

# PROSCENIUM

## **Waiting For Godot**

By Samuel Beckett

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Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> January to Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> January 2008  
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

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## CAST:

Estragon.....Duncan Sykes  
Vladimir .....Mark Sutherland  
Pozzo .....Robert Ewen  
Lucky.....Vincent Eavis  
Boy .....Adrian Sykes

Directed by.....Michael Gerrard  
Assistant Director .....Paul Davis  
Stage Manager.....Lloyd Davis  
Assistant Stage Manager.....Sheila Harvey  
Costumes .....Anne Gerrard

Act 1. A country road. A tree. Evening.

Act 2. Next day. Same time. Same place.

Alan Schneider: Who or what does Godot mean?

Samuel Beckett: If I knew I would have said so in the play.

## The Author

- 1906 Born on Good Friday, April 13<sup>th</sup>, at Foxrock, near Dublin, son of a quantity surveyor. Both parents were Protestants.
- 1920-3 Educated at Portora Royal School, Ulster.
- 1923-7 Trinity College, Dublin. In BA examinations placed first in first class in Modern Literature (French and Italian). Summer 1926: first contact with France, a bicycle tour of the chateaux of the Loire.
- 1927-8 Taught for two terms at Campbell College, Belfast.
- 1928-30 Exchange lecturer in Paris. Meets James Joyce.
- 1930 First separately published work, a poem Whoroscope. Four terms as assistant lecturer in French, Trinity College, Dublin. Helped translate Joyce's *Anna Livia Plurabella* into French.
- 1931 Performance of first dramatic work, *Le Kid*, a parody sketch after Corneille. *Proust*, his only major piece of literary criticism, published.
- 1932-7 Travel throughout Europe, culminating in a decision to settle permanently in France.
- 1933 Death of his father.
- 1934 Publication of *More Pricks Than Kicks*, short stories.
- 1935 *Echo's Bones and Other Precipitates* (poems) published.
- 1938 *Murphy*, his first novel, published after 42 rejections.
- 1941-2 Worked in the French Resistance with his friend, Alfred Peron. In 1942 the group was betrayed to the Gestapo. Peron was arrested but Beckett escaped with Suzanne Dumesnil, later to become his wife.
- 1942-5 Worked as an agricultural labourer near Avignon. Wrote *Watt*, his last English novel.
- 1945 Returned briefly to Ireland, then became interpreter and storekeeper at an Irish Red Cross Hospital in Normandy. Awarded Croix de Guerre and Medaille de la Resistance.
- 1946-50 Back in Paris, wrote, in French, the trilogy of novels, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*.
- 1950 His mother died.
- 1952 *Waiting for Godot* published in Paris.
- 1953 First production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Theatre Babylone, Paris, where it had more than 300 performances.

- 1955 First English production at the Arts Theatre Club. Peter Hall's production transferred to the Criterion Theatre – with cuts suggested by the Lord Chamberlain. The full text not performed in England for another nine years.
- 1957 *All That Fall* broadcast by BBC. Creation of *Endgame* (French text) in London.
- 1958 World premiere of Krapp's Last Tape in London.
- 1959 Hon D.Litt Dublin University. Radio play, *Embers*, won Italia Prize.
- 1961 World premiere of *Happy Days* in New York.
- 1962 *Words and Music* broadcast by BBC.
- 1964 *Film* made in New York starring Buster Keaton. *Play* staged by the NT at Old Vic.
- 1969 Awarded Nobel Prize for Literature.
- 1973 *Not I* opens in London.
- 1976 *Happy Days* revived at Lyttleton, directed by Peter Hall. Beckett directed *That Time* and *Footfalls* at the Royal Court.
- 1981 *Rockaby* and *Ohio Impromptu* premiered in America.
- 1982 *Catastrophe*, dedicated to the imprisoned Czech dramatist Vaclav Havel, performed in France.
- 1983 *What Where?* Premiered in New York. Asked by The Times about his hopes and resolutions for 1984 Beckett replied: "Resolutions: Zero. Hopes: Zero."
- 1989 Beckett died on December 22.

## The Play

### Reputation

When *Waiting for Godot* was first produced in Paris in 1953 Samuel Beckett was approaching fifty and virtually unknown. In the thirties he had published two very slim volumes of poetry, a short critical study of Proust, a book of short stories and a novel – all sunk more or less without trace. In the early fifties he published three novels in French but was known only to the most devoted connoisseurs of the avant garde. Yet sixteen years later he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature and A. Alvarez points out: He was one of the Nobel choices about whom nobody argued; Beckett's right to that usually questionable Laureateship was unquestioned and obvious. He was a recognized world figure, an authority, a major influence.

Peter Hall gives an interesting account of directing the first London production: In 1955 I was twenty-four years old and a very lucky young man. I had been given a theatre (The Arts) and asked to provide it with a play every four weeks. The resources were minimal and the money not good (£7 per week and luncheon vouchers), but the opportunity to direct new plays seemed too good to be true.

That year I had another bit of luck. *Waiting for Godot* landed on my desk. Apparently no actor would play and no director would stage it. I had faintly heard of Beckett – at that time only a few people knew his work – but I read the play and responded warmly. I won't claim that I saw it as a turning point in 20<sup>th</sup> century drama: that came later. And it certainly took a month of intensive rehearsal for me to realise that the play was a masterpiece. But I did think it blindingly original, turning the undramatic (waiting and doubt and uncertainty) into tense action. It was exquisitely constructed and very funny. It took the cross-talking tradition of the music hall (Laurel and Hardy and Morecambe and Wise) and made it poetry. Above all it had great metaphorical strength: it made the theatre a place that provoked the imagination again.

By the time we opened I was confident that we had something special: the first night came as something of a shock and the critics next morning expressed bafflement and derision. The owner of the Arts theatre warned me that the play would have to close on Saturday. I begged him to wait until the Sunday notices. Perhaps *Godot* would come through. Happily he did – and in the person of Harold Hobson, critic of The Sunday Times. He found himself on the road to Damascus. Kenneth Tynan in The Observer was also enthusiastic and to my amazement *Godot* mania gripped London; it was discussed, praised, analysed and abused everywhere.

What was my production like? Well, I know it had too much scenery: everything did then. The tree was too complicated and Vladimir and Estragon spent too much of the evening sitting on an oil drum; it was all too naturalistic. I also blush when I remember that the play was introduced by a fragment of music as the lights went down. But I was journeying in a new country and finding my way.

### The first reviews

The Daily papers:

This play comes to us with a great reputation among the intelligentsia of Paris. And as far as I am concerned, the intelligentsia of Paris may have it back as soon as they wish.

*Cecil Wilson, Daily Mail*

The language is flat and feeble.

*Philip Hope-Wallace, The Guardian.*

It has no plot, no connected action, no clearly defined purpose, and only a vaguely suggested meaning.

*W.A. Darlington, The Daily Telegraph.*

The Sundays:

I am not sure that Mr Samuel Beckett is not the profoundest of living humourists.... The linguistic architecture of *Waiting for Godot* is of a high and subtle kind. It is not separate words that Mr Beckett repeats, but entire sentences; they fall into the text with the certainty and exactitude of the repetition in a theme of music; and the consequence is that, approximating to the nature of music, they take on the capacity of music to express what is beyond the reach of clear and rational statement..

Four times while I have been a professional drama critic I have found myself on the Road to Damascus, four times I have been struck down and changed by the miraculous voice..The fourth occasion was the first night of *Waiting for Godot*.

*Harold Hobson, The Sunday Times.*

Mr Peter Hall directs the play with a marvellous ear for its elusive rhythm and Messrs Peter Woodthorpe and Paul Daneman gives the tramps a compassionate lunacy which only professional clowns could excel .. It is a valid new play; and hence I declare myself, as the Spanish would say, 'Godista'.

*Kenneth Tynan, The Observer.*

Godot is one of the few masterpieces of the 20<sup>th</sup> century theatre.

*Clive Barnes of the New York Times  
(after the American first night)*

### Beckett's reaction

Beckett came to London to see the production when it transferred to the Criterion and Alan Schneider, who was to direct the New York production, remembers: Beckett's clutching my arm from time to time and, in a clearly-heard stage whisper, saying: It's ahl wrahng! He's doing it ahl wrahng! About a particular bit of stage business or the interpretation of a certain line. Nevertheless he admired much of the

production and would have been happy for Peter Hall to direct the New York opening, and was impressed by the acting, finding Peter Woodthorpe's Estragon, with his natural Yorkshire accent, superb: 'bloody marvellous' he said as he walked over to embrace the young actor in the dressing room.

### Some interpretations.

The seed of *Godot* is Luke's account of the crucifixion, as summarised by St Augustine: Do not despair: one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume: one of the thieves was damned.

*Ruby Kohn, 1974.*

It is curious how readers and audiences do not think to observe the most obvious thing about the world of this play: that it resembles France occupied by the Germans, in which the author spent the war years. How much waiting must have gone on in that bleak world; how many times must Resistance operatives have kept appointments not knowing whom they were to meet.

*Hugh Kenner, 1973.*

If it is viewed as an allegory of nations, it makes some sense. The tramps are Great Britain and France – they are free but have little freedom. Pozzo is Russia, driving the slave peoples who can only repeat what is now a meaningless stream of totalitarian clichés. Godot is the United States for whom the free nations wait, expecting 'him' to solve all their problems.

*Lady Margaret D'Arcy, letter to the Daily Mail.*

Some commentators have suggested that the action of the play is set on Holy Saturday, the day between Christ's death and resurrection. That Saturday refuses to become Sunday: God has let man down by refusing to rise again in the flesh. Take it further, and you have the essence of man's absurdity in his capacity to conceive of the idea of God countered by God's damnable unwillingness to exist.

*Anthony Burgess, 1987.*

**The Swedish Academy's citation on awarding the Nobel Prize:  
Samuel Beckett has transmuted the destitution of modern man  
into his exaltation.**

# Our Next Production

## The Winslow Boy

By Terence Rattigan

When 13-year-old Ronnie Winslow is accused of stealing a Postal Order at his Naval College, a private matter becomes a public outrage. The effects for the Winslow family and the entire government will be shattering. Based on real events before the outbreak of the first world war, this witty play holds resonance even today. Would you sacrifice the well-being of your entire family for a cause that you think is morally right?

Directed by Crystal Anthony  
Wednesday 2nd April to Saturday 5th April 2008  
7.45pm Compass Theatre, Ickenham  
Box Office : 020 8866 7075

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## About Proscenium

George Woollands and Margaret Rendle founded Proscenium in 1924.

The company's first production was the now little-known "The Tide" by Basil McDonald Hastings. Since then, the company has performed nearly 250 plays, using Harrow as a base since 1945.

In this time Proscenium has built up a strong reputation for performing challenging plays (both classic and contemporary) to a high standard.

For more information on Proscenium, and to join our mailing list, please visit our web site :

<http://www.proscenium.org.uk>

**This season is dedicated  
to the memory of  
Roderick Jones (1931-2007)**

Contact us at:

[www.proscenium.org.uk](http://www.proscenium.org.uk)

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