

A Noise Within Study Guide



Waiting for Godot

*Destiny's
Embrace*
A NOISE
WITHIN
2007/08 SEASON



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Waiting for Godot

Cast of Characters/Synopsis



Vladimir
Estragon
Pozzo
Lucky
Boy

Vladimir (also called Didi) and Estragon (also called Gogo) arrive at a pre-arranged location to await the arrival of someone named Godot. They pass the time in conversation and argument. They are interrupted by the arrival of Pozzo, a cruel man claiming to own the land that they are standing on. Pozzo has brought with him his servant, Lucky, whom he controls using a long rope. Pozzo entertains Didi and Gogo by directing Lucky to perform a dance and deliver a lecture loosely based on the theories of the Irish philosopher Bishop Berkeley.

After Pozzo and Lucky depart, a boy arrives supposedly with a message from Godot stating that Godot will not come today, but most certainly tomorrow.

The next day, the Didi and Gogo are waiting for Godot. Pozzo and Lucky arrive again, but this time, Pozzo has gone blind and Lucky has gone dumb. The boy arrives to announce that Godot will not appear.

The oft quoted ending goes as follows:

Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?
Estragon: Yes, let's go.
They do not move

About the Play

The Playwright



Samuel Beckett

(1906-1989)

“The farther he goes the more good it does me. I don’t want philosophies, tracts, dogmas, creeds, ways out, truths, answers, nothing from the bargain basement. He is the most courageous, remorseless writer going and the more he grinds my nose in the shit the more I am grateful to him. He’s not f---ing me about, he’s not leading me up any garden path, he’s not slipping me a wink, he’s not flogging me a remedy or a path or a revelation or a basinful of breadcrumbs, he’s not selling me anything I don’t want to buy — he doesn’t give a bollock whether I buy or not — he hasn’t got his hand over his heart. Well, I’ll buy his goods, hook, line and sinker, because he leaves no stone unturned and no maggot lonely. He brings forth a body of beauty. His work is beautiful.”

Harold Pinter on Samuel Beckett

BORN IN A SUBURB OF DUBLIN to a middle class, Protestant family, Samuel Beckett’s early life was a comfortable one. The family home, Cooldrinagh, was large and complete with garden and tennis courts. However, Samuel was a generally unhappy child. He once said, “I had little talent for happiness.”

He attended the local playschool before going to Earlsford House School in the centre of Dublin. In 1919 Beckett went to Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh (the same school attended by Oscar Wilde). He was a natural athlete and excelled at cricket. Beckett studied French, Italian and English at Trinity College in Dublin from 1923 to 1927. While there he studied under the eminent Berkeley scholar Dr A.A. Luce. After university, Beckett taught briefly at Campbell College in Belfast before accepting a post in 1928 as *lecteur d’anglais* in the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, and the city quickly won his heart.

The unhappy child had grown into an unhappy young man, sometimes so depressed that he would stay in bed until mid-afternoon. Conversation with him was difficult — it took lots of hours and drinks to warm him up.

However, to those that knew him best, he was gregarious, loyal and fun. In a recent interview with Benedict Nightingale of *The Times*, director Peter Brook described his friend Samuel Beckett as “a good companion, a loyal friend and a very open, laughing man, a bon viveur with a love of life and wine and food and women and music and literature and the things in his past, like the Irish countryside, which he could describe in spellbinding detail.” Brook remembered Beckett telling him how he’d “sit for hours in front of a piece of paper on which he’d written only ‘a man is sitting at’ asking himself question after question about that man, his seat, his table, everything: “That was his inner torture. He was a perfectionist and he had to purify and purify before he dared finish a sentence.”

It was in Paris that he was introduced to fellow Irishman James Joyce. Beckett would go on to assist Joyce in researching *Finnegan’s Wake*. Their friendship cooled after Beckett spurned advances from Joyce’s daughter Lucia. He remarked after this episode that he was dead and had no feelings that were human in nature.

In 1929 Beckett published his first work, an essay entitled *Dante...Bruno. Vico...Joyce*. The

essay defends Joyce's work and was included in *Our Examination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* — a book of essays on Joyce. In 1930 he won a small literary prize with a poem *Whoroscope* — in which Descartes meditates on the subject of time and the transiency of life.

Later that year, Beckett returned to Trinity College as a lecturer, but remained only a year as he had become disillusioned. He traveled throughout Europe observing and writing. During this period he wrote *Proust*, a critical study of the French author; his first novel — *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*; a short story collection, *More Pricks than Kicks*; and a number of essays and reviews. His novel *Murphy* was published in 1937 and Beckett translated the work into French in the following year. Following his brief affair with Peggy Guggenheim, Beckett found himself again in Paris. While refusing the solicitations of a notorious pimp by the name of Prudent, Beckett was stabbed in the chest and nearly died. Beckett confronted his attacker in court and eventually dropped the charges. The publicity of the attack attracted the attention of a young woman, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, and the two began a lifelong companionship.

At the beginning of the war, Beckett remained in Paris, even through the occupation. Beckett joined the French Resistance after the 1940 occupation by Germany, working as a courier. On several occasions, he was nearly arrested by the Gestapo. In 1942, his unit was betrayed and he and Suzanne fled south to the unoccupied Roussillon in the Provence Alpes Cote d'Azur region. He continued to assist the Resistance by storing armaments in his back yard. He indirectly helped the Maquis sabotage the German army in the Vaucluse Mountains. Beckett rarely spoke about his wartime efforts and would refer to his work with the Resistance as 'boy scout stuff', but was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* and the *Médaille de la Résistance* by the French Government.

In 1945 Beckett returned to Paris. On a visit to Dublin later that year, he claimed to have a revelation in his mother's bedroom in which his entire future literary was revealed to him. He wrote about this experience in his 1958 play *Krapp's Last Tape*.

Beckett chose to write primarily in French because, he said that it was easier for him to

write 'without style' in that language. He wanted the discipline and economy of expression that an acquired language would force upon on him. He translated all of his works into English himself with the exception of *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, which were translated in collaboration with Patrick Bowles.

His first real triumph came with the premiere of *En attendant Godot* at the Théâtre de Babylone on January 5, 1953. The play was an instant success and ran for 400 performances enjoying the critical praise of writers such as Tennessee Williams, Jean Anouilh, Thornton Wilder and William Saroyan.

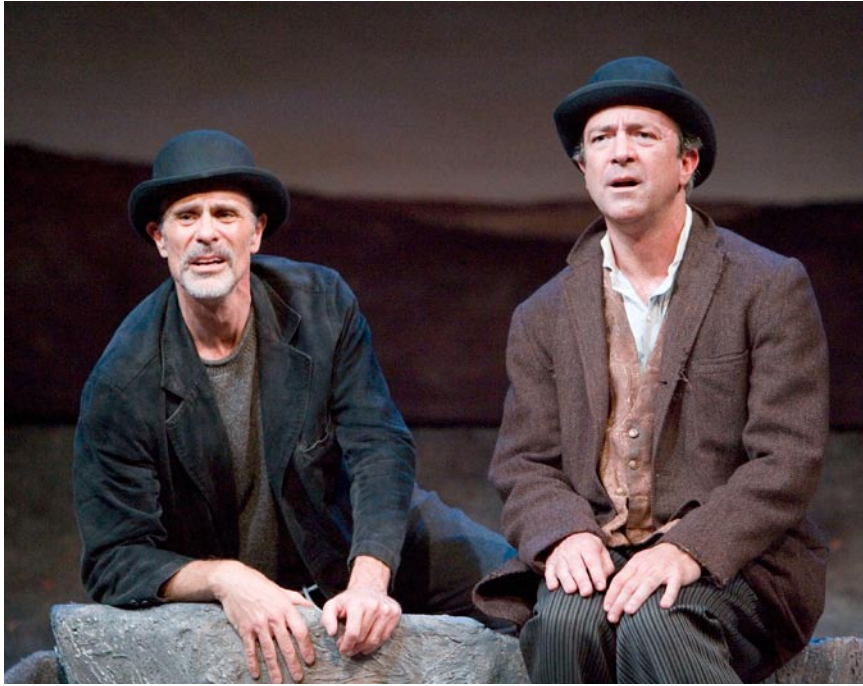
The success of *Waiting for Godot* in 1953 opened up a career in theatre for Beckett. His second play, *Endgame*, premiered in French at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 1957. He went on to write many other successful plays including *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Happy Days* and *Play*. It also led to invitations to attend rehearsals and productions worldwide leading to a new career as a theatre director. In 1956 the BBC commissioned a radio play, *All That Fall*, and he went on to write several radio, film and television plays.

In 1961 he married Suzanne mainly for reasons relating to French Inheritance Law. In 1961 he received the International Publishers' Forementor Prize, which he shared that year with Jorge Luis Borges.

Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969.

Suzanne died in July of 1989. Beckett, suffering from emphysema and Parkinson's disease died on December 22 of that same year. They were interred together in the Cimetière du Montparnasse in Paris.

Beckett is one of the most widely discussed and highly prized 20th century authors. His works have been translated into over twenty languages and he has influenced writers such as Vaclav Havel, Eugene Ionesco, Tom Stoppard, Edward Albee, Harold Pinter, John Banville, and Aidan Higgins. Composers such as Luciano Berio, Morton Feldman, Philip Glass and Heinz Holliger have created musical works based on his texts. Beckett also influenced visual artists such as Bruce Nauman and Alexander Arotin. ❖



Major works by Beckett

Plays

Eleutheria (1940s; published 1995)
Waiting for Godot (1952)
Act Without Words I (1956)
Act Without Words II (1956)
Endgame (1957)
Krapp's Last Tape (1958)
Rough for Theatre I (late 1950s)
Rough for Theatre II (late 1950s)
Happy Days (1960)
Play (1963)
Come and Go (1965)
Breath (1969)
Not I (1972)
That Time (1975)
Footfalls (1975)
A Piece of Monologue (1980)
Rockaby (1981)
Ohio Impromptu (1981)
Catastrophe (1982)
What Where (1983)

Radio Plays

All That Fall (1956)
From an Abandoned Work (1957)
Embers (1959)
Rough for Radio I (1961)
Rough for Radio II (1961)
Words and Music (1961)
Cascando (1962)

Television

Eh Joe (1965)
Ghost Trio (1975)
...but the clouds... (1976)
Quad I + II (1981)
Nacht und Träume (1982)

Novels

Dream of Fair to Middling Women (1932)
Murphy (1938)
Watt (1945, pub 1953)
Mercier and Camier (1946)
Molloy (1951)
Malone Dies (1951)
The Unnamable (1953)
How It Is (1961)

About the Play

Theatre of the Absurd

THE TERM "THEATRE OF THE ABSURD" was first coined by Martin Esslin as a title for his 1962 book in which he discusses the works of various European playwrights of the post-war era. Esslin saw a common thread in the work of playwrights such as Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Adamov that demonstrated their fundamental belief that life is naturally without meaning and one must find one's own purpose. This philosophy was an offshoot of Camus' thesis in his work *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin says:

"The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being —that is, in terms of concrete stage images. This is the difference between the approach of the philosopher and that of the poet. The hallmark of this attitude is its sense that the certitudes and unshakeable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions."

Although Theatre of the Absurd has its roots in Dadaism, avant-garde art and poetry of the first decades of the 20th century, absurdist elements in plays were not a new theatrical innovation. In fact, wild humor was included in the plays of Aristophanes and of the late classical period. Medieval mystery plays depicted characters dealing with existential issues and in the Elizabethan age, writers represented the world using mythological ideals.

The single play that can be acknowledged as the precursor to Theatre of the Absurd was Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (part of A Noise Within's 2005-06 season). Other writers who inspired this movement included Luigi Pirandello, Franz Kafka and Guillaume Apollinaire as well as surrealist painters such as Magritte and composers like Varese.

Absurdism was, purely by origin, an *avant garde* movement that was distinctly Parisian, linked initially to small theaters found in the Latin Quarter. It took time for the movement to gain international prominence, but Theatre of the Absurd grew in popularity during and





immediately after World War II, when the fragility of human life was highlighted by the horrors of war.

The purpose of Theatre of the Absurd can be seen as an attempt to restore the importance of myth and ritual. In the world of the absurd, man was aware of the realities of his condition and as a result he suffered primeval torment mixed with the feelings of the lost soul. Theatre of the Absurd shocked mankind out of its complacency. This is not to say that its goal was to depress audiences, rather it tried to bring them closer to reality and understand their own purpose in life.

In the context of theatre history, the Absurdist movement was a blatant rebellion against convention —almost anti-theatre. It lacked logic, conflict and plot and was surreal in nature.

Existentialist Roots

To understand Theatre of the Absurd, one must understand the existentialist ideal that “existence precedes essence”. Man is a conscious subject, not a thing to be controlled and exists as an undefined conscious being. “Existentialism says I am nothing else by my own conscious existence.”

The other existentialist theme is an underlying sense of anguish, angst, fear or dread not directed to any singular thing or being. This anguish is a universal condition suffered by humankind. Existentialism concurs with some Judaic and Christian beliefs that human life is lived in suffering, sin and guilt and rejects ideas such as happiness and optimism as these are considered superficial.

One of the leading figures of French existentialism was Jean Paul Sartre. He stated that “human beings require a rational basis for their lives, but are unable to achieve one, thus human existence is a futile passion.”

Beckett’s own understanding of this existentialist philosophy can be summarized by this quote, “Nothing is more real than nothing.”

Characteristics of Absurdist Theatre

- Language in an absurdist drama goes nowhere.

One of the most important characteristics of this genre was its distrust of language as a means of communication. To the Absurdists, language had evolved into nothing more than meaningless exchanges. Words did not express the human experience. In the Theatre of the Absurd, language is an unreliable tool of communication. Playwrights of this genre would distort conventional speech, jargon and slogans to demonstrate that by going beyond everyday speech one can communicate in a more honest manner.

In some examples of Absurdist drama, the dialogue resembles nothing more than gobbledygook.

- Physical objects have a higher importance than language.

What actually happens goes beyond what is being said about it. The subtext has primary importance, over and above what is being said. The Theatre of the Absurd aims to communicate a totality of perception and had to transcend language.

- Absurd drama subverts logic. It revels in the unexpected and logically impossible.
- The plotline of an absurdist drama, if any exists, generally ends up where it started — nothing has been accomplished and characters are the same at the end of the play as they were at the start.

Michael Cummings in his guide to *Waiting for Godot* likens the structure of absurdist drama to “a spaceship orbiting earth or a Ferris Wheel revolving on an axle: the spaceship and the Ferris wheel endlessly repeat their paths. If only the passengers on the spaceship and the Ferris wheel could break free and fly off on their own...but they cannot. They are tethered to forces beyond their control.”

In the case of Vladimir and Estragon, they wait for Godot at the beginning of the play, in the middle of the play and are still waiting at the end of the play. They will continue to wait for Godot. They are constantly moving but never moving on. ❖

THE ESSENTIAL ABSURDIST READING LIST

Ubu Roi BY ALFRED JARRY

A good starting point. To understand how Theatre of Absurd evolved, it is helpful to read one of the great influences.

Waiting for Godot BY SAMUEL BECKETT

Endgame BY SAMUEL BECKETT

Waiting for Godot deals with waiting, *Endgame* deals with leaving

Rhinoceros BY EUGENE IONESCO

The Bald Soprano BY EUGENE IONESCO

The Balcony BY JEAN GENET

The play is set inside a bordello in a modern European city that is going through a revolution. When the city's rulers are destroyed, the bordello's patrons impersonate the city's leaders.

Tango BY SLAWOMIR MROZEK

A young man who has grown up in a valueless world stages a revolution to restore order.

Le Ping Pong BY ARTHUR ADAMOV

Two men waste their lives trying to build the perfect pinball machine.

The Dumb Waiter BY HAROLD PINTER

Two hired killers wait around for their next assignment.

The Birthday Party BY HAROLD PINTER

A young man seeks shelter from a hostile world and finds it in what he thinks is a safe house. Two visitors from his old life track him down.

The Homecoming BY HAROLD PINTER

A man takes his wife home to visit his dysfunctional family.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead BY TOM STOPPARD

An absurd take on Hamlet from the points of view of two minor characters in Shakespeare's Hamlet.

Fuddy Meers BY DAVID LINDSAY-ABAIRE

An amnesiac wakes up every morning a blank and her family must fill in the memories.

The Marriage BY WITOLD GOMBROWICZ

An example of drama demonstrating the shattered consciousness of post-war Europe.

About the Play

Finding Meaning in *Waiting for Godot*

WHEN GOOGLE-ING WAITING FOR GODOT, one will come up with approximately 885,000 entries. Many of these entries are attempting to find hidden meaning in the play. Indeed there is many a doctoral thesis on the subject of meaning in *Waiting for Godot* gathering dust on the shelves of libraries worldwide.

First of all, is it worth it to delve into the play to find hidden meaning? Beckett certainly did not intend that and was very clear that he had put into the play all that he knew about the characters and their situation.

On first glance it is easy to assume that the character of Godot* who never appears, is “God”. The names are similar—in English that is. But the play was written in French

and in that language the word for God is “Dieu”. Beckett later regretted calling the absent character “Godot” because it opened a Pandora’s box of theories. When Roger Blin, director of the first production of the play, asked Beckett who or what Godot stood for, Beckett replied that it suggested itself to him by the slang word for *boot* in French, which was *godillot* or *godasse*, because feet play such an important part in the play.

When the play was being cast for London, Beckett wanted the great actor Ralph Richardson to play Pozzo. The play was sent to Richardson who read it and sent a letter back to Beckett saying how much he liked the play, but “who is Godot?” Beckett immediately rescinded the offer.



Human beings are naturally inquisitive and we, as the audience want to speculate on Godot's identity. We want answers. Beckett suggests that the identity of Godot is a rhetorical question and perhaps it is wiser to stress the 'for' in the title of the play and see the purpose of the action in the two men who are waiting. We want to know how Gogo and Didi got there and why, and we have to content ourselves as the audience with accepting that that is not the important issue in this play. This is a hard concept to deal with as we are used to, in drama, getting the answers.

The identity of Godot is irrelevant. "Why", "how" and "who" are irrelevant. The important element in the play is the act of waiting for someone or something that never arrives.

Waiting in the play induces boredom as a theme. The existentialist writer Albert Camus, believed that through boredom or waiting, people think seriously about their identity. This is similar to the idea that meditation allows individuals to think clearly. Through repetition of action and dialogue, Beckett illustrates this. The two tramps are always asking questions: Who is Godot? Where are Gogo and Didi? Who beats Gogo? These are questions which will never be answered. The tramps repeatedly inspect the inside of their bowler hats. Why? What are they searching for? Perhaps this action symbolizes mankind's search for answers within the vacuum of the universe.

Camus and other existentialists suggested that trying to answer questions about one's own identity could drive one to the brink of insanity. In *Waiting for Godot*, the tramps are continuously trying to prove their existence in order to retain their sanity.

The play is filled with Christian stories and imagery. Some critics are convinced that the play is Beckett's commentary on faith: that the tree symbolizes the Tree of Knowledge and the Cross. Didi and Gogo are Everyman and his conscience. The relationship between them symbolizes marriage. Some have even said that the two tramps symbolize the two thieves crucified with Christ. Beckett himself

repudiated these and all such theories. He was not a particularly religious man so, would he really write a play with sacred undertones?

Other interpretations abound.

Those looking for political connotations see the play as a commentary on the cold war or the French resistance or Ireland's view of Britain. Graham Hassell writes "where society has ever been blighted by a greedy ruling elite keeping the working classes passive and ignorant by whatever means."

Psychological interpretations of the Freudian kind include Bernard Dukore's theory that Didi, Gogo and Godot represent Freud's description of the psyche in *The Ego and the Id* written 1923. And the Jungian view is that the four personalities are reminiscent of the four aspects of the soul grouped in pairs: the ego (Pozzo) and the shadow (Lucky), the masculine persona (Vladimir) and the soul's feminine image (Estragon).

Some see *Waiting for Godot* as a biographical sketch documenting a journey into Roussillon that Beckett and his wife took during the war when they slept in haystacks during the day and traveled by night.

Some say that play's casting of only males and few references to women could be symbolic of a homosexual relationship. Beckett's play was staged with all-female casts in several productions the 1980's. Beckett was unhappy with this and even took a Dutch theatrical company to court over the issue. He lost the case, but he felt so strongly about male casting for this play that it a clause is now included in the license that every theatre company has to sign stating that only males will be cast in the roles.

We as the audience are wiser after seeing a performance of this play. Not necessarily secure, but wiser. We all are waiting for a Godot somewhere in our lives. It is how we wait and what we do with that time that makes the difference. ❖

*As a footnote, there has always been a discrepancy regarding the pronunciation of "Godot". In Britain and Ireland it is pronounced with the stress on the first syllable. In the US, it is usually pronounced with the stress on the second syllable. Beckett himself said that the emphasis should be on the first syllable and that the US pronunciation was incorrect.

Waiting for Godot

In Performance



Scene from *Waiting for Godot*. Directed by Roger Blin. Théâtre de Babylone, Paris, 1952

WAITING FOR GODOT was written in French between October 9th 1948 and January 29th 1949. Beckett is said to have based the play on the painting *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* by Caspar David Friedrich from 1819. He chose to write in French primarily because it allowed him to write freely within the discipline and economy that the French language afforded him.

Waiting for Godot had many landmark productions, with each director and actor trying to produce a play that could be considered definitive. There are not just a couple of notable productions—there are many. Who could have imagined that a play with such humble beginnings could have evolved into a worldwide phenomenon?

On February 17th 1952, an abridged version of *Waiting for Godot* was broadcast on the radio. Beckett did not show up to the studio at the Club d'Essai de la Radio, but sent a note to director Roger Blin that read:

"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."

The play was first performed onstage as *En attendant Godot* in 1952 at the tiny Théâtre de Babylone, Paris. The production was directed by Roger Blin and starred Pierre Latour, Lucien Raimbourg, Roger Blin, Jean Martin, and Serge Lecointe.

Its English language premiere was at the Arts Theatre Club in London and was directed by a 23-year old Peter Hall. Due to various elements in the play and strict censorship by the Lord Chamberlain, the play had to be performed in a private club theatre. When the play transferred to the Criterion Theatre in the West End, the

Lord Chamberlain insisted on the elimination or alteration of specific words and passages to make them less objectionable.

There were even attempts to completely ban the play from public performance. Lady Dorothy Howitt wrote to the Lord Chamberlain, "One of the many themes running through the play is the desire of two tramps to continually relieve themselves. Such a dramatization of lavatory necessities is offensive and against all sense of British decency."



American Premiere of *Waiting for Godot* (Coconut Grove Playhouse, Florida, 1956). L TO R: Burt Lahr (Estragon), Tom Ewell (Vladimir), and Alan Schneider (director).

Waiting for Godot had its North American premiere at the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Florida, in January of 1956. Directed by Alan Schneider, the play featured Bert Lahr, Tom Ewell, Arthur Malet, Jack Scott Smart, and Jimmy Oster. The play was billed as "The Laugh Sensation of two Continents", but many patrons walked out and the critics panned the play. The show closed after two weeks. Beckett confided to the director, "Of course I know the Miami swells and their live

models can hardly be described as theatre-goers and that their reactions are no more significant than those of a Jersey herd and I presume their critics are worthy of them."

This production was re-staged for the John Golden Theatre in New York by Herbert Berghof who retained only Bert Lahr in the cast. Lahr was a veteran of Broadway musicals and movies (most notably as the Cowardly Lion in *The Wizard of Oz*). Brooks Atkinson wrote of his performance, "Bert Lahr has never been given a performance as glorious as his tatterdemalión Gogo, who seems to stand for all the stumbling, bewildered people of the earth who go on living without knowing why. He is an actor in the Pantomime tradition who has a thousand ways to move and a hundred ways to grimace in order to make the story interesting and theatrical and touching, too. His long experience as a bawling mountebank

has equipped Mr. Lahr to represent eloquently the tragic comedy of one of the lost souls of the earth."

Other cast members included E.G. Marshall, Kurt Kaszar and Alvin Epstein. Brooks Atkinson, in his review for the *New York Times* said, "Although the drama is puzzling, the director and the actors play through it as though they understand every line of it." He called Beckett's play "an uneventful, maundering, loquacious drama," but was enthralled by the play, which was "puzzling and convincing at the same time."

A year later, the play opened on Broadway at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. Directed again by Herbert Berghof, this was the first all-black production of the play and featured Manton Moreland, Earle Hyman, Geoffrey Holder, Rex Ingram, and Bert Chamberlain.

In November of 1957, a landmark production at San Quentin State Prison was directed by Herbert Blau. The play, chosen because its cast was entirely male, greatly impressed the inmates who, unlike the "Miami swells," understood a thing or two about the idea of waiting. The formation of the San Quentin Drama Workshop was a result of the production's success.

The first television broadcast of the play was on June 22, 1961 for the BBC. It was directed by Donald McWhinnie and featured Peter Woodthorpe, Jack MacGowran, Timothy Bateson, Felix Felton, and Mark Mileham in the cast. When Beckett saw the production, he was not pleased: "My play wasn't written for this box. My play was written for small men locked in a big space." Beckett was not against television as a medium, as he would go on to write plays specifically for television, but for this piece he felt it represented his work very poorly.

Europe was in love with Beckett's play and there was no end to the succession of productions:



A production opened at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on December 30, 1964. Directed by a young Anthony Page, assisted by Beckett himself. Featured Alfred Lynch, Nicol Williamson, Jack MacGowran, Paul Curran, Kirk Martin. The Royal Court has traditionally been the “writer’s theatre” and rarely (even to this day) produces a play featuring star actors. The “star” for this theatre is the writer and the play.

In February of 1965 Beckett again assisted a young director, Deryk Mendel on a production, which opened at the Schiller-Theatre Werkstatt in Berlin. Beckett thought this production was mediocre and was dissatisfied with the casting. Ten years later, Beckett returned to this theatre to direct a production totally in German of *Warten auf Godot*. In April of 1976, Beckett brought this German production and the cast of *Warten auf Godot* to the Royal Court Theatre in London.

The first production on the West Coast was at the Actors’ Theatre in Los Angeles in 1977 and was directed by Ralph Waite. The cast featured Donald Moffat, Dana Elcar, Bruce French, Ralph Waite, and Rico Williams.

In 1978, the play’s original director Roger Blin, directed a production (as *En attendant Godot*)

at the Odéon-Théâtre de France in Paris. The cast was comprised of French stage and film stars Jean-Paul Rousillin, Michel Aumont, Georges Riquier, François Chaumette.

Robin Williams and Steve Martin as Estragon and Vladimir, along with Bill Irwin and F Murray Abraham, starred in Mike Nichols’ 1988 production of the play. Beckett was consulted on this reading of his play, but that did not stop the stars from taking liberties with the play and critics felt the play had been obliterated by the actors.

Other stars who have tackled the play are Ben Kingsley and Denis Quilley in a production in the late 1980’s directed by Peter Hall.

Seeing one production of *Waiting for Godot* is not like seeing another. Each actor and director brings with him a different experience, a different perspective on the characters and their situation. The director of *A Noise Within’s* production, Andrew Traister, has directed several productions of the play at various times throughout his career. He commented that when he had first directed the play, he was younger and at a different point in his life and career. In revisiting the piece at this stage in his life, he brings yet another perspective.

Peter Hall when asked how his various productions have differed over the years said, “I don’t know. A production is created by a group of actors and a director making an honest response to a play at a certain time and a certain place. It differs and should differ. *Godot* becomes clearer by the year and less “absurdist”.

Ironically, *Waiting for Godot* was Beckett’s least favorite piece among his works, primarily because of the way that it overshadowed the rest of his work. However, it was the piece that brought him notoriety and financial stability and as such, held a certain place in his affections. Even though he was asked on several occasions, Beckett was not emotionally able, during his lifetime to sell or donate his original manuscript for the play. ❖

Waiting for Godot

Classroom Activities

Questions for before and after the performance

Reading *Waiting for Godot* is one thing and seeing it is another. As an exercise, ask your students the following questions before they see the play and then again following their visit to *A Noise Within*. How did their answers differ?



1. *Waiting for Godot* is labeled as a 'tragicomedy'. What elements of the play are comic? What tragic? How do they work together to give the play meaning?
2. What do Vladimir and Estragon represent?
3. What characteristics differentiate the two characters?
4. What does the tree symbolize? The tree is bare in the first part of the play. On the second day, Beckett instructs in his stage direction that the tree has four or five leaves. What do the leaves symbolize?
5. What or who does Godot represent? (Keep in mind that Beckett himself could not answer this, so it is really a rhetorical question.) Does it matter?
6. What is the structural purpose of having Pozzo and Lucky in the play?
7. What is the purpose of having those characters appear altered in the second act?
8. Beckett was particular about his stage directions. Choose a section of *Waiting for Godot* and write a completely different set of stage directions, but keep the dialogue the same. How does this alter the meaning of the play?
9. If the two parts of the play were reversed how would that effect your interpretation of the play?

Waiting

We all have periods in our life when we are waiting for something that never seems to come: the bus, an important phone call, text message or email, the end of a particularly boring class...

Describe one of these occasions in as much detail as possible. Describe your surroundings. Were you inside or outside? What was the weather like? Did the weather add to your anxiety? Did you have time to kill or were you in a hurry? What did you do while you were waiting? Did you meet someone who helped you pass the time or were you alone while you were waiting?

Bibliography/Resources

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About Theatre Arts



Being an Audience Member

Today, movies and television take audiences away from what was once the number one form of entertainment: going to the theatre. But attending a live performance is still one of the most thrilling and active forms of spending time. In a theatre, observers are catapulted into the action, especially at an intimate venue like *A Noise Within*, whose thrust stage reaches out into the audience and whose actors can see, hear, and feel the response of the crowd. Although in the past playhouses could sometimes be rowdy, today participating in the performance by giving respect and attention to the actors is the most appropriate behavior at a theatrical performance. Shouting out or even whispering can be heard throughout the auditorium, as can rustling paper or ringing phones.

After *A Noise Within*'s performance of *Waiting for Godot*, you will have the opportunity to discuss the play's content and style with the performing artists and directors. You may wish to remind students to observe the performance carefully or to compile questions ahead of time so they are prepared to participate in the discussion.

Theatre Vocabulary

These terms will be included in pre- and post-performance discussions at *A Noise Within*.

blocking: The instructions a director gives his actors that tell them how and where to move in relation to each other or to the set in a particular scene.

character: The personality or part portrayed by an actor on stage.

conflict: The opposition of people or forces which causes the play's rising action.

dramatic irony: A dramatic technique used by a writer in which a character is unaware of something the audience knows.

genre: Literally, "kind" or "type." In literary terms, genre refers to the main types of literary form, principally comedy and tragedy. It can also refer to forms that are more specific to a given historical era, such as the revenge tragedy, or to more specific sub-genres of tragedy and comedy such as the comedy of manners, farce or social drama.

motivation: The situation or mood which initiates an action. Actors often look for their "motivation" when they try to dissect how a character thinks or acts.

props: Items carried on stage by an actor to represent objects mentioned in or implied by the script. Sometimes the props are actual, sometimes they

are manufactured in the theatre shop.

proscenium stage: There is usually a front curtain on a proscenium stage. The audience views the play from the front through a "frame" called the proscenium arch. In this scenario, all audience members have the same view of the actors.

set: The physical world created on stage in which the action of the play takes place.

setting: The environment in which a play takes place. It may include the historical period as well as the physical space.

stage areas: The stage is divided into areas to help the director to note where action will take place. Upstage is the area furthest from the audience. Downstage is the area closest to the audience. Center stage defines the middle of the playing space. Stage left is the actor's left as he faces the audience. Stage right is the actor's right as he faces the audience.

theme: The overarching message or main idea of a literary or dramatic work. A recurring idea in a play or story.

thrust stage: A stage that juts out into the audience seating area so that patrons are seated on three sides. In this scenario, audience members see the play from varying viewpoints. *A Noise Within* features a thrust stage.

Theatre Lore

Why do actors say “break a leg”?

Perhaps the saying comes—in a complicated way—from the use of “leg.” In theatre, a “leg” is a part of the mechanics that open and close the curtain. To break a leg is to earn so many curtain calls that opening and closing the curtain over and over during final applause causes the curtain mechanics to break. At the outset of theatre tradition, players acted outdoors, where there were no stages or curtains. Applause came in the form of foot stomping, which could indicate another origin of this phrase.

Why is it bad luck to say “Macbeth” inside the theatre?

There are many origins for this superstition. Old actors believe the witches’ song in *Macbeth* to possess the uncanny power of casting evil spells. The reasons for this fear usually bring tales of accidents and ill-fortunes that have plagued productions of the play throughout the world.

An alternative is that the superstition began in the days of stock companies, which would struggle to remain in business. Frequently, near the end of a season, a company would realize it was not going to break even, and, in an attempt to boost ticket sales, would announce the production of a crowd favorite: *Macbeth*. If times were particularly bad, the play would frequently be a portent of the company’s demise.

What is a ghost light?

There is a superstition that if an emptied theater is ever left completely dark, a ghost will take up residence. In other versions of the same superstition the ghosts of past performances return to the stage to live out their glory moments. To prevent this, a single light called a ghost light is left burning at center stage after the audience and all of the actors and musicians have gone.

Now, those in the world of theatre know that a “dark” theatre is one without a play. There is nothing sadder to a dramatic artist than an empty house and a playless stage. Therefore, a light is left burning center stage so that the theatre is never “dark;” it is simply awaiting the next production.

What is a raked stage? Where do the terms upstage and downstage originate?

Historically, stages were built on inclines, with the backs of the stages slightly higher than the fronts. The incline was called a rake and helped those in the back of the audience see the action onstage. Eventually, theatres started placing seats on inclines instead of stages, but the terminology stuck. Downstage is the front of the stage, closest to the audience, and upstage is the back of the stage. Some theatres, like A Noise Within, still participate in the tradition of using raked stages.

Why are actors called thespians?

In the sixth century B.C., a Greek chorus performer named Thespis was the first person in history to step away from the chorus and speak by himself, exchanging dialogue with the group and impersonating a character instead of simply reciting a story as the chorus had done before then. ❖

About A Noise Within

A Noise Within's mission is to produce the great works of world drama in rotating repertory, with a company of professional, classically- trained actors. *A Noise Within* educates the public through comprehensive outreach efforts and conservatory training programs that foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of history's greatest plays and playwrights.

As the only company in southern California working in the repertory tradition (rotating productions using a resident ensemble of professional, trained artists), *A Noise Within* is dedicated solely to producing classical literature from authors such as Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, Shaw, and Euripedes.

The company was formed in 1991 by founders Geoff Elliott and Julia Rodriguez-Elliott, both of whom were classically trained at the acclaimed American Conservatory Theatre in San Francisco. They envisioned *A Noise Within* after recognizing a lack of professional, classical productions and education in Southern California and sought out and assembled their own company of actors to meet the need. All of *A Noise Within's* resident artists have been classically

trained, and many hold Master of Fine Arts degrees from some of the nation's most respected institutions, such as Juilliard, Yale, and the American Conservatory Theatre. In its fourteen-year history, *A Noise Within* has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Circle's revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

In 2004, *A Noise Within* accepted an invitation to collaborate with the Los Angeles Philharmonic for a tandem performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Hollywood Bowl.

More than 25,000 individuals attend productions at *A Noise Within*, annually, and between performances at the theatre and touring productions, the company draws 13,000 student participants to its arts education programs every year. Students benefit from in-school workshops, conservatory training, and an internship program, as well as subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, discussions with artists, and state standards-compliant study guides.

A Noise Within Study Guide

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California's Classical Theatre Company

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