A Study Guide

WAITING FOR GODOT

By Samuel Beckett
Directed by Geoffrey Kent

APRIL 21 – MAY 20, 2017
BLACK BOX THEATRE

arvada center
for the arts and humanities
Synopsis
(or, How It All Goes Down)

Act I: Estragon and Vladimir wait for Godot to arrive. He does not arrive.

Act II: Estragon and Vladimir wait for Godot to arrive. He does not arrive.

Godot does not have a traditional plot. Very little occurs and the play’s focus is on characters’ behaviors and questions asked and never answered rather than on events.

Beside a tree, two tramps meet to wait for Godot. Estragon, also called Gogo, fusses with his boots while Vladimir, sometimes called Didi, plays with his hat. To pass the time, they argue about going their separate ways, but decide to stay together. They consider suicide, eat vegetables, ponder religion and question the wisdom of continuing to wait for Godot. Pozzo and his slave, Lucky, pass by. Pozzo, appearing to have a great deal of power, controls Lucky’s every move and interrogates and intimidates Vladimir and Estragon before moving on. Later, a boy brings a message that Godot will come tomorrow. As night falls, Didi and Gogo agree to leave, but as Act I ends, they stand still.

Act II begins the next day, and the tramps are again waiting, continuing to argue, play games and discuss their plans. Pozzo and Lucky return, and they are clearly much changed; Pozzo is blind and no longer powerful. After they leave, the boy comes again to say that Godot will come tomorrow. Night falls, and after agreeing to leave, they stand still.
Born in a Dublin suburb on April 13, 1906, Samuel Beckett would become one of the most renowned avant-garde writers of the 20th century. His work as a poet, novelist, playwright, and director would define him as one of the last modernist writers and a key figure in the movement characterized as “Theatre of the Absurd.”

Beckett had very diverse interests from an early age. He excelled in sports, studied music at the age of five, and attended Trinity College studying French, Italian, and English. In 1926 he was elected a Scholar in Modern Language, teaching briefly in Belfast. In 1928 he accepted a position as lecteur d’anglais at the Ecole Normale Superieure in Paris and became acquainted with renowned author James Joyce. Beckett worked closely with Joyce, doing much of the research for Joyce’s novel *Finnegan’s Wake*. He returned to Trinity for a few years, but was dissatisfied with academia, resigning in 1931.

After the death of his father, Beckett spent two years in treatment with a psychoanalyst. He had a tempestuous relationship with his mother and had been very close to his father. These relationships shaped his depression, and it would continue to be a recurring theme in his life’s work.

He spent several years writing articles, essays, and poems about Irish literature. He became interested in film and art, spending time traveling around Germany and finishing his first novel, *Murphy*. After a falling out with his mother, he decided to permanently move to Paris where he became a fixture in the Left Bank social scene. When World War II broke out, he stayed, saying that he preferred “France at war to Ireland at peace.”

During the war Beckett joined the resistance, eluding the Gestapo until his unit was betrayed. He and his close friend Suzanne Dechevaux-Dumesnil hid in the town of Roussillon where he continued to assist the resistance. Charles de Gaulle would award him the Croix de Guerre and the Medaille de la Resistance at the end of the war.

In 1945 he had a revelation that would shape his writing. In a complete departure from Joyce’s style, he decided that his writing should focus on “subtraction.” His work would focus on poverty, failure, exile, and loss. Beckett wrote a trilogy of novels and in 1953 published his most famous work, the play *En attendant Godot*. The absurdist style, where “nothing happens, twice” was controversial and met with harsh criticism at first. However, subsequent productions in the US and Germany solidified its reputation, making it one of the most written about and discussed pieces of 20th Century literature.

In 1961 he married Suzanne even though he had an ongoing relationship with a woman named Barbara Bray. In 1969 he won the Nobel Peace Prize for literature. Suzanne called the fame a “catastrophe,” and Beckett refused to attend the ceremony and donated the prize money. On December 22, 1989, Beckett died from emphysema a few months after Suzanne passed away. They were interred together in Paris under a gravestone that he requested should be “any color, so long as it’s grey.”

**Activities**

- Beckett is best known for writing minimalist pieces that highlight questions about life, without ever giving satisfying answers. Read two poems by Beckett from before and after WWII. What similarities and differences do you see between them and *Waiting for Godot*?
Context
(or, What Are We Waiting For?)

Theatre of the Absurd

Waiting for Godot remains to this day, one of the most discussed, debated, and analyzed plays ever written. The reason it has been subject of such discourse is that it defied genre with its universalism. The play has been described as drama, modernism, philosophical literature, surrealism, existentialism, and a tragicomedy, testament to the interpretations that scholars and audiences have tried to make the play adhere to. Godot’s brilliance is that it changed the world of theatre, showing that a play could resemble abstract art or poetry. In other words, the play offers no conclusions or satisfying answers. It lives in the realm of forcing audience members to give it their own meaning and walk away with more questions than they started with.

This genre-busting play became the gold standard for a new form of drama known as “Theatre of the Absurd.” This new genre often focused on characters caught in hopeless situations that might parody reality - or completely dismiss it. Plots were often cyclical, allowing playwrights to elucidate existentialist ideas of freedom, life, purpose, and human existence. Time and setting were often loosely defined, allowing the viewer to fill in the blanks and focus more on the ideas, dialogue, and absurd actions rather than traditional plot. The form this genre often took was tragicomedy; the full title of Godot was Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in 2 Acts. Tragicomedy was in part a response to the horrors of World War II. It serves as a great way to highlight the absurd with humor but still explore complex ideas. It also took inspiration from vaudeville. Look for moments where the short clipped patter of Gogo and Didi reminds you of Laurel and Hardy. The use of props and physicality hearkens to some of the characters played by Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin.

Martin Esslin, who coined the term, “Theatre of the Absurd,” wrote:

The Theatre of the Absurd aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation as these writers see it. But the challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation.

The Action of Waiting

The most common explanation of Waiting for Godot is that it is a play where nothing happens, twice. However, the very title of the play focuses in on an action that, whether we like it or not, takes up a huge portion of our lives. Think about the last time you had to wait for something. Think about how much time in a day is spent waiting for some trivial thing to happen. Then consider how the act of waiting changes when it is something
that’s very important. You might camp out and wait all
day in line for the newest iPhone, but when you go to
the DMV, and the line is two hours long, you’re likely turn
right around and try again another day.

*Waiting for Godot* explores the act of waiting as it
relates to a particular event, but it opens up a discussion
on how life is in and of itself a prolonged act of waiting.
Are we all essentially filling time until our number is
called? This is the idea that drives the exploration of
existentialism in the play. Existentialism is the idea that
life is what you make it since it has no real meaning. In
existential thought, you are responsible for your choices
and nothing happens for a particular reason. No one
is bound by any rules because personal freedom is the
ultimate form of truth. The conflict of existentialism is
how one finds ultimate personal freedom within the
constraints of society and maintaining some form of
doing what one is expected to do.

An example would be if you absolutely hate math.
To graduate you need to pass a math class and so you
study because you "have to." There is no other way.
Except, of course you could be liberated from society’s
expectations and not take it at all. The consequences
could be dire and that is the conflict of existentialism.
We all have radical personal freedom, but it is paired
with radical personal responsibility. Estragon and
Vladimir seem to wait for Godot as if they have no
choice in the matter. They make the decision to leave,
and yet they stay put. Do they have a choice about
whether or not to wait? Or is waiting inevitable?

The waiting is also a form of the absurd. It highlights
the thin line between the normal and the absurd. Think
about how often you check your phone when you’re
waiting for an important text or call. Now imagine if
you had to wait for that message every day with no end
in sight. At what point does it become absurd to check
your alerts one more time? Estragon and Vladimir show
us this absurdity with their taking on and off of hats and
shoes. The repetitive nature of the two acts highlights
this even more. Beckett’s genius is also in the fact that he
makes the audience wait with the actors. We are actively
waiting with them for Godot to arrive, and we feel for the
trap that they seem to be stuck in. We identify with their
plight and experience it right along with them.

The other fascinating aspect of waiting is that we
rarely ever “just wait.” The two characters have deep
conversations, play games, sing songs, dance, and
contrive numerous ways to keep themselves occupied.
We flip through magazines at doctors’ offices, look for
license plates on long car trips, play Candy Crush in line,
and send snaps of our face with a puppy dog filter to all
of our friends. We listen to music, strike up conversations,
scroll though Pinterest, compose emails, and update
social media while we wait to get to the business of
living. Consider how often the living and the waiting
have blended together, how quickly ten minutes of killing
time can turn into three hours of watching cat videos.

Pozzo says, “They give birth astride of a grave…”
meaning that from the moment we are born we are
merely waiting for death. If all we are doing is literally
killing time until the end, Godot asks the question: How
important is it to make the most of all of this waiting that
we are so very fortunate to have?

**Activities**

- What would this play look like if it were placed in a
  specific setting? Write an absurd scene based around
  waiting for something. Examples: DMV, electronic
  release, airline security. How would the situation
  change the absurd props or games the characters play?
- Who or what do you think Godot is. How would
  we feel if Godot actually showed up? Would it be
  satisfying or disappointing? Choose a figure for Godot
to take (dragon, God, a talking squirrel, etc.). What
  would Godot have to say?
- Write a brief monologue, then a short essay that
  explains why and how the characters would react to
  the arrival.
- Write an essay on what the play means to you. Do
  you find it encouraging, hopeful, distressing, or tragic?
  What meaning do you take away from it? How does it
  compare to what others in your class felt?
Themes
(or, What Are We Talking About?)

**CHOICES** – Estragon and Vladimir are trapped by their waiting, unable to act, move, or think critically of their situation. They don’t realize that they are making a choice to wait. It is a mandatory part of their routine. They “decide” to leave several times but are unable to physically act, and they remain stuck in an endless cycle of waiting.

**Questions**
- What is the barrier between decision and action in the play? Why are they unable to move after deciding to leave?
- Are Vladimir and Estragon condemned to wait or are they choosing their fate?
- Does Lucky’s situation seem to be a choice he has made?
- How does uncertainty affect the choices the two men make?

**THE ABSURD** – The play presents a world where actions seem to have no meaning, language fails, and the characters make bizarre decisions that don’t seem to be reasonable.

**Questions**
- Even though the world of the play doesn’t resemble reality, how does the absurdity comment on our own lives? Does Beckett think that real life is absurd?
- Do the characters know their actions are absurd or is this “normal” behavior?
- Who seems more absurd: Pozzo and Lucky or Didi and Gogo?
- Do the characters ever hint that they are aware that the world of the play isn’t real? How does this affect the play itself?

**TRUTH** – There is a lack of truth or certainty in the play. Without truth every statement becomes subjective and common labels such as color, time, or names become arbitrary.

**Questions**
- After a debate on committing suicide, Estragon says, “Don’t let’s do anything. It’s safer.” Is doing nothing safer?
- The two men are afraid of unknown consequences and this uncertainty prevents them from making a choice. What is the consequence of them not choosing?

**LIFE, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND EXISTENCE** – Daily life in the play is bleak. It is repetitive and stagnant, lacking purpose. This removal of meaning results in perpetual suffering. The solution would be for the men to take some action despite the consequences. Vladimir says that, “Habit is a great deadener.” The point is made that our actions should stem from conscious choice instead of apathy.

**Questions**
- What is the value of life in the play?
- Pozzo says that life has no meaning because it is fleeting while Vladimir says it has no meaning because it is deadened by habit. Which statement does the play support? Which do you support?
- Vladimir wonders in Act 2 if he is even awake. Why would he begin to have this doubt? In what way are the characters not “awake”?

**TIME** – The central foe in the play is the killing of time. The two men are whiling away their lives waiting for someone who never shows up. Time is a barrier and a test for them to endure. As each day seems like the other, their memories become faulty. Time loses meaning when each day has no relevance to what will be done tomorrow.

**Questions**
- Characters forget the events from the previous day. If they can’t remember events, do they have any meaning?
- Can we trust Vladimir and Estragon’s recollections of events that happened before the play?
- Does time pass differently in Act 2 then it does in Act 1?

**RELIGION** – There are many references to religion in the play, but they often do nothing to soothe the characters or help them in any way. The system of religion is compared with absurd actions such as switching bowler hats or taking a boot on and off. Religion is tied to uncertainty since we don’t know objectively what is true or not in matters of faith.

**Questions**
- Which man has a better understanding of religion? Why?
- In *Waiting for Godot* religion is incompatible with logic. If this is true, what is the next step? Does the
play think we should accept or reject religion due to the irrationality of it?

- Beckett stated that Godot was not God, but many people have argued the case that he is. If Godot represents God, what do Estragon and Vladimir expect to happen when he arrives?

**FRIENDSHIP** – Even though they spend every day together, Estragon and Vladimir are very isolated and lonely. They need each other but are not always able to connect. The things keeping them apart vary from physical disgust to ego to a fear of the others’ suffering.

*Questions*
- How would you describe Vladimir and Estragon’s relationship? Are they friends? Companions? Acquaintances?
- They often ask if they would be better without each other? Would they? How would their circumstances change if they were *Waiting for Godot* alone?
- Of the two, who seems more eager for companionship and intimacy? Who is resistant? Why?
- Pozzo and Lucky are master and slave, yet is their relationship closer than that of Vladimir and Estragon?

**FREEDOM AND CONFINEMENT** – Every character lives in a prison of his own making. Each is confined to his circumstances by his inaction. The slave has more freedom than the others because he is aware of his imprisonment. Vladimir and Estragon are not.

*Questions*
- Does Lucky choose to be a slave?
- Why does Vladimir want to play the part of Lucky when he’s pretending?
- Between Estragon and Vladimir, who has more freedom?

**SUFFERING** – Suffering is a constant and fundamental to existence in the play. Every character suffers, with no end in sight. Hardships range from physical to mental, minor to extreme. Suffering drives people to find companionship or isolate themselves. Watching others suffer triggers anguish for the characters as well.

*Questions*
- What is the worst kind of suffering experienced in this play?
- Have Estragon and Vladimir ever been happy? How do they define it? What would it look like?
- Is there a purpose to their suffering? Do they learn from it?

**MORTALITY** – Everyone in the play recognizes that death is inevitable. At times they actually see it as a solution. Why do Didi and Gogo discuss suicide in such a causal manner? They have the tools necessary and would like to end their lives but finally decide on no action at all.

*Questions*
- Why do Estragon and Vladimir want to kill themselves?
- Why don’t they?
- Since death is inevitable, how do we live a life with purpose? Does the play present a solution to that problem?
Designing for Nowhere (or, What It Looks Like)

Beckett was awfully specific in his expectations for Godot’s visuals.


At first glance that is beautifully simple and certainly guided our design team into our absurdist play. However, we also have the joy and challenge of working in repertory. Meaning our simple Godot stage also shares the space with realistic Bus Stop and the giant pool that is The Drowning Girls.

I adore Brian Mallgrave’s solution to this. Our “nowhere” is distinctly set within the ruins of a roadside building. The floor is littered with a pool, a mound of a collapsed ceiling, some rusty pipework with shattered light bulbs hanging above. All of which is meant to connect us to a realistic space that pays homage to Bus Stop and The Drowning Girls in turn. I like to imagine that our nowhere lives in the detritus of our other productions.

Godot also calls specifically for a lightning quick shift to nighttime. Brian has designed a clever infinite back wall that curves up from the deck and a stylized shattered opening to provide a home for our moon. This environment was then handed off to Shannon McKinney, our talented light designer, to help us “light switch” into our moon and allow for shifting beams of light throughout the course of our early evening and sunset.

Our lighting and scenic elements were inspired from photos of abandoned amusement parks, urban exploration of condemned buildings in Detroit and shots from damaged Chernobyl and Fukushima.

Adding to the look is Meghan Anderson Doyle’s catch as catch can costume design. Our belief is Vladimir and Estragon travel through the world wearing and repairing what they find and carrying anything of value on their persons. This allows us to envision our production away from the vaudeville roots of our clowns, with more of a realistic modern homeless vagabond style, available at an H&M near you, just add dirt. A lot of it.

Scenic Design by Brian Mallgrave 2017

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Our goal with Godot is to create a grounded real world for the absurdism of Beckett to populate and bounce off of. It has deep connections to the rest of our rep but also stands on its own two feet as a modern-ish retelling of a groundbreaking play. We hope you enjoy waiting in it with us.

Costume Design by Meghan Anderson-Doyle 2017

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