interviewer couldn’t ask any questions. Thus the following clip was created.



—*The Hollywood Reporter* explores *Dance First*, the soon-to-be-release feature film on the life of Samuel Beckett.

Alan Schneider’s biographical tale of bringing *Godot* to the US as printed in *The New York Times*, 1985. \_\_\_\_\_



—NOLO.com examines the acclaimed 2007 post-Katrina staging of *Godot*.



Traffic of our stage: Why Waiting for Godot? \_\_\_\_\_



Samuel Beckett London 1984, John Mimihan.

# Explore Further

*Beckett - Waiting for Godot* by Lawrence Graver  
*Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* by James Knowlson

*Beckett and Behan, and a Theatre in Dublin* by Alan Simpson  
*Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, Cambridge Univ Press, J. Pilling

