

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

Waiting for Godot

Samuel Beckett

Sheffield Theatres Production

Crucible Theatre

4–27 February 2016

The title of the play may cause some confusion, Godot is not God, but Beckett brings clarity when he says that the aim of the play is "to give artistic expression to a state of complete ignorance or the unknowingness about the larger questions in which we exist". Or as Vladimir says in the play, "what are we doing here?"

The play was saved from oblivion by a young Peter Hall, who remarkably recognised its poetic and abstract qualities and mounted a production at the Arts Theatre in London in 1955 where it was panned by most of the attending theatre critics. Since then it has been acknowledged as the most important and influential play of the twentieth century.

When the play opens we see a barren landscape in which the most significant feature is a leafless tree. We encounter two smelly old tramps, Estragon and Vladimir, one with stinking feet, the other with stinking breath, who while away their time awaiting the arrival of Godot. They exchange insults, recall past times, share a carrot, and consider hanging themselves.

Their wait is alleviated by the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky, who have also seen better days and are joined together by an umbilical rope which reinforces their master/slave relationship. At the end of each day of tedious waiting, a shepherd boy appears to tell them that Godot will not be coming today but "will surely come tomorrow".

What are audiences to make of a play in which, according to 1950s Irish critic Vivian Mercier, "Beckett... has achieved a theoretical impossibility—a play in which nothing happens, that yet keeps audiences glued to their seats. What's more, since the second act is a subtly different reprise of the first, he has written a play in which nothing happens, twice"?

Charlotte Gwinner's crystal clear production at the Crucible helps to provide an answer. Lorcan Cranitch as an Irish Vladimir and Jeff Rawle as Estragon are recognisably human individuals with their hopes, needs, memories and fears, who simultaneously represent "all mankind".

Similarly the relationship between Richard Cordery's surprisingly genial Pozzo and Bob Goody's downtrodden, pathetic Lucky suggest interdependence, and the master/slave relationship can be generalised to represent many situations in which there is an exploiter and those who are exploited.

But beyond the symbolic relationships represented in the play is the visual and verbal insistence on the passage of relentless and 'cursed' time, evidenced in the barren landscape and the physical and mental degeneration of the human beings. Vladimir sings a song but can't remember how it ends; Estragon is incapable of distinguishing the events of one day from another; Pozzo has to go

through a ritual in order to sit down; and Lucky's once erudite philosophical discourse has shrunk to a jumble of incoherent fragments.

There are sophisticated and moving performances from the four experienced actors, who effectively express the existential angst of not knowing or understanding why we are here or where we will go. "One of the thieves was saved", but not all of the gospels agree on that story.

In contrast, the shepherd boy, beautifully performed by William Oxley, comes at the end of each act with a message from Godot. "He will not come today but will surely come tomorrow." His simple assurance and clear replies bespeak a certainty about existence to which the main characters can no longer subscribe, if they ever did.

This is a production which keeps the audience glued to their seats as they ponder the meaning of the play and enjoy the wit and humour of the language and action.

Reviewer: [Velda Harris](#)