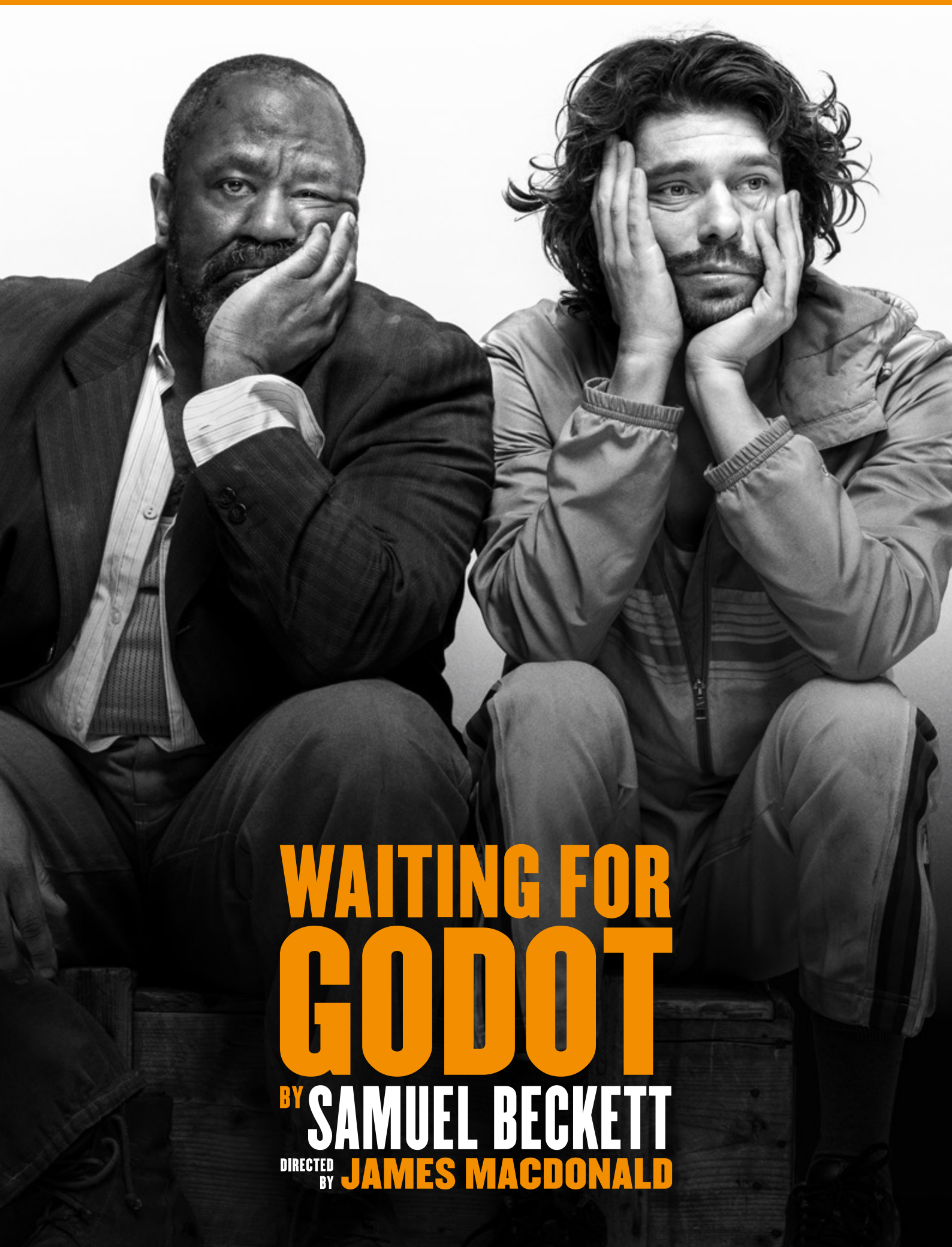
LEARNING GUIDE



WAITING FOR GODOT

BY SAMUEL BECKETT

DIRECTED BY JAMES MACDONALD

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WAITING FOR GODOT BY SAMUEL BECKETT

WELCOME FROM THE DIRECTOR, JAMES MACDONALD

Welcome to the Learning Guide for *Waiting for Godot*. We are delighted to provide these resources to help you explore the play, and our production.

Waiting for Godot is a remarkable play which has become part of the canon. It is famously difficult to interpret which is why it is such a challenging but exciting text to direct and perform.

Throughout this pack, you'll find various articles, images and resources to help you understand the play and this 2024 production at Theatre Royal Haymarket in London. *Waiting for Godot* has been performed at times of political crisis, in prisons, schools, Victorian theatres and black box studios. It has been performed in its original French, in English translation, and performed in various other languages around the world. The fact that *Waiting for Godot* has been performed in such diverse performance spaces across the globe is testament to its relevance, its power and its universal appeal.

Every member of the audience will come away from seeing *Waiting for Godot* with different ideas about its meaning. None of those ideas will be wrong. Like Samuel Beckett, we are reluctant to insist on one specific interpretation. Instead, we hope that this Learning Guide will provide you with opportunities to keep asking questions about the play, and inspire you to look further into Samuel Beckett's remarkable body of work, as well as the incredible life that he led.

We hope you enjoy the show.

James Macdonald
Director

James Macdonald (Director)

Lucian Msamati (Estragon) and Ben Whishaw (Vladimir)

Rehearsal and production photography from this 2024 Theatre Royal Haymarket production: Marc Brenner

SYNOPSIS

ACT 1

Unlike most plays, *Waiting for Godot* does not conform to conventional structures such as exposition, climax, or denouement. Its structure is cyclical, and there is a lot of repetition.

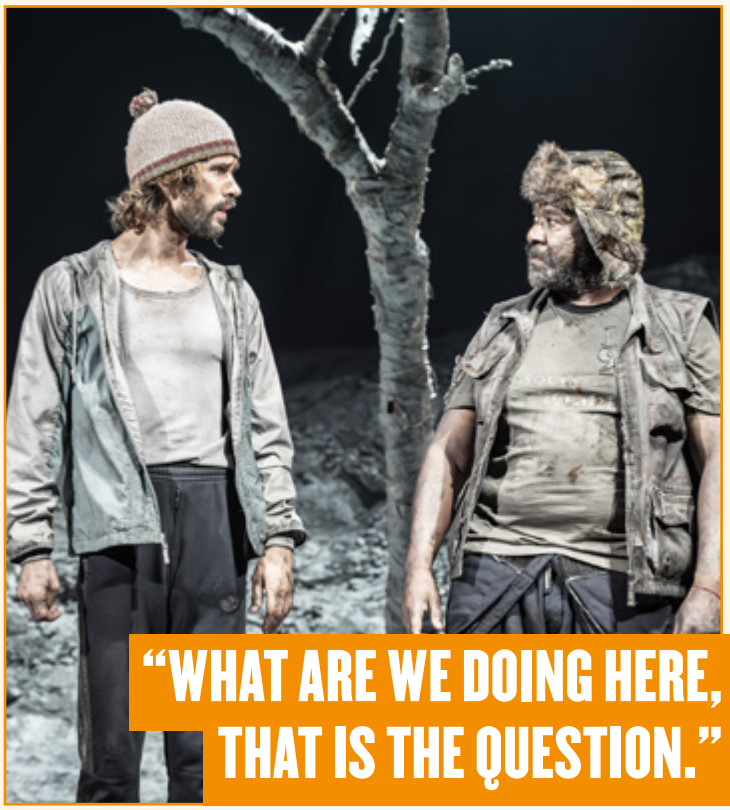
The play opens with Estragon, trying to take off one of his boots. The location is "a country road." Beckett does not provide much more detail, but we know that there is "a tree" and that it is "evening". Vladimir enters and it is clear that Estragon and Vladimir know each other, with Vladimir telling Estragon "I'm glad to see you back. I thought you were gone forever". Estragon explains that he has spent the night in a ditch, having been beaten. It is not revealed who has done this to him.

Vladimir and Estragon discuss religion, in particular the story of the two thieves with whom Jesus was crucified. As the pair talk, it becomes clear that they are waiting for someone to arrive - this person is named as Godot, but we are never told who Godot is, or why they are waiting to meet him. They wait by a tree.

Despite their bickering, Vladimir and Estragon are co-dependent: when Estragon falls asleep Vladimir wakes him because he feels "lonely". Estragon tells him "There are times when I wonder if it wouldn't be better for us to part". They discuss the possibility of hanging themselves from the tree, but decide against it, preferring to wait and see what Godot says. Estragon becomes hungry and is given a carrot by Vladimir.

Pozzo and Lucky arrive. Pozzo "drives" Lucky who has a rope around his neck. Pozzo carries "a heavy bag, a folding stool, a picnic basket and a greatcoat". Pozzo carries a whip and jerks the rope heavily to make Lucky stop. Lucky drops everything that he is carrying and Vladimir goes to help him, but is held back by Estragon. Pozzo introduces himself and tells the other two men that Lucky is "wicked... with strangers". Pozzo is threatening as he demands to know whether his name means anything to Vladimir and Estragon. He sits down and, having made various demands of Lucky, begins to eat some chicken and drink some wine. Estragon and Vladimir watch him and grow hungry. Pozzo discards the bones, once he has sucked all the meat off them, and Estragon cannot help but stare at them. He is told to ask Lucky if he can have them; Lucky does not answer and so Estragon "makes a dart at the bones, picks them up and begins to gnaw them".

Vladimir and Estragon ask Pozzo why Lucky never puts his bags down. After some prevarication, Pozzo tells them "he imagines that when I see him indefatigable, I'll regret my decision" and goes on to explain, "Instead of driving him away like I might have done... I am bringing him to the fair, where I hope to get a good price for him. The truth is you can't drive such creatures away. The best thing would be to kill him". Estragon goes to wipe away Lucky's tears but is kicked violently in the shins by Lucky. Both Lucky and Pozzo take off their hats and reveal long white hair (Lucky) and semi baldness (Pozzo) which reveals their age to some extent (Pozzo has already mentioned something which happened over 60 years ago). Vladimir challenges Pozzo's treatment



"WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE, THAT IS THE QUESTION."

of Lucky, commenting "after having sucked all the good out of him you chuck him away like a... like a banana skin". The men look at the sky and Pozzo contemplates the twilight with "lyrical" delivery of his monologue. Lucky is made to dance. Estragon exclaims that "nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" After much tugging on the rope that holds him captive, Lucky delivers a long monologue (known as the 'Think' speech) after which he falls. Vladimir stamps on Lucky's hat.

Pozzo begins to say goodbye, but no one moves and their responses to each other begin to repeat themselves. Pozzo and Lucky leave. Estragon is keen to leave too, but Vladimir insists that they must wait for Godot. A Boy arrives, and tells them "Mr Godot told me to tell you that he won't come this evening but surely tomorrow". The Boy tells Vladimir and Estragon that he works for Godot, who doesn't beat him, but he does beat the Boy's brother, who minds the sheep. Vladimir is keen for the Boy to tell Godot that he did see them waiting. The Boy remains silent in response, and simply leaves.

The two men contemplate the tree again, and Estragon tells Vladimir to remind him to bring some rope with them tomorrow, so that they can hang themselves after all. They discuss the fact they have been together for about fifty years. Vladimir tells Estragon "we can still part, if you think it would be better". Vladimir agrees to leave for the night, but neither of them moves.

SYNOPSIS

ACT 2

Act Two opens the “Next day. Same time. Same place”. Lucky’s hat and Estragon’s boots are on the ground. The tree has grown “four or five leaves”. Vladimir sings a song about a dog that stole a crust of bread from a kitchen, which reminds him of how Estragon is beaten every night. Estragon enters and refuses to answer any of Vladimir’s questions. They eventually embrace and Vladimir tells Estragon “I missed you... and at the same time I was happy”. Estragon tells him that he has been beaten by ten men but can’t explain why. They discuss happiness, and what to do if Godot does not arrive.

The two men contemplate the tree and whether it had been there the day before. They discuss whether they should part ways again. Estragon tells Vladimir that he doesn’t know where his boots are, and Vladimir shows him. Estragon denies they are his, and Vladimir suggests that someone has taken Estragon’s boots and replaced them with the pair that is now there. When Estragon wishes to leave, Vladimir reminds him “We’re waiting for Godot” and therefore they can’t leave.

Estragon is hungry and demands that Vladimir gives him a carrot. There are only black radishes to eat. Estragon puts the boots on, with Vladimir’s help, and then falls asleep. Vladimir covers him with his own coat, but Estragon wakes up with a start. Vladimir tells him again that he cannot go, as they must wait for Godot. Vladimir finds Lucky’s hat and puts it on; there is a complex routine of exchanging hats between Vladimir and Estragon. They pretend to be Pozzo and Lucky.

As Vladimir and Estragon keep watch, Pozzo and Lucky enter. Pozzo is blind and the rope that connects him with Lucky is much shorter so that Pozzo can be guided. Lucky is wearing a different hat. Pozzo and Lucky fall to the ground - Estragon and Vladimir discuss whether they should help Pozzo or demand chicken bones first. Pozzo offers them one hundred, and then two hundred francs for them to help him. A complex sequence of trying to assist Pozzo, and failing, follows.

Pozzo asks where Lucky (“my menial”) is. Pozzo tells Estragon that he should tug on the rope around Lucky’s neck but if that doesn’t rouse him, Estragon should kick him “in the face and the privates as far as possible”. Estragon starts to kick Lucky violently but hurts his foot as he does so. Vladimir demands that Lucky is made to sing, but Pozzo reveals that Lucky has now become dumb: “He can’t even groan”. Pozzo and Lucky leave.

Estragon has gone to sleep, but Vladimir wakes him up, telling Estragon “I felt lonely”. Estragon goes back to sleep. As Vladimir becomes melancholy, he declares “I can’t go on!”. A Boy enters, and tells Vladimir that Godot will not arrive that evening but promises that he will tomorrow, “without fail”. Vladimir tells the Boy to “tell him you saw me”. The Boy runs away again, without answering Vladimir.

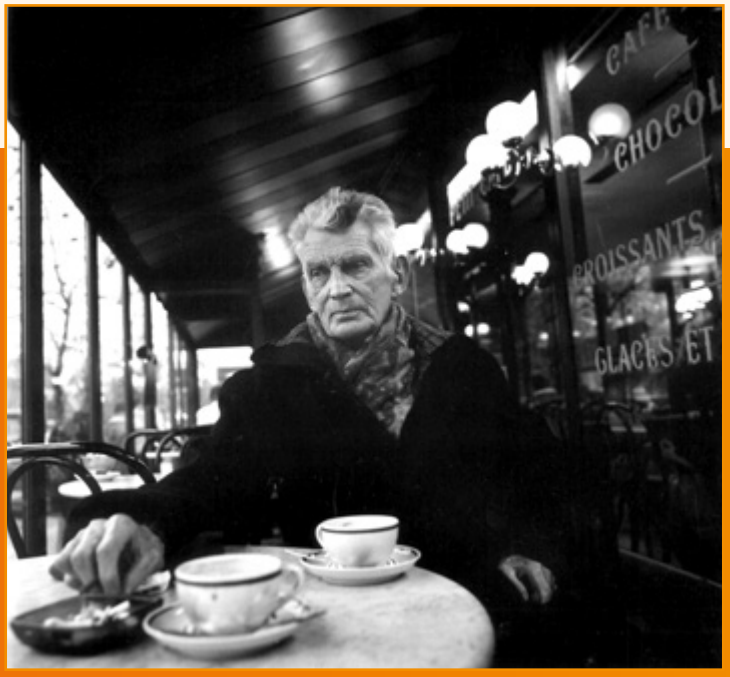
As the sun sets and the moon rises, Vladimir stands motionless once more, echoing the ending of Act One. Estragon wakes up, removes his boots and places them on the ground. He suggests that they leave and go far away from where they are now, but Vladimir reminds him that “we have to come back tomorrow... to wait for Godot”. They discuss the tree, and the possibility that they can use it to hang themselves, but they don’t have any rope. Estragon removes the cord that is holding up his trousers, and his trousers fall down around his ankles. The cord pings offstage when Vladimir and Estragon test its strength, so they agree to bring “a good bit of rope” with them tomorrow.

Estragon wonders if it would be better if the two men parted, Vladimir suggests that they will hang themselves tomorrow if Godot does not arrive, but that if he does arrive they will be “saved”. They agree to leave but neither of them moves.

“WE ARE NOT SAINTS, BUT WE HAVE KEPT OUR APPOINTMENT. HOW MANY PEOPLE CAN BOAST AS MUCH?”

INTRODUCTION TO SAMUEL BECKETT

SAMUEL BECKETT: A SNAPSHOT



Samuel Beckett. Photo by John Minihan

Born 1906, died in 1989.

Born in Foxrock, County Dublin, in Ireland.

Beckett excelled in languages, studying French and Italian at Trinity College, Dublin, and then learning German, into which he translated several of his own works.

During World War Two Beckett worked as part of the Resistance in France, and was awarded both the Croix de Guerre and Médaille de la Résistance. Although Ireland was officially neutral in the war, Beckett was determined to take action against the oppression of France by the Nazis. His Resistance cell was betrayed and he narrowly escaped capture by the Germans who searched his home.

After the war, Beckett continued to live between Paris and Ussy-sur-Marne until he died.

Beckett's creative outputs include works for theatre, radio, TV, prose, poetry and even one film. His best known plays are *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Happy Days* and *Krapp's Last Tape*.

His most famous fiction works are arguably the three novels: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*.

Beckett won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969.

He was notoriously private, turning down many invitations and requests to be interviewed about his work.

You can read the New York Times obituary of Samuel Beckett here. It is an excellent way in which to start your exploration of Samuel Beckett's remarkable career and his influence on literature and theatre in the 20th century.

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY

As you read this guide, and explore the online content about the production, make notes about your responses to Beckett and *Waiting for Godot*, as well as Beckett's influence on theatre of the 20th century and beyond.

You'll find some helpful videos on our production website.

RESEARCH TOPICS

Religion

Beckett was raised as a Protestant in Ireland. Many of his works include references to religion, despite the fact that he himself did not practise any form of religious worship.

Beckett and France

Beckett spent his adult life living in France. He was a fluent French speaker and wrote many of his works in French rather than English. He found the French language much easier to express the stark, stripped back nature of his dialogue.

Imagery and symbolism

Beckett was notoriously shy and reluctant to speak about his work. He refused to elaborate on the meanings, characters and symbols in his works. Recurring themes include isolation, religion, confinement, embodiment, human relationships and the human condition, decay and entropy.

Censorship

Beckett resisted the censorship of his plays. Whilst the (British) Lord Chamberlain's Office still had the authority to refuse performance licences for plays until 1968, Beckett was adamant that whilst some changes could be made to language, there were other changes which were non-negotiable, meaning that the play's premiere had to be performed under a 'private club' licence.

TIMELINE

GLOBAL & THEATRE HISTORY		SAMUEL BECKETT & *WAITING FOR GODOT*
Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* premieres at Theatre Royal Haymarket, London	1895	
Queen Victoria dies. She is succeeded by her son, Edward VII	1901	
	1906	Samuel Beckett is born on 13th April
George Bernard Shaw writes *Pygmalion* which premieres in Germany. It opens in London the following year	1913	
World War One begins	1914	
Easter Rising in Dublin, Ireland	1916	
World War One ends on November 11th, with the signing of the Armistice	1918	
Pirandello writes *Six Characters in Search of an Author*	1920	Beckett attends Portora Royal School in Enniskillen, (soon to be Northern Ireland) 1920-1923. He excels at sports including rugby, cricket and boxing
Partition of Ireland. Anglo-Irish Treaty establishes Ireland and Northern Ireland. NI remains part of the UK	1921	
James Joyce publishes *Ulysses*	1922	
	1927	Beckett graduates from Trinity College, Dublin with a First Class Honours degree in French and Italian
R.C. Sheriff's *Journey's End* depicts life in the trenches in World War One Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* premieres	1928-30	Beckett works as a lecturer at École Normale Supérieure in Paris, meets James Joyce and they become friends
	1938	Beckett is stabbed by a pimp in Paris Beckett meets Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil - his partner and later wife *Murphy* is published
World War Two begins	1939	Beckett is in Ireland visiting his mother when war is declared. He quickly returns to France, where he has been living
Nazi Germany occupies France	1940	
Brecht writes *Mother Courage and her Children* James Joyce, with whom Beckett has a close friendship, dies at the age of 58	1941	Beckett joins the French Resistance (Gloria SMH)
	1942	Beckett's friends are betrayed to the Nazis. He flees to Roussillon where he stays for two years, still working with the Resistance in sabotage activities
World War Two ends	1945	

TIMELINE

1947

Beckett writes *Eleutheria*, his first play. This was published after his death and remains unavailable for licensed performances

The British Government passes the National Theatre Bill and authorises funds to build the National Theatre. However, the National Theatre company will not form until the early 1960s

1948-49

John Gielgud directs *The Glass Menagerie* at Theatre Royal Haymarket

Beckett writes *En attendant Godot* in French

The election of the Nationalist Party in South Africa sees the beginning of Apartheid

Ireland becomes the Republic of Ireland and leaves the British Commonwealth

1951

Beckett publishes *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*

Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II ascends the throne. The coronation takes place the following year

1952

Terrence Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea* premieres in London

1953

Roger Blin directs the world premiere of *En attendant Godot* at the Théatre de Babylone. Blin also designs the production (with Sergio Gerstein) and plays Pozzo

Beckett publishes *The Unnamable*

1954

Beckett translates *En attendant Godot* into English

1955

The English premiere of *Waiting for Godot* is directed by Peter Hall, at the Arts Theatre, London, before transferring to the Criterion Theatre for a total of 263 performances. An 8 week tour of provincial theatres follows

War begins in Vietnam and Cambodia

Arthur Miller writes *A View from the Bridge*

A production of *Waiting for Godot* is performed at the Pike Theatre, Dublin, directed by Alan Simpson. After opening 4 weeks after the London production, it plays for over 100 performances and transfers to the Gate Theatre, Dublin

The Suez Crisis begins when Egypt takes control of the Suez Canal

1956

Beckett completes a one act play for BBC Radio called *All That Fall*

John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* premieres at the Royal Court Theatre

Brecht visits Britain with the Berliner Ensemble

1957

Waiting for Godot is directed by Herbert Blau, for the Actors Workshop of San Francisco

John Osborne's *The Entertainer* plays at the Royal Court Theatre, London

Endgame (Fin de Partie) premieres in French at London's Royal Court Theatre

The Suez Crisis ends

1958

Beckett's one man play, *Krapp's Last Tape* premieres, starring Patrick Magee, for whom the part was written

Harold Pinter's second play, *The Birthday Party*, opens but is a critical flop. He writes *The Dumb Waiter* the following year

1960

Happy Days premieres at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York

Pinter's *The Caretaker* is a success, premiering at the Arts Theatre, London

1961

Beckett Publishes *How It Is*

America becomes involved in the Vietnam War

Beckett marries Suzanne in Folkestone, Kent

TIMELINE

1963

Laurence Olivier creates the National Theatre of Great Britain Company. They are initially housed at the Old Vic Theatre, London, until the permanent building is built

1964

Spiel (Play) premieres in Ulm, Germany, followed by *Play* at the National Theatre, UK - Beckett attends rehearsals for the latter

Beckett travels to the USA for the production of his only film, which is called *Film*

1965

Edward Bond's *Saved* plays to private audiences at the Royal Court Theatre. Those involved are prosecuted by the Lord Chamberlain's office who refused to give a performance license due to its content

Beckett writes *Come and Go* in English. It is performed at Berlin's Schiller-Theater in January 1966, followed by an English language premiere in London a month later

1968

The Lord Chamberlain ceases the censorship of plays for performance

1969

Beckett is awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature

1970

Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* premieres

1972

Not I, a short dramatic monologue, premieres at New York's Lincoln Centre, as part of a Samuel Beckett Festival

1975

Beckett directs the German language *Warten auf Godot* at the Schiller Theater, Berlin. This production includes revisions to the dialogue and some of the stage directions. It is the version used in the 2024 production directed by James Macdonald

1976

Warten auf Godot tours to the Royal Court Theatre, London, as part of the theatre's 70th birthday season dedicated to Beckett. This includes the world premiere of *Footfalls* which was written for Billie Whitelaw

The National Theatre building on the South Bank opens

1978

Walter Asmus, who has previously assisted Beckett in rehearsals, revives *Waiting for Godot* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music

1979

Margaret Thatcher becomes the first female British Prime Minister

1980

During the Apartheid years in South Africa, Beckett specifies that his plays can only be performed by multi-racial casts there. Donald Howarth directs a multi-racial cast in Cape Town, casting Black actors to play Vladimir and Estragon, and white actors to play Pozzo and Lucky

1982

Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* opens at the Royal Court Theatre, London

1984

Beckett supervises 10 days of rehearsals for the San Quentin Drama Workshop production at Riverside Studios, London, in preparation for the Adelaide Festival in Australia. Walter Asmus directs the rest of the production

TIMELINE

1988

Walter Asmus directs *Waiting for Godot* at the Gate Theatre, Dublin. The production was revived and toured until 2008

A production of *Waiting for Godot* is performed at the Haadernse Toneelschuur in the Netherlands. It has an all-female cast. Beckett launches an unsuccessful lawsuit, but the judge dismisses the case, stating that because the play is about the human condition, gender of the performers/characters is not significant

1989

Death of Suzanne on 17 July 1989
Beckett dies, 22nd December

1990

Iraq invades Kuwait, triggering the first Iraq war

1991-95

The Croatian War of Independence takes place in the former Yugoslavia

A referendum on ending Apartheid in South Africa officially ceases segregation. Universal suffrage is awarded 2 years later

An all-female cast performs Waiting for Godot at the Avignon Festival in 1991. It is directed by Bruno Boussagol. It is not approved or licensed for performance by the Beckett Estate

1993

Susan Sontag directs *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo. They only perform Act One, due to the danger of performing in a war zone

1996

Sir Peter Hall directs *An Ideal Husband* at Theatre Royal Haymarket to celebrate the centenary of the play

1997

Sir Peter Hall directs *Waiting for Godot* at The Old Vic theatre, London. Sir Ben Kingsley plays Estragon and Alan Howard plays Vladimir

1998

The Good Friday Agreement brings the Troubles in Northern Ireland to an end, after 30 years of conflict

1999

Walter Asmus directs *Waiting for Godot* at the Gate Theatre, Dublin

2001

The 9/11 attacks take place in the USA

2005

Hurricane Katrina hits New Orleans, USA, and kills over 1800 people. Homes are destroyed and the effects of subsequent flooding are catastrophic. The world sees images of people seeking shelter in stadiums such as the Atlanta Superdome and New Orleans Convention Centre

2007

Christopher McElroen directs *Waiting for Godot* in an outdoor production set in post-Katrina New Orleans. The play is performed in New Orleans' Ninth Ward, an area that saw some of the worse destruction caused by the hurricane

2009

Sir Ian McKellen and Sir Patrick Stewart play Estragon and Vladimir respectively in *Waiting for Godot* at Theatre Royal Haymarket. The production transfers to New York in 2013

2024

Waiting for Godot opens at Theatre Royal Haymarket, starring Lucian Msamati and Ben Whishaw

INTERPRETING *WAITING FOR GODOT*

Waiting for Godot challenges audiences, directors and actors alike. It deliberately avoids giving us any answers, except the brief detail of setting, and the references to the time of day within the text. Nothing is certain in *Waiting for Godot*, memory is unreliable and the plot is somewhat cyclical. The audience are never given the answers that we instinctively seek as theatregoers and as human beings.

"I PRODUCE AN OBJECT. WHAT PEOPLE MAKE OF IT IS NOT MY CONCERN."
SAMUEL BECKETT[1]

ALAN SCHNEIDER: "WHAT DOES GODOT MEAN?" SAMUEL BECKETT: "IF I KNEW, I WOULD HAVE SAID SO IN THE PLAY."[2]

A lot has been written about Samuel Beckett, and he was an avid correspondent with his friends and family. He discussed the progress of his work in his letters and maintained detailed director's notebooks about his own productions of *Waiting for Godot*, which are available to view at the Beckett International Foundation at the University of Reading. However, the cast of this production of *Waiting for Godot* are in agreement that the only way to approach the play is to "play what's on the page", rather than becoming too concerned with productions and interpretations that have gone before. Tom Edden (Lucky) says, "at the end of the day, you want to delete as many obstacles between you and Beckett's words as physically possible, any past productions, any preconceptions, any pressures, any academic commentary, all that's very, very interesting, and it fires the synapses BUT the important thing is that it's all there on the page. He's given you the parameters".

Beckett's writing rejects the psychological realism that we are accustomed to seeing in plays by Chekhov and Ibsen, and also rejects the traditional arc of narrative which begins with exposition and an inciting incident, followed by rising action and a climax, before eventually coming to a form of denouement and conclusion at the end of the play. Instead, the play's two acts both end with Vladimir and Estragon agreeing to leave but then failing to do so. The much-anticipated arrival of the mysterious Godot never happens and we have the sense that this narrative will continue on even after the play has finished. Michael Worton suggests that the cyclical structure is better explained as a spiral, in which the characters "take refuge in repetition, repeating their own actions and words and often those of others - in order to pass the time".[3] Certainly the two pairings of Vladimir and Estragon, and Pozzo and Lucky, repeat the same patterns of conversation and physical action, as well as verbal and physical abuse in relationships. The sentiment that there is "nothing to be done" becomes a refrain throughout the play.

Max Harrison, the production's Associate Director explains that:

"There was something nice that James said in week one of rehearsals about the map of the play being an **emotional map**. Normally you'd have a map of plot. Something happens in Scene One, someone says something at dinner, and then that impacts Scene Two, the morning after, etc, and that's quite a natural map to jump onto. *Waiting for Godot* doesn't give you one of those."

Samuel Beckett described *Waiting for Godot* as a "tragi-comedy", and this can be another source of surprise for the audience. The physical setting is bare, and the characters are often uncomfortable and in pain. However, there is plenty of release through comedy in the cross-talk dialogue and the physical clowning action of the play which is described by Lucian Msamati (Estragon) as "a serious business". Beckett was influenced by his love of actors such as Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers, whose work he had seen in films as a young man, and the dialogue and the stage business, such as the exchange of hats and the collapse of Pozzo and Lucky, owes much to the actors with whom Beckett was so familiar.

For the audience, it can be frustrating to come away from the play with a sense of nothing being resolved. Dean Graham, who understudies both Vladimir and Lucky, suggests that "you can go as an audience member and surrender to the mystery of it, and still get so much out of it". Like Estragon and Vladimir, we are denied the opportunity to meet Godot or to understand what he might represent. Worton suggests that Godot is actually "an absence, who can be interpreted at moments as God, death, the lord of the manor, a benefactor, even Pozzo, but Godot has a function rather than a meaning. He stands for what keeps us chained to and in existence".[4]

1 Quoted in Alan Duckworth, (ed), En attendant Godot, p.xxiv-xxv
2 Quoted by Michael Worton in '*Waiting for Godot* and Endgame: theatre as text' in The Cambridge Companion to Beckett, p.67
3 Ibid, p.69
4 Ibid, p.71

INTERPRETING *WAITING FOR GODOT*

"THE MORE YOU CAN HOLD ITS MEANING OPEN, THE RICHER THE PLAY IS. THE TASK ISN'T TO PIN SOMETHING DOWN TO ONE POINT. THE TASK IS TO HEAR AS MANY DIFFERENT MEANINGS IN THE PLAY AS YOU CAN."
JAMES MACDONALD

Sir Peter Hall, who directed the first English language production of *Waiting for Godot*, wrote in The Guardian about the experience of being a young director faced with such an unusual play:

"I soon felt secure in Beckett's rhythms. This was real dramatic poetry, not applied but organic. And I wondered less and less about what the play meant as day followed day. It clearly meant what it said. Two men were "*waiting for Godot*". Who was Godot? That would depend on the audience and their beliefs - or lack of them."

Hall's reference to rhythm refers to the structure of the dialogue, which often uses short, rapid single lines of dialogue between characters. There is also the rhythm of the scenes in terms of exits and entrances, and the very detailed moments of comic interplay inspired by Beckett's love of music hall and silent movies. Students exploring *Waiting for Godot* might find it helpful to investigate those rhythms (which also includes pauses), rather than trying to settle on one definitive meaning of the play.

One example of *Waiting for Godot* 'speaking' to a particular audience is its use in prisons. In 1957, *Waiting for Godot* was performed at San Quentin Prison by the Actors Workshop of San Francisco during their run of the play. 1400 inmates saw the play and many immediately related to the existence of the characters whom they saw on stage.

"IF THOSE ARE THE WORDS OF THE PEOPLE WHO ARE AT THE BOTTOM OF LIFE, THOSE PEOPLE WHO ARE INCARCERATED ARE SAYING, "I SEE MYSELF. THAT'S MY EXPERIENCE", THIS HAS GOT TO BE SOMETHING MAGICAL AND SPECIAL AND VITAL."
LUCIAN MSAMATI

The play's performance in 2007 in New Orleans represents another, highly cathartic effect created by *Waiting for Godot*. Performed as an outdoor production in the Ninth Ward - one of the areas worst hit by Hurricane Katrina two years before - the actors and audience were surrounded by destroyed homes and scenes of devastation. The determination to survive, against the odds, is a key idea in the play. Christopher McElroen was inspired to direct *Waiting for Godot* when he saw a photograph of two men floating on a door during the flooding, and Vladimir was played by actor Wendell Pierce whose family had lost everything to the disaster. So, whilst our inclination when approaching the play might be to discover a meaningful plot, it could be more fruitful to consider the meaning that the audience might find within the imagery, setting and characters as Beckett presents them. Lucian sums this up perfectly when he comments:

"FOR ME, WHAT WE DO IS NOT IRRELEVANT. THIS IS THE STUFF OF LIFE."
LUCIAN MSAMATI

Peter Hall, 'Godotmania' in The Guardian, 4 January 2003, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/jan/04/theatre.beckettat100

THEMES IN *WAITING FOR GODOT*

Samuel Beckett was reluctant to give concrete answers regarding what *Waiting for Godot* might be about. He used the phrase "vaguen", his deliberate effort to make the play more vague. Interpretations form through discussion, debate and exploration in the rehearsal room. James Macdonald's initial list of themes in *Waiting for Godot* includes:

ENTROPY

Entropy is defined as a lack of predictability, or a descent into chaos. In *Waiting for Godot*, any pursuit of order is futile. Questions remain unanswered, nothing is concrete or certain. Physical chaos - such as the collapse of Lucky and Pozzo, and the attempt to help them get back up - is also present in parts of the play.

SLAVERY

Lucky wears a rope around his neck and is controlled, or "driven", by Pozzo, his "owner". Lucky is weighed down by baggage, which he drops at least once. In Act One, Pozzo refers to taking Lucky to market to sell him. Lucky has no free will and, in Act Two, must lead Pozzo who has become blind. We never see Lucky released from his captivity, and he also experiences violence at the hands of Pozzo and Estragon. Vladimir stamps on Lucky's hat to avenge Lucky's kicking of Estragon in Act One.

MENTAL HEALTH

As well as the explicit reference to suicide by hanging in both acts of the play, we might consider Beckett's play to be a reflection on mental health and how we lose or retain it. Companionship and co-dependency is reflected in the relationship between Estragon and Vladimir; despite discussing the need to go their separate ways, they never do so, suggesting that they both have a function to fulfil in each other's mental and physical safety.

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

Early in the play, Estragon explains that he has been beaten, and in Act Two he says that he has been beaten by ten men. His existence includes hiding in ditches and trying to avoid physical violence. Both pairings of men - Vladimir & Estragon and Pozzo & Lucky - seem to live a transient lifestyle. Rae Smith's initial research for her set and costume design for the production includes a number of visual references to transient individuals, and the setting of the play includes "a road". This is not a permanent place in which to settle, but people return with a sense that this time it might be different. James Macdonald considers this an important element of the play which could reflect current issues of migrancy and displacement due to political instability, the safety of minority groups or the desire to live a better life.

Alan Howard (Vladimir) and Ben Kingsley (Estragon) in *Godot* at the Old Vic, 1997. Directed by Peter Hall and designed by John Gunter. Photograph by Douglas H. Jeffery. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

OUR CONTRACT AND RELATIONSHIP WITH POWER

The two main pairings in the play demonstrate various power dynamics. The image of servant and master is clear between Pozzo and Lucky. Vladimir and Estragon's relationship is often co-dependent, whilst at other times there are attempts at achieving dominance. When the Boy arrives in Act One he admits that Godot beats the Boy's brother. Although he remains unseen, Godot himself perhaps exerts the greatest power: Vladimir's refusal to leave the setting for any prolonged period suggests the power of hope, promise or expectation. The reward for waiting for Godot's arrival is also unclear, and so the audience might wonder whether the wait will be worth it.

A PROVOCATION ABOUT FORM

Waiting for Godot rejects traditional and conventional forms. The play uses intertextual references (such as its frequent references to The Bible), creates loops through language and repetition, and refuses to conform to traditional narrative arcs. Critical and audience responses have centred around discussions concerning form, purpose and structure of drama. Some people have found this new form liberating, whilst others find the lack of answers or resolutions an uncomfortable and disorientating experience.

James Mcdonald talks about *Waiting for Godot* as an "anti-play": there is no discernible plot, no concern for psychological realism, and no significant change in the circumstances of the characters that the audience would expect in a conventional play.

WAITING FOR GODOT'S PRODUCTION HISTORY

PARIS, 1953: *EN ATTENDANT GODOT*, WORLD PREMIERE

Roger Blin directed the world premiere of *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*) at the Théatre de Babylone in Paris, in 1953. Before securing funding or a venue to host the production, Blin would rehearse sections of the play with his friends and actors, and was excited by the opportunities within the play to challenge theatrical form and convention. Blin wrote "with *Godot* I was sure that we would shake up a lot of people, especially the playwrights of the time, the theatre directors and a section of the audience".

In the post-war years, money was tight everywhere and theatrical budgets were meagre. For *En attendant Godot*, the tree was constructed by bending metal coathangers and wrapping them up in tissue paper which were then painted brown. The leaves which appear in the second act were simply green paper. Lighting was also very simple, and the stage was very small. The husband of the costume-mistress scavenged props (he was a refuse collector) and clothes were borrowed, with or without their owners' permission!

Black and white photographs do not do the costumes for this opening production justice. Whilst Estragon and Vladimir wore mismatched clothing (with Estragon not wearing a shirt underneath his jacket), Lucky's costume included a red footman's jacket which had been found somewhere in the theatre, with a striped vest and black trousers that ended at the knee. In contrast to the other men, Pozzo's status and power was conveyed through his costume of jodhpurs worn with knee-high boots, a shirt and tie, and a cape.

Blin experimented with a range of ideas with which to stage *Waiting for Godot*, including the idea of creating a circus ring. In subsequent interviews about the play, Blin has said merely considering Vladimir and Estragon as clowns is a 'trap'. Instead, Blin interpreted the play as having four characters who suffered from various physical ailments and injuries, showing the relationship between Lucky and Pozzo as being like that of a circus animal and its master when they exited in Act One. Although Beckett was often in rehearsals, he rarely gave any further insight into the play apart from what was already on the page. He was, however, insistent that Estragon's trousers must fall down completely at the end of Act Two; after the first performance he heard that this had not been the case and wrote to the director, "That might seem stupid to you but for me it's capital".

LONDON, 1955: *WAITING FOR GODOT* ENGLISH TRANSLATION PREMIERE

Twenty-four-year-old Peter Hall was the newly appointed Artistic Director of the Arts Theatre in London, and was the first person to direct the English translation of the play, after several directors and actors had turned the play down. Audiences and many reviewers struggled to make sense of the play. The post-war theatrical landscape in London was straddling the drawing room comedies and 'well made plays' that audiences were used to. It was to be a few years before the Royal Court hosted other plays which challenged audience taste and experience (such as John Osborne's *The Entertainer* and *Look Back In Anger* which premiered in the latter half of the decade). Early responses to the play saw audience members walk out or heckle the actors and critics for the daily newspapers offered negative readings of the play in production. However, the Sunday critics, Harold Hobson and Kenneth Tynan, famously applauded the play's originality and innovations, which helped the production develop a curiosity for London theatregoers, and it eventually transferred to the Criterion Theatre.

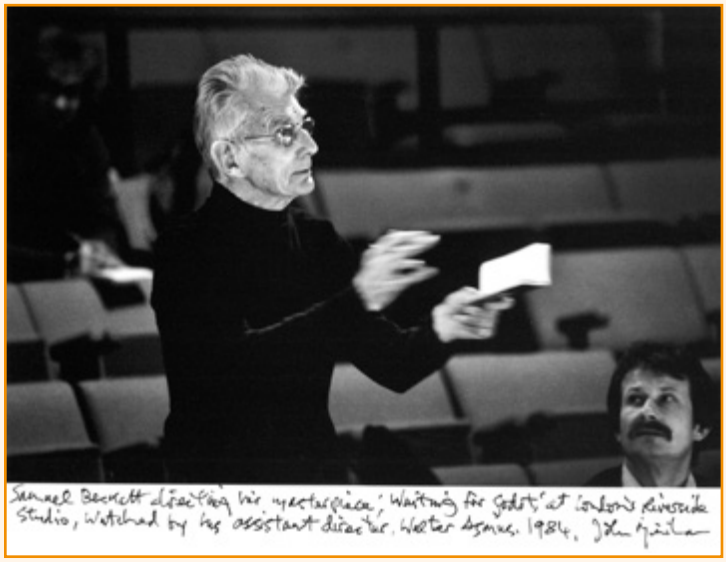


Photo and caption: John Minihan

SAN FRANCISCO, 1957: THE ACTORS WORKSHOP OF SAN FRANCISCO

Herbert Blau directed this production, which was originally placed on a weekly production schedule before its popularity meant that it moved to the main repertoire of the theatre that season. David Bradby suggests that the play was so popular that it became "a kind of cult phenomenon". Blau noticed that the play has a certain musicality and rhythm (think of its structure, repetition, motifs etc) and encouraged his actors to consider that, for these characters, nothing else exists - they are in a kind of void. You may wish to consider how the set and lighting design of this 2024 production takes a similar approach to the characters' predicament.

Although this production was important in terms of Beckett's popularity in the US, it was the visit to San Quentin Prison for which this production is just as well known. The play was seen by 1400 inmates, and triggered a desire in those men to create their own drama group. Eventually, they too staged a production of *Waiting for Godot.* Further research about *Waiting for Godot* shows that prison inmates and communities relate to the wait, and sense of decline, experienced by those who are incarcerated. Like the production that took place in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the cathartic and social aspects of the play (for example, the reduction in violence anticipated by the San Quentin Prison warden) were significant. Beckett's work remained popular at San Quentin, with seven of their thirty-five productions being his plays.

WAITING FOR GODOT'S PRODUCTION HISTORY

BERLIN, 1975: BECKETT'S OWN PRODUCTION OF *WAITING FOR GODOT*

For this production, which he translated into German, he made significant adjustments to the stage directions and the dialogue. It is this version which had a longstanding influence on later productions of the play, which has been included in the English translation, published by Faber and Faber in 1993. David Bradby's analysis suggests that in this production, Beckett chose to highlight the mirroring and pairing of the play, bringing out the poetry of the language as well as the references to death which occur throughout it. Beckett broke the play down into sections (you can see this in his notebooks which are available to view at the Beckett International Foundation), this is exactly what James Macdonald has done for this production. James has broken down the play into units, or beats, and works with the cast on each unit which usually lasts between half a page to two full pages. With this technique, it is easier to discover the shape and momentum of the play, and to find a sense of structure.

Beckett had two months of rehearsal for this production - this is an unusually long period of time but it is unsurprising given the modifications that Beckett made to his text.

With his own productions of *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett chose to focus on different aspects of the play in different versions. According to Michael Worton, the 1975 production at the Schiller-Theater in Berlin "pointed up the bleakness of the play" but Walter Asmus' 1978 production (informed by detailed discussion with Beckett) focussed much more on the comic aspects and relation to the audience.

Beckett was a great admirer of visual art, particularly paintings, and he counted several artists amongst his close friends. He visited art galleries in any city in which he found himself, often repeating those visits and examining exhibition catalogues closely. He was particularly influenced by Bruegel's *The Land of Cockaigne* which Bradby links to the fall of all four characters in Act Two of *Waiting for Godot*. Casper David Friedrich's *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* is another painting that influenced Beckett's visual imagination for the play. Other favoured painters included Brouwer and Bosch. Researching those paintings can be a helpful source of information and inspiration for your own interpretations of the play and its individual characters.

SARAJEVO: 1993

During 1991-1995, the former Yugoslavia was ravaged by a war of independence and the city of Sarajevo was under siege. Susan Sontag, an American writer, staged parts of *Waiting for Godot* in Sarajevo in two performances: at 2pm and again at 4pm. The staging of the play was an enormous risk to the actors' safety, and performances could only take place in the afternoon because of the risks of performing at night in a war zone. Sontag's production was a political statement about the impact of war. She worked with local theatre makers who had been severely affected by the war's stoppage of theatre productions - a threat to their livelihood. You may wish to reflect on the relevance of the production to the circumstances of the theatremakers who were waiting for the blockade to end. For more information on the political situation in Sarajevo in 1993 and the war of independence, visit here.

Stefan Wigger (Vladimir), Klaus Herm (Lucky) and Karl Raddatz (Pozzo) in the Schiller Theatre Berlin's tour of *Warten auf Godot* at the Royal Court Theatre, 1976. Directed by Samuel Beckett and designed by Matias. Photograph by Douglas H. Jeffery. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

LONDON, 1997: THE OLD VIC, LONDON

Peter Hall writes "In 1997, I directed *Godot* again at the Old Vic. My 16-year-old daughter was baffled by the programme material detailing the play's controversial history. "What on earth is there to understand?" she said. "It's perfectly clear what it is about. You only have to listen". How stupid it seems now that, 50 years ago, people denied that this play was a play. But I suppose new tunes are always by definition unfamiliar and disturbing".[1] Given that over four decades had passed since *Waiting for Godot*'s premiere, and its influence on subsequent plays in the canon became established, audiences in the late 20th century were much more willing to embrace the play's refusal to conform to conventional meaning and style. In 2006, Hall's Bath Theatre Royal production of *Waiting for Godot* was revived and performed in London, confirming Hall's important role in the longevity and popularity of the play.

The above descriptions of a handful of key productions are only a starting point for understanding *Waiting for Godot*'s place in the dramatic canon.

When asked about the legacy of these different versions of *Waiting for Godot*, Tom Edden (Lucky) explains:

"You've got to do your homework and understand what's gone before, but we can only do our production with this company in this time. We can't do a past production, and we can't do a future production. The joy is that it's a masterpiece."

[1] Peter Hall, 'Godotmania' in The Guardian, 4 January 2003, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/jan/04/theatre.beckettat100

JAMES MACDONALD ON DIRECTING *WAITING FOR GODOT*

DIRECTING *WAITING FOR GODOT*

Waiting for Godot came back to my attention in lockdown. When I started off in theatre there was a lot of Beckett being staged. For a long while it was the province of Michael Colgan in the Irish theatre and then various other directors as well. During lockdown, it felt like an interesting time for me to have a look at that stuff - it was a very personal thing. I'd grown up with it, and I adored it. I now mostly work on new plays, and for most of the writers that I work with you could say that Beckett is their God. He's the writer that they instinctively have been influenced by and that's carried into their own writing.
It's a little like going back to the source for me.

Waiting for Godot is the most playful of Beckett's plays. It's the most approachable for an audience in lots of ways. I just loved the idea of doing it with great actors.

"THE PLAY SPEAKS TO A RANGE OF THEMES THAT ARE VERY RELEVANT TODAY."

It speaks to poverty, it speaks to environmental catastrophe, it speaks to a lot of things to do with the nature of theatre and challenging what we take for granted in a theatre. It's about people who have nothing.

Waiting for Godot is an existential play that asks what human life is for and about. Beckett wrote it immediately after the Second World War, a war in which Beckett was active. (See the biography section - page 6 of this learning guide for more information on this). There's a historical aspect to that which, perhaps now we're further away, we can see more clearly. It feels like a play that speaks to us quite powerfully. Over the years there has been an attitude that it's a gentle comedy, often cast with more well-known actors.

Actually, it's a much more hard-edged play. It's got comedy in it, and Beckett wants it to be funny, and that's part of what he's saying. He calls it a tragi-comedy. However there's something I want to try and rediscover, which is the shock that people must have had when they first saw the play. I want to see if we can somehow get that back a bit. One of my favourite things to explore is silence and how you use it. Silence is one of the main ingredients of this play, and he kind of invented that. Harold Pinter got it from him, rather than the other way round!

In the rehearsal room, we'll work instinctively. *Waiting for Godot* can't be reduced to one meaning, and we need to get the hang of the form of the play. We'll need to get up and do it, and that's how we'll get the hang of it. We'll tackle it by hearing where it changes, by hearing what goes on in the silences, by just listening to it, getting to know it. We'll develop our own terms for what's going on there.

"IF YOU APPROACH IT BY REDUCING IT TO ONE THING, OR EVEN ONE SET OF IDEAS, YOU'RE NOT REALLY DOING IT JUSTICE."

There are ideas about mental health in this play, there are issues around who Pozzo is and his relationship with Capitalism, there's the aspect of climate change. We'll explore all of these strands and take them into consideration. When Beckett wrote this play, and his other plays, he always took away the obvious signposts.

"IF YOU TAKE THE CHARACTERS AND THE PLAY SERIOUSLY, THEY WILL EMERGE."

If you take the circumstances that he's given these people, which is that they have nothing and they're sleeping in ditches and being beaten up every morning, then the reality of the stakes of the play and the emotional arc of the play will emerge.

We might ask "how do they get through a day? Why have they invented or decided that Godot is the answer to everything or anything?"

Personally, I find the lack of clear answers liberating, but I'm not a young theatre maker. I've learnt to not be too worried by not having the answers. The best texts don't give you easy answers. They ask you to keep an ear or an eye out for lots of different layers.

"TRUSTING YOUR INSTINCTS IS THE BEST THING TO DO."

It's no different from doing Shakespeare. In a lot of great Shakespeare lines, you can hear five different meanings. You explore those lines with openness so that you can hear all those different things.

JAMES MACDONALD ON DIRECTING *WAITING FOR GODOT*

"ON ONE LEVEL, THE PLAY IS ABOUT PEOPLE WHO HAVE NO SECURITY. THEY'RE CONSTANTLY, CONSTANTLY DOUBTING EVERY ASPECT OF THEIR REALITY."

Research is interesting but I'm more interested in what Beckett knew. I find that more useful. In preparation for this production I have read what else Beckett was writing at the time, or what he had just written, and where his ideas came from. He started writing *Waiting for Godot* in the middle of writing the trilogy (the novels *Molloy, Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*). And you can see why, if you read the trilogy, he needed to put it down at that certain moment, because it must have been the most intensely exhausting process. It has no movement except the sort of movement of the mind.

I've also been reading Dante, who was his favourite writer, and a lot of the kind of play and the imagery - such as Purgatory - that's in this piece comes from Dante.

Metaphorically, these characters are in Purgatory. Although he's not a religious man, he refers to religion a lot in this play, crucifixion is in there, and the characters are sort of suspended in a void.

Beckett never drew attention to his politics, but his politics were quite strong. You see that in this play, and you see that in the way he writes. He always chooses to write about people who have nothing,

Max (Harrison, Associate Director) and I have talked a lot about the influence of film on Beckett. There are elements of the play that he got from silent comedy, which he loved, such as Charlie Chaplin.

I wrote a list of themes as I read *Waiting for Godot* and made notes:

My thoughts included:

- Entropy and climate change
- Latent capitalism, and the demolished Capitalist and land owner. In Britain today we're having such great arguments about land and who owns it
- Humanity in ruins
- People destroyed and people on the move, including refugees. Estragon and Vladimir talk about hiding in ditches and being beaten up
- Mental illness and mental health
- The play as a provocation about form
- Our contract and relationship with power
- Slavery
- It's a play about two couples, who sometimes can't bear each other but who are stuck together and also take solace from that sometimes
- Existentialism and avoiding the void

I'm looking forward to working with Rae (Smith, Set and Costume Designer) to put these people on stage who we wouldn't normally see on a stage because they're poor. When this play was first written, that was a radical thing to show.

The Theatre Royal Haymarket housed Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*: it's a theatre built to showcase Victorian and Edwardian drawing room comedies, and here we are showing people who are homeless. There's something fantastic about that.

INTRODUCING THE CAST

The cast of *Waiting for Godot* tell us about their first experiences of Samuel Beckett's work, and give some helpful advice on how to tackle *Waiting for Godot* in the rehearsal room.

LUCIAN MSAMATI
Estragon

BEN WHISHAW
Vladimir

TOM EDDEN
Lucky

JONATHAN SLINGER
Pozzo

DEAN GRAHAM
Understudy, Vladimir and Lucky

DAVID LEE-JONES
Understudy, Estragon and Pozzo

THE CAST AND DIRECTING TEAM, ON THEIR FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH BECKETT AND *WAITING FOR GODOT*

DAVID LEE-JONES

I first encountered the play and Beckett at A Level, and I was very lucky because I got to study it simultaneously for English A Level and French A Level so I read it in English and French. There's sometimes a kind of a silliness around learning a foreign language, and I think that infused, for me, this sense of daftness in the play, because to do a play like this, it encourages that silliness to the extent that "en charnier, en charnier" (the charnel house, the charnel house) was a comedy catchphrase in our class! I remember being amazed by this play.

I had already done *The Birthday Party* at GCSE, and we had done *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* as a school play. Suddenly there was this thing that was a really pure original version of that, really stripped down and ridiculous. It was very exciting.

"I REMEMBER BEING AMAZED BY THIS PLAY."

INTRODUCING THE CAST

TOM EDDEN

My first contact with Beckett before anything else was the image of him. I had a very good drama teacher who really passionately held together this great department at GCSE. So there were constantly plays piled up and posters and stuff. I remember one image that was just of Beckett in one of these wonderful photographs where he just looks like this bird of prey carved out of granite with this electric hair. I just remember thinking that whatever this guy is seeing is going to be new. He wasn't Chekhov, he wasn't Terrence Rattigan: this guy was on the edge, and always in the darkness. I did see a touring production of *Godot* that came to the school, and I think I saw Fiona Shaw do *Happy Days* and I remember as a teenager, I suppose, watching *Godot*, I don't know if I enjoyed it or not. I can't remember what, but I want to remember going, Oh, this is like a nightmare, because knowing nothing about it, it was that creeping realisation as a viewer of realising that Godot's never going to arrive.

You're taught in every other narrative that there's going to be a fulfillment of whatever it is and in *Godot*, there is no fulfillment. I remember it being very uncomfortable and realising they're trapped in a nightmare. As an art student at that age everyone loves Escher and Dali. I think teenagers really love things that are just different, upside down or that change perspective. I feel like Beckett lived in that world of upside downness or in an odd dream landscape.

BEN WHISHAW

I'd started an art course, and then there was a season of Beckett plays and other things related to Beckett at the Barbican in London. I went there with my friend, and we just found that we wanted to go back and see more and more. It was so interesting that I realised I shouldn't be doing the art course, I should be pursuing something else.

I'd always loved him, having read him - I think I'd read *Murphy* - but I loved the darkness of the plays and of the writing. I was drawn to something if it was about depressed people or alienated people or darkness in some way; I really went towards it. It seemed to speak to me; I related to those feelings as a teenager, I think most teenagers do. I always really liked him, but then when I saw the actors perform the plays, something happened!

"I WAS SURPRISED AT HOW FUNNY THE PLAY WAS."
MAX HARRISON (ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR)

MAX HARRISON

This was the first time I'd read or watched or come across a Beckett play at all. In preparation for my interview for this job, two of us read it out loud in my living room.

The preconceptions I had were that it was a depressing play and that "nothing happens, twice". I think, like many people, other people's summaries of it had put me off. I read it, and I found it really funny, human and quite moving, especially as each act draws to a close and coordinates with what has happened before. I really enjoyed the kind of combination of that poignancy and that humour.

JAMES MACDONALD

I came to Beckett through the novels. I went to drama school in Paris, and Beckett's such an important figure in Paris. I saw the plays, but I got obsessed with the novels. Like Ben, I'm drawn to the darkness of the experience and how funny that darkness is, which is both alarming and consoling, I think. Whilst you're watching you're just struggling to make sense of the world, and you're coming to your own terms with what a godless universe is. Beckett's the first person that achieved that effect successfully. It felt much more relatable to me than Sartre, for example. There were other people who were doing it, like Ionesco, who were doing the same thing, but Beckett was the one who did it most forcefully and most beautifully in the writing.

INTRODUCING THE CAST

ON RISK-TAKING IN REHEARSAL

LUCIAN MSAMATI

Every single one of these great plays (Shakespeare, Beckett etc), these great pieces, are the great interpretations because there is respect, but not reverence. They're not holy relics. They can't be holy relics. Otherwise, what's the point of doing them?

Being playful doesn't mean you're being ill-disciplined or disrespectful. It's part of your responsibility. It's how you learn.

JONATHAN SLINGER

The thing to do is you just have to carve out the time to, as Beckett said, "fail, fail again, fail better". Until you do it, you don't know, and that's a rule with theatre.

BEN WHISHAW

James is so patient. It's all well and good saying, "make mistakes", but it's not possible if you're not working in a room where that's allowed, and sometimes you're not, for whatever reason. We're very lucky. James allows us to just be lost and work through it. I mean, we don't know what we're doing at the moment, but you start and you have to go through. You have to be allowed to go through those phases.. And so, yeah, it's really important to be given the space, to be held, to be watched.

"TRY AGAIN. FAIL AGAIN. BETTER AGAIN. OR BETTER WORSE. FAIL WORSE AGAIN. STILL WORSE AGAIN. TILL SICK FOR GOOD. THROW UP FOR GOOD. GO FOR GOOD."

SAMUEL BECKETT, *WORSTWORD HO*

ON *WAITING FOR GODOT'S* RELEVANCE

BEN WHISHAW

The play doesn't offer any fake comfort to you. Lots of pieces are saturated with things that will give you a temporary feeling of something nice, not to say that there aren't nice things or funny things in it, because there are. But Beckett doesn't offer comfort. He's deliberately taken away everything from these characters, it's the barest kind of situation. They're not even really certain if they exist sometimes. Beckett has so radically stripped away all the things that we think we are certain about. I love this play because it's about doubt, it's about people who are really profoundly uncertain. I find it so moving because of that. I feel that's like, also I don't know, I believe in that as an offering to the world right now.

SET DESIGN

ASSOCIATE SET DESIGNER NIALL MCKEEVER EXPLAINS THE DESIGN CONCEPT FOR *WAITING FOR GODOT*

THE DESIGN PROCESS

When I joined the production Rae and James had already started talking about wanting a dystopian landscape within the space.

They were already adamant that they wanted to complete the proscenium of the theatre. The proscenium arch of the theatre technically only has three sides to it, and then they decided they really wanted to complete the fourth side, which is the very bottom of it, creating a frame. It was a fun reference to looking into a picture and a picture frame, and reflecting on that formality of what you're about to sit down and watch. That also gave rise to thoughts about what are you going to view inside this frame, and the early 20th century references to landscape. What followed was a discussion of what this landscape should be, how big it should be, and how vast: the expanse of it, and how much of the stage it should take up.

We went through this process of very different versions of the shapes of the landscape, some that covered the entire stage, and how much it was broken down. There was even discussion of a runway-type set, with a concrete style road that went up at an angle and created this weird, obscure, surreal landscape.

Eventually what we came down to was a rhomboid-type shape. Then we decided that the play all takes place in a massive void. The device of the frame helped us articulate what the void was and the space beyond this landscape. It's a floating landscape in the middle of a black space. Some of the references we were looking at were artists like Anselm Kiefer. He's very inspirational in this piece because of the breakdown and the texture. The word that Rae returns to is entropy. The imagery is of constant breakdown and decay that's happening before our eyes.

We considered what the remnants of a post-apocalyptic landscape would be, within the Beckett world. What would be left in terms of a stone, what would be left in terms of a tree? That's what we were exploring.

The idea Rae and James wanted to go with is this base layer of what made this floating landscape: a tarpaulin. They were looking at very rural materials. Tarpaulin would protect big silos for example. These things really don't decay - they take years and years to break down, so this brings that rural aspect into this Beckett world. We layered and experimented with the texture of that - the years upon years upon years of build-up and detritus.

We experimented with a lot of different colours but we went with white, because Rae was talking about the idea of feeling like they're almost walking on the moon. The reference to the moonlight in the play that happens over the course of the day also informed the idea, as did Anselm Kiefer and Joseph Beuys, artists who looked into existential landscapes and these post-war landscapes.

> **"NOTHING HERE IN THIS VERSION HAS BEEN ADDED BEYOND WHAT BECKETT TELLS US."**

In my research I was exploring a lot of blasted landscape imagery after World War One and after World War Two. We returned to the war that was happening when Beckett lived in France and the landscapes he would have come across. We used this as a guide into how we created the emotional landscape for these characters. We were influenced by Rothko as well, particularly the Expressionist style of his work and how to create the landscape.

THE SET

The set isn't on the stage floor, it's slightly set above it, so it's about 30 centimetres higher. It becomes a bit higher into the hilly landscape upstage.

We also discussed what the front cloth could be. James and Rae didn't want to use the traditional front cloth of the theatre, so we've created the sense of the black tarp - the tarp nearly in its raw form that has been folded back and forth. It's as if it's got years of this life that was in it that's now been used as this non-artistic front cloth of the theatre.

I broke down a black piece of tarpaulin and created scratches on it - that's where maybe the Rothko influences come in. We have got these white scratches on it and holes in the tarpaulin so it looks like a map or grid of some sort, or as if you're looking up into the sky and seeing stars. The tarpaulin brings us back to brutal reality once the play starts. It looks like whatever this piece of tarpaulin was, it fell. It looks like this artwork has fallen off the frame and has landed here, and we've got this lunar landscape of these textures and cracks on the surface.

For the stone that Beckett suggests, we wanted some reference to a former architectural structure or civilization, and we also looked into a range of very different images. We investigated post-war, concrete blocks that were used in prisoner of war camps and barracks where there is a very brutalist style. We also looked into Greek architecture such as Greek temples and what this stone would have fallen off of. That becomes the stone in the piece.

The tree itself is a weird enigma in the space. It should feel both natural and completely unnatural at the same time. It should feel like the foundation of it is a bent piece of metal that looks like a natural formation of a tree that's died but also, once you look a bit closer, you realise that it's layers of plastic bags that have been wrapped around the tree, and that have built up over time. It's what's accumulated over that tree and almost looks like bark – both the natural and the unnatural tree just looks very out of place.

SET AND COSTUME DESIGN

USING BECKETT'S STAGE DIRECTIONS

The sparseness of both the set and the information Beckett provides works both ways for a designer. Beckett's sparseness actually is a tool, but it's also your worst enemy, because the more you add, the more you're fighting against Beckett. The more you fight against Beckett, the more the piece doesn't work! There's a reason for the sparseness. You're just left with the raw visual signals, and when you break it down, it's the only signals that Beckett gives anyway. Nothing here in this version has been added beyond what Beckett tells us. We've interpreted the road and we've interpreted the tree. But at the end of the day there's no embellishment. That's very important.

COSTUME

The costume design has been kept quite contemporary, with nods to the past. In our research we looked a lot into the images of people living rough in London, and refugees, people who travel, and people who've lost everything trying to get home, including post-World War Two. In today's world we can't ignore everything that's happening worldwide, but especially on our own shores now. I think that the bleakness of the set with these contemporary nods highlights those references even more. This is Beckett for today. You can't ignore the people on the street anymore, especially in London. You can't ignore the people who are trying to cross the Channel on boats.

For the costumes, a lot of the design work has happened in the rehearsal room as well, because you can come with all these ideas, but at the end of the day, the actors have to embody the characters. You give the actors your little ingredients, and then they take them on, embody and challenge them, and play with them. In the script there's a lot of messing with hats and props and all sorts. Rae, James and I asked for a range of different costume items to be in the rehearsal room and we essentially played dress up in the room, and that allowed us to make informed decisions rather than placing something on the actors and characters. There were no rules in terms of period or anything, so it meant actors could choose anything they wanted based on what the character was. Through this approach you can then consider the questions such as: what is a master? What is a servant? Who are these people?

In terms of colour choices for the costumes, Rae and James have kept an eye on what colour means in the space. Once you introduce colour in a very bleak landscape, it becomes something specific or significant, so you must really be careful about the colours you choose. The colours are quite dark, which means they need to stand out against the white landscape. You couldn't have them in bright white colours, or else they'd disappear, unless that is a decision that is significant for a particular character, for example.

The costumes go through the same process of how we made the tree. For example, what layers have been built up, what has remained, what is decaying, and what is sticking whilst what else just blows off? We thought about the conditions of the landscape in terms of whether it's arid. If so, the hair will be quite dry, for example. What's great about the rehearsal room is that the director, actors and the designer can work together to decide. These decisions are all based on this world, this concept.

DESIGNING FOR AN ICONIC PLAY

I think what's always important about these plays is that these things aren't untouchable. Yes, Beckett put his constraints on the play, but at the end of the day, it's our job to interpret those constraints in terms of what it means for today. People who work in theatre are very responsive and reactive to what's happening in the world. You can always view a piece, no matter what it is, through the lens of today. You'll find the references that work for 2024 might not be the same references, or the things you'd pull out of the script if it was 2008 for example. Everything just has to be considered sensitively.

RESEARCH

As well as the influences listed and linked above, you may wish to investigate other influences and references that have informed the design process.

For Rae's initial research, she compiled striking images of people who might be considered itinerant or 'drifters'. One particular image that you might wish to explore is Richard Avedon's image of 'James Kimberley, Drifter' which is part of the series called *In the American West*. You can find brief detail about those photographs here.

Another influence has been the work of photographer Pablo Olivieira whose work includes *Careful: Soul Inside*. You can explore these images here.

LIGHTING *WAITING FOR GODOT*

BRUNO POET TELLS US ABOUT THE PROCESS OF CREATING A LIGHTING DESIGN FOR THE PRODUCTION

Up until we started rehearsal, I'd thought about *Waiting for Godot* in quite an abstract way. I get to know more when I see rehearsals in full swing and see what directorial decisions have been made. Fundamentally, the important thing to consider when creating the design concept for the play is that we need to be really careful: we need to capture the nuance of the actors' performances. We need to see their eyes, we need to hear their voices and understand what they're saying, because we must give the audience opportunities to make their mind up about what the play is about, what the characters want, what the words the audience are hearing mean, and how the audience relate to their own experiences.

The Theatre Royal Haymarket has a proscenium stage, and then we're adding sections to make it turn into a picture frame.

The theatre is a Victorian theatre, so it has certain limitations on lighting opportunities but we are embracing that challenge, particularly with the idea of the picture frame.

Victorian theatre audiences were never very far away from the actors, even if their seats were at the top of the auditorium, so this is something we have to take into consideration when thinking about lighting - what the different audience experience will be, depending on where they're sitting.

The floor is canvas in shades of white and grey and the landscape is quite desolate.

We're also interested in having some corridors of side light, where the lights at the side of the stage that are focused so that they don't really hit the floor for example - the light disappears off into the wings of the theatre. If someone's in that, then they can appear as if they are floating in dark space.

At one point Beckett talks of the moon coming out and the characters contemplate the sky. We have the opportunity to track sun or moon light across the stage, but we can experiment with, and subvert, the direction that light travels.

There are no rules, really, so we can warm the colour up, we can cool it down as necessary. We can decide whether the moon is a cold white, or whether it's a romanticised version of the moon, for example.

LIGHTING *WAITING FOR GODOT*

Check out Bruno's initial rig plan below:

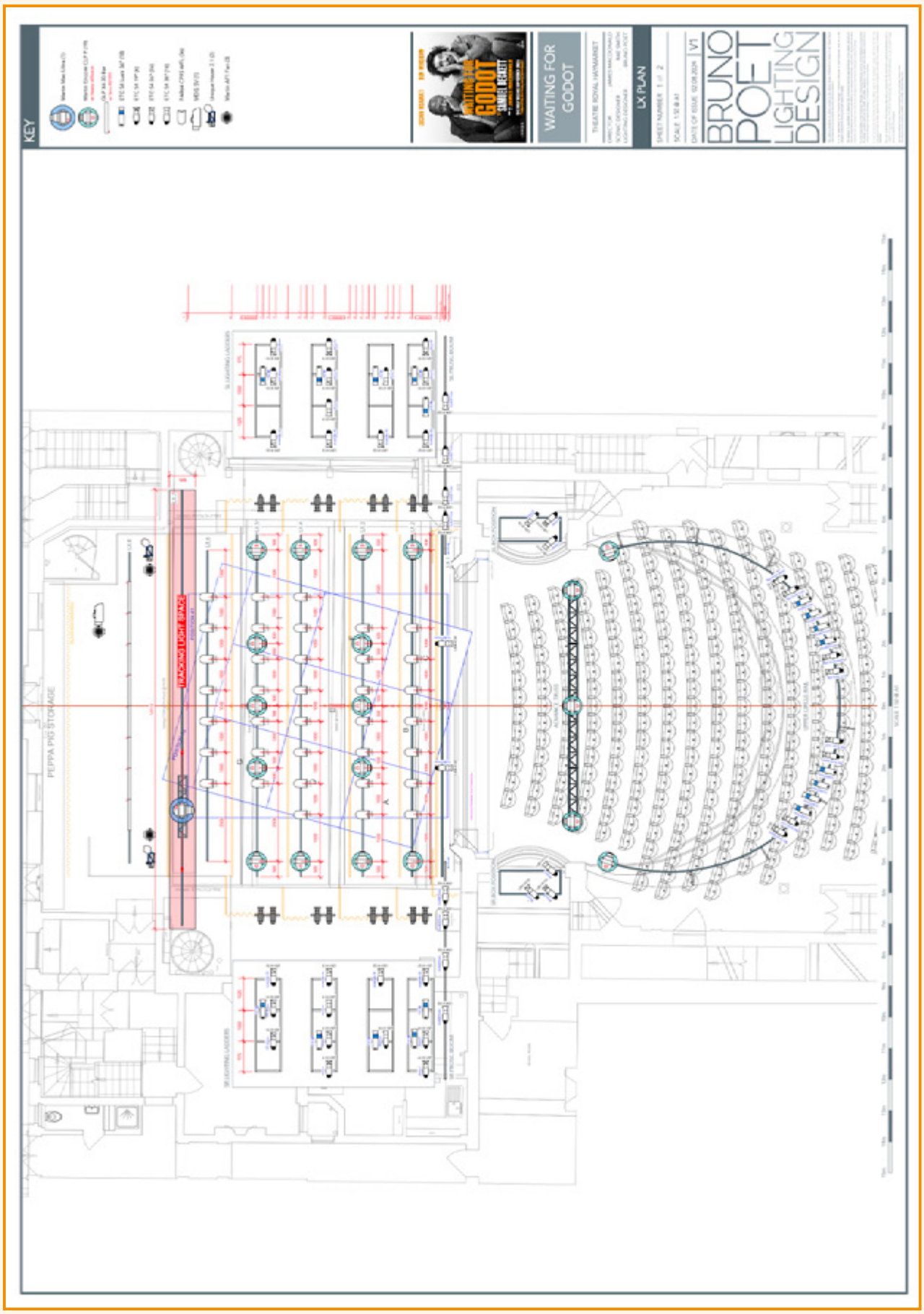


Photo: Initial lighting rig plan

LIGHTING *WAITING FOR GODOT*

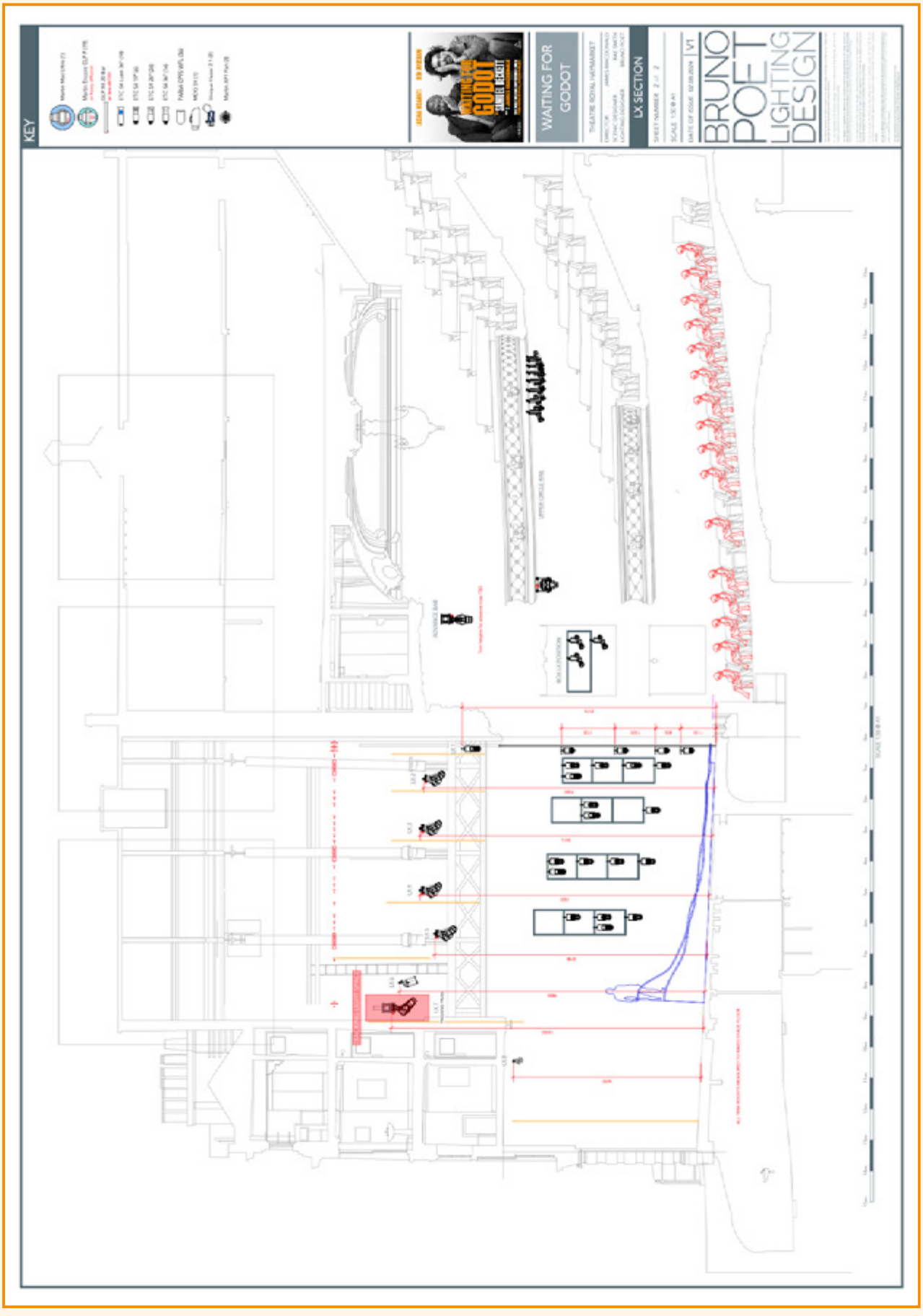


Photo: Side view of initial lighting rig plan

SOUND DESIGN IN *WAITING FOR GODOT*

IAN DICKINSON TALKS ABOUT THE SOUND DESIGN FOR THE PRODUCTION:

WHAT IS THE PROCESS OF PREPARING THE DESIGN FOR THIS PRODUCTION OF *WAITING FOR GODOT?*

We've had to take a slightly different approach to *Waiting for Godot*. It's quite hard to find something from a sound design concept to hang your hat on in this play. No pun intended, but at the time of writing our approach is one of 'waiting'... to see what comes from the rehearsal room in terms of style and then seeing what creative ideas it throws up. Then we can explore how best to adapt to it so that our sound world can support that.

The other element of the design process is a more practical one of deciding which speakers/microphones etc to use, why, and in which location to best service the production's needs.

WHAT HAVE YOU PARTICULARLY ENJOYED ABOUT THIS DESIGN PROCESS?

One thing that I suppose I have enjoyed so far is thinking about the challenge of 'what are the silences within the play'?

Of course, if one ever finds one's self in a moment of silence, that is when we often actually become aware of the aural world hidden around us. For example, I've recently returned from holiday where early one morning I set off on my paddle board to a remote part of the lake we were staying on. It was beautiful and still with not a soul around and so, so quiet, but there in the far distance, caught on the wind were the sounds of families waking up, the distant excitement of the children, a dog stirring, or the first motor boat, far, far away heading out for the day.

We need to consider, therefore, whether we go for that version of 'silence' or go for a more 'pure' silence? There's obviously a danger of imposing a distant world upon the audience that Beckett never intended so it's a strong consideration for us in moving forward.

WHAT HAVE BEEN THE CHALLENGES OF THIS DESIGN PROCESS?

We're trying to avoid aural 'intrusion' of any kind and the play's structure with its many pivots and twists and 'loose' plotline don't really make life easy for us! Where are we? Really? What does this world sound like? Is it a 'real world'? Do the actors hear any of it? Do only the audience hear it? Does it even matter?!

The characters are in a void - a bubble - and as such, in theory we could create almost any world taken from within each of their own internal perspectives. But... in any play, for any production, I believe the words are always the most important thing and so we must tread carefully, without intruding.

Maybe there are too many possibilities which can sometimes muddy the waters a little: the options available being quite daunting, especially in such a revered piece as this.

WHAT INFLUENCES AND INSPIRATIONS CAN YOU POINT OUT IN TERMS OF YOUR DESIGN?

To be honest, I always try to avoid any watching or referencing previous versions for fear of any obvious influence seeping into my own work. However, I truly think Rae has designed something emotive and most beautiful. I suspect that will be a leading inspiration of the sound design that follows.

WHAT HAVE YOUR OWN EXPERIENCES BEEN OF BECKETT'S WORKS BEFORE WORKING ON THIS PRODUCTION?

I'd worked on a version of this play a very long time ago when I was first starting out on my theatrical journey. I hate to admit it, but at the time it made me quite cold towards the piece. In a way it does weigh a little heavier on me as I want it to be a brilliant production that wipes away those old memories and really bring to life what the piece is and should be. The version I worked on wasn't particularly accessible and that had stuck with me all these years, so much so that I struggled to re-read the play on numerous occasions leading up to the rehearsal process.

IF YOU COULD SUM UP YOUR DESIGN CONCEPT FOR THE PLAY IN THREE WORDS, WHAT WOULD THOSE WORDS BE?

Quiet. Disciplined. Fun.

SOUND DESIGN IN *WAITING FOR GODOT*

IF YOU HAD TO SUMMARISE *WAITING FOR GODOT* IN FIVE WORDS, WHAT WOULD THEY BE?

Groundbreaking. Unusual. Silences. Thoughtful. Quirky.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE MOMENT IN THE PLAY?

I really enjoy the first exit of Pozzo and Lucky and the interaction between the four characters. The moment really allows the comedic skill of our company to shine through.

WHY DO YOU THINK *WAITING FOR GODOT* STILL HAS SO MUCH RESONANCE, 70 YEARS AFTER IT WAS WRITTEN?

I suppose because it breaks all the 'rules' and still does to this day compared to most modern, new plays.

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNT FROM YOUR INVOLVEMENT IN THIS PRODUCTION?

It has really opened my eyes to the humour of the piece. I hadn't realised for example how one might lean into the influence of Chaplin or say Laurel & Hardy – those old-school routines that I was very familiar with as a child but had no idea could be echoed in this piece.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE THAT THE AUDIENCE WILL THINK AND/OR FEEL BY THE END OF THE PERFORMANCE?

Well of course I hope that they will leave the theatre having had a wonderful night out – so hopefully happy! And a bit like me, will have maybe been surprised at how humorous and accessible the piece can actually be. This 'fun' aspect of the show aside, it's also a real discussion piece, open to debate on content, style and performance.

STUDIO ACTIVITIES

The texts for these activities are listed by page number according to the Faber & Faber edition of *Waiting for Godot*, ISBN 978-0571229116

1. ESTRAGON'S BOOT AND VLADIMIR'S HAT - P1-3

Both Estragon and Vladimir have their own physical set pieces which recur throughout the play. The play opens with Estragon struggling to take off his boot. Soon after, Vladimir removes his hat and peers into it.

In pairs, rehearse the first three pages of the play, paying close attention to the stage directions. It may help to only play the stage directions, before adding the dialogue.

It can be tempting to ask a lot of questions about why, how, and for how long this stage business with the boot and the hat should continue. However, working practically and experimenting with timing, silence and pause, and use of space are the only way to make this your production. You may wish to video your rehearsals so that you can watch back and evaluate, but a more effective way is to ask friends or classmates to watch and feedback about their experience as a live audience.

Once you have added dialogue and rehearsed for 20 minutes, share your work with another pair who are working on the same dialogue. Use the following prompts to help evaluate your work:

- **Did having an audience tempt you into deliberately trying to be funny and raise a laugh from your audience?**
- **How do you think an audience might respond to your performance? Is it funny? Are the two men merely uncomfortable or are they in pain? What might your performance tell the audience about Vladimir and Estragon in this particular moment?**
- **What are the challenges of these stage directions for an actor? Focus particularly on the fact that they form the opening moments of the play, and so this is the audience's first introduction to Vladimir and Estragon.**

"I REMEMBER DOING A WORKSHOP WHERE THE PERSON WHO WAS TAKING IT SAID 'STOP TRYING TO BE FUNNY. STOP TRYING TO MAKE EVERYBODY LAUGH'."

LUCIAN MSAMATI

2. *WAITING FOR GODOT* - P.10-11

The dialogue on pages 10 and 11 is an example of where Beckett uses rhythm and pace to engage the audience. The text is made up of short sentences and very rapid exchanges, very similar to the stichomythia used in Greek plays. Before you start to work on delivery of the text, it would be beneficial for you to be fairly familiar with the lines so that you can work up to a pace and style of delivery that you are happy with.

Consider the vocal skills that you might apply, such as volume, pitch, tone and diction. There are a number of questions asked in this exchange, which will also affect the way in which the dialogue is delivered.

STUDIO ACTIVITIES

3. THE ARRIVAL AND RELATIONSHIP OF POZZO AND LUCKY - P.14-18

Work in groups of five. Four people will play the parts of Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo and Lucky. The fifth person ('The Reader') is responsible for reading and monitoring adherence to the stage directions.

Work through these tasks in order. You may wish to work page by page, and then build up to working on the whole extract:

- **The Reader reads each stage direction. The actors, without using their texts at all, only respond to the stage directions which suggest physical movement.**
- **Repeat the exercise, but this time The Reader also reads each line on behalf of the actors. The actors will simply mime what is in the stage direction, in accordance with what they have just said.**
- **Now The Reader only reads the stage direction and the actors speak their own lines. The actors only execute the stage directions as they are being read - not before - so that speech and action remain separate.**
- **Repeat the last exercise, varying your acting as you see fit. Resist the temptation to simply recreate what you have already done.**
- **When you feel confident, return to the beginning of the extract and rehearse it without the stage directions being read out loud. However, The Reader should follow the script and prompt with dialogue or direction where necessary.**
- **Film your performance, or perform to a live audience and evaluate your work. Evaluate the process of rehearsal, too. How did using the stage directions help you work through the scene? How did they help you create the action, structure, humour and pathos of the scene?**

4. DIALOGUE - P.53-56

Beginning with Vladimir's line, "You're a hard man to get on with, Gogo" read through the scene. Highlight the stage directions which ask for "silence".

Although Harold Pinter is often credited with experimenting with pause and silence, it is in fact Beckett who began doing so. In rehearsals, Lucian Msamati has relished the opportunity to see how long a silence can be maintained, and this has been a source of interest and experimentation during those sessions. As actors, it can be tempting to constantly be 'doing' something. The challenge in this extract is to hold your nerve and consider why those silences are important, for the actors and for the audience. Remember, too, that Estragon comments that "we are incapable of keeping silent", they talk "so that we won't think".

Beckett said of *Waiting for Godot*, "silence pours into this play like water into a leaky ship". Consider what is being 'poured into' these silences: what is it that keeps the character "incapable of being silent"? Is it fear of loneliness? Fear of their own thoughts, and being alone with them? Considering what is 'in' each silence can help you find out what motivates the characters to break them.

Bear this in mind as you rehearse and perform this section.

Compare your performance with those of your peers. What are the similarities and differences between the various interpretations? Which performances are fairly static, and which have embraced movement around the stage? Is that movement necessary, or is it a response to the need to 'do' something?

If you have already seen the production, what can you recall about the way in which it was performed? How did you feel towards the characters, and the actors? At what point was silence broken? Did you notice a change in audience attention, for example, or did there seem to be a dramatic reason for breaking the silence?

5. THE HAT SEQUENCE - P.63-64

This is one of the most well-known sequences or moments from the play. Like Task 3, you may wish to have a reader who helps you with the stage directions as you choreograph the routine.

Once you are confident with the routine (which you will need to repeat numerous times before it becomes muscle memory!), then consider the reasons why Vladimir and Estragon are exchanging hats. On page 63, they find Lucky's hat, and we know that from the beginning of the play, Vladimir has been removing his hat and looking into it. Does it itch? Is it too tight? Does it irritate him in some way?

The important thing to remember in this task is that there does need to be a reason behind the different moves. Of course you are thinking of the comic effect on the audience, but only playing it for laughs can cause the movements to be superficial and unconvincing.

To help you understand the influences that Beckett may have had in mind, you might wish to research the following:

- **Laurel and Hardy's hat switch from *Beau Hunks***
- **The Marx Brothers in *Duck Soup* (particularly the hat scene at the peanut stand)**
- **Charlie Chaplin's cake hat routine from *The Pilgrim***
- **You can also see Michael Lindsay-Hogg's film version of *Waiting for Godo*t (2001) online, which includes the same cast as Walter Asmus's production at the Gate Theatre, Dublin. Notice the way in which the speed of the sequence changes throughout.**

Remember to be playful in your work on this sequence.

6. LUCKY'S 'THINK' SPEECH - P.35-38

Before you begin to work on the text, it is helpful to consider the instruction within this extract, which is to THINK. In our busy lives, we often think at speed, and try to multitask as we do so!

Although you may be working as a whole class or large group on this activity, the first few points are intended to be done alone, before you then work with other people. Ensure that you have created a quiet working environment in your studio or classroom before you begin.

- **Sit in a space on your own. Consider the following riddles (thinking, rather than speaking), the answers of which can easily be found online[1]:**
  What has many keys but cannot open a single lock?
  I have eyes but cannot see. What am I?
  What has thirteen hearts but no other organs?
  If there are three apples and you take away two, how many apples do you have?
- **You can now talk to yourself out loud, as you try to solve the puzzles. Choose one of the riddles above which you have not solved or, if you have solved all of them, work your way through the following:**
  What word in the English language does the following: The first two letters signify a male, the first three letters signify a female, the first four letters signify a great person, while the entire world signifies a great woman. What is the word?
- **Finally, pair up with someone else in the group. Discuss the following problem:**
  A man has to get a fox, a chicken, and a sack of corn across a river. He has a rowboat, and it can only carry him and one other thing. How does he transfer everything across the river so that it remains safe?

Once you have worked your way through these different stages of thinking about riddles and problems, discuss with your partner, or the wider group, about the different stages of thinking. Perhaps you found the riddles easy and you worked through them quickly? Some people may have abandoned one idea and moved on to another riddle because they thought it was easier. Alternatively, you may have repeated the same phrase and stuttered whilst you tried to express your thoughts.

That thinking exercise is designed to remind you what it is like to try and formulate arguments and solutions for something you need to understand. Remember what you have discussed for your exploration of Lucky's 'Think' speech.

[1]The solutions can be found here: https://parade.com/947956/parade/riddles/

STUDIO ACTIVITIES

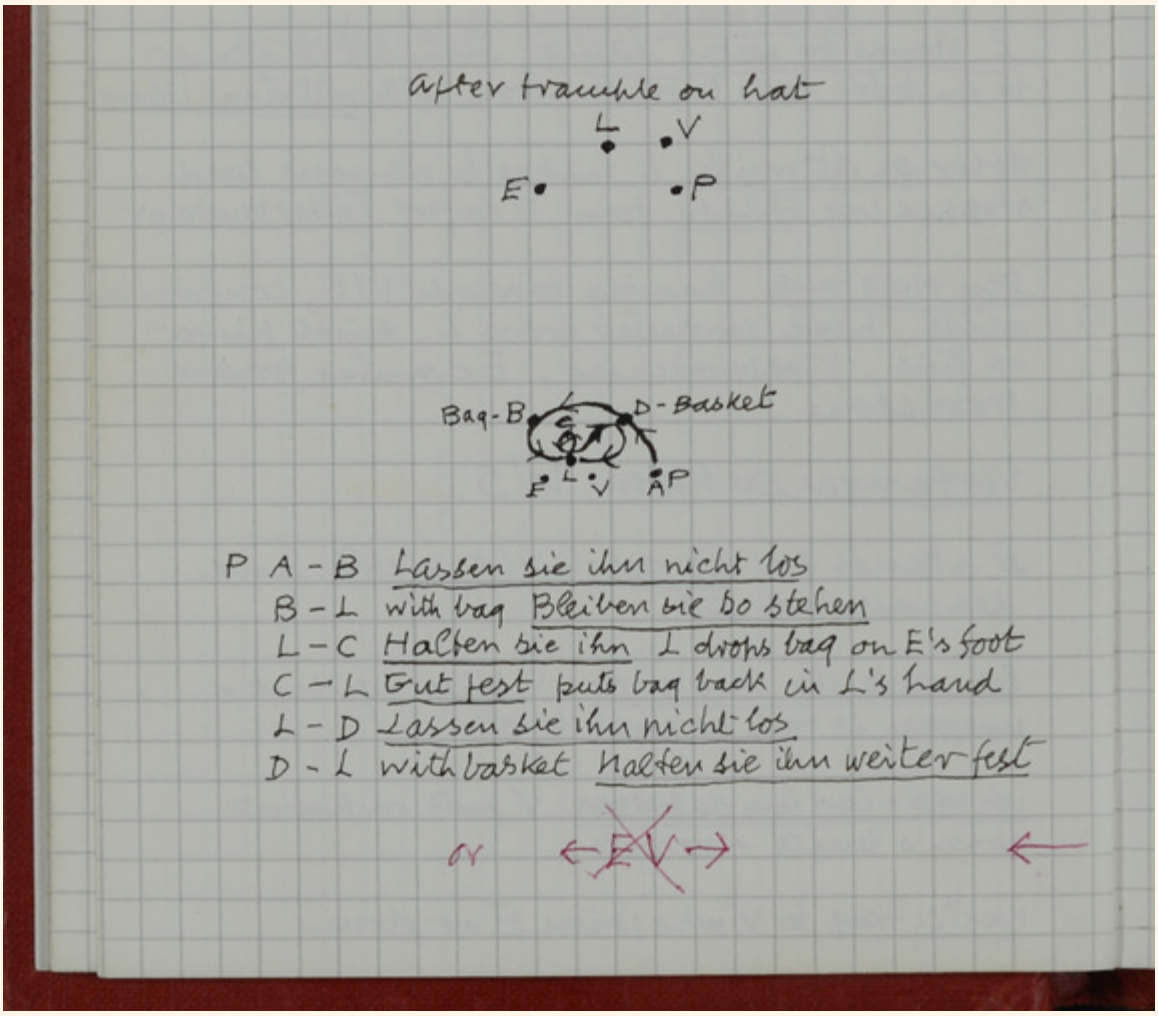
Before Beckett's own production, actors and critics both found it difficult to discover a shape or direction for the speech. In Beckett's notebooks for his production of *Waiting for Godot*, he outlines how he breaks up Lucky's monologue into sections.

1. *Start to first "but not so fast"*
2. *To "waste and pine"*
3. *To first "the facts are there"*
4. *To "the facts are there but time will tell"*
5. *"I will resume alas alas" to end*

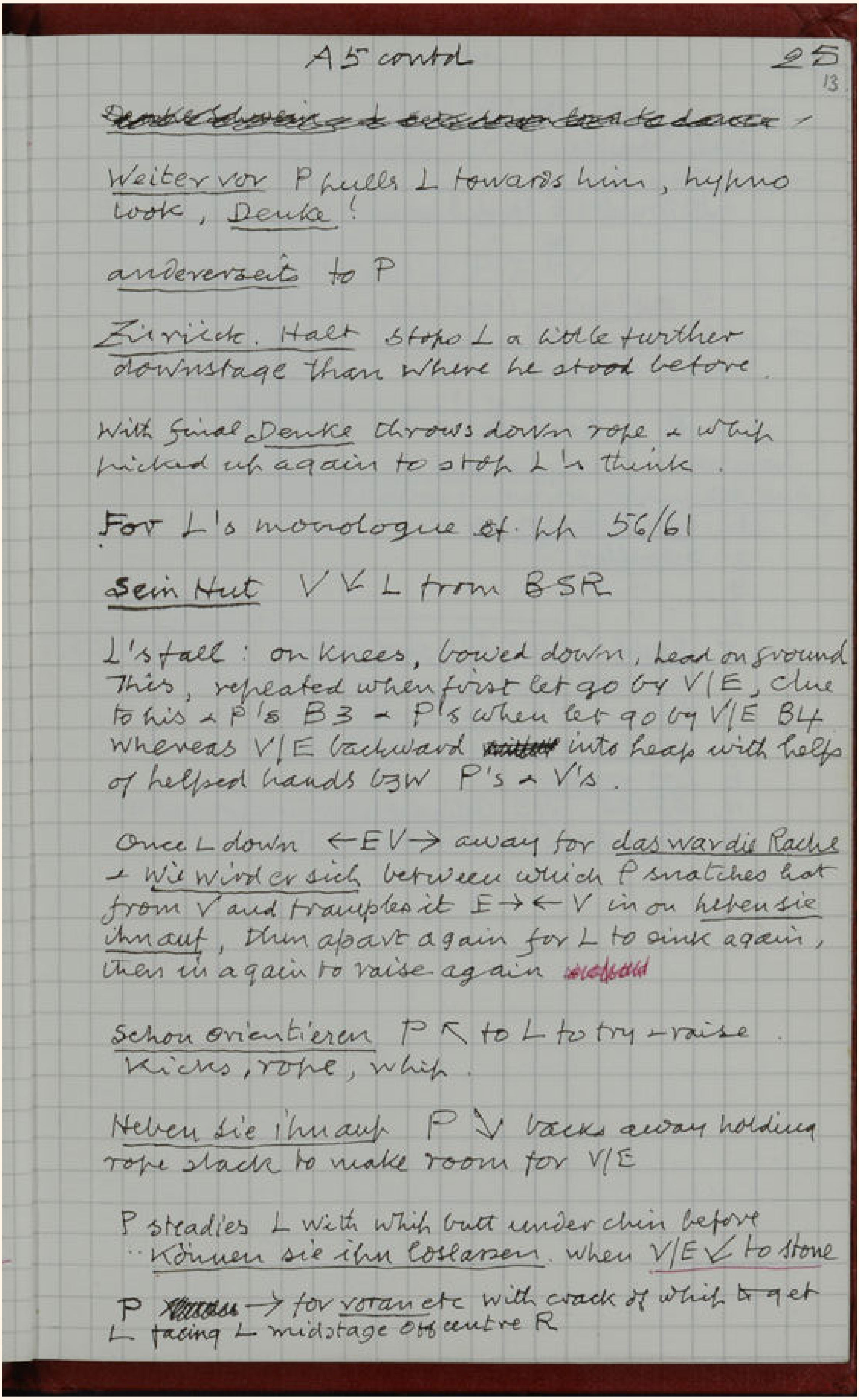
Max Harrison suggests that you approach the speech as follows:

- **Read the speech carefully. Go through it word by word and make sure that you understand each sentence and section. Make sure you physically mark each section in your text to give you a shape for the speech.**
- **Become aware of how each section is structured as it moves to its close, before another one starts.**
- **Take note of where Lucky repeats an idea, or loses the thread of what he is saying. Where are the moments where he doesn't complete a thought?**
- **Hold your nerve! The more you read the speech out loud, the more it will make sense! The lack of punctuation can be both liberating and intimidating until you find your way through the text using the above points.**
- **Allow yourself to explore a range of physical, facial and vocal expressions as the speech progresses.**

Now that you've worked on Lucky's speech, look at this reproduction of Beckett's notebooks for this moment in the play.



Samuel Beckett's red 'Godot Berlin 75 II' Notebook for his direction of Warten auf Godot at the Schiller Theater, Berlin, 1975. University of Reading, Special Collections, MS 1396/4/4/.
Reproduced by kind permission of the Estate of Samuel Beckett and the Beckett International Foundation, University of Reading.


A 5 contd
25
13
Weiter vor P pulls L towards him, hypno look, Denke!
andererseits to P
Zurück. Halt stops L a little further downstage than where he stood before.
With final Denke throws down rope & whip picked up again to stop L's think.
For L's monologue cf. pp 56/61
Sein Hut V ↙ L from BSR
L's fall: on knees, bowed down, head on ground. This, repeated when first let go by V/E, clue to his & P's B3 & P's when let go by V/E B4 whereas V/E backward into heap with help of helped hands b/w P's & V's.
Once L down ←EV→ away for das war die Rache & Wie wird er sich between which P snatches hat from V and tramples it E→←V in on heben sie ihn auf, then apart again for L to sink again, then in again to raise again
Schon orientieren P ↖ to L to try & raise. Kicks, rope, whip.
Heben Sie ihn auf P ↘ backs away holding rope slack to make room for V/E
P steadies L with whip butt under chin before Können sie ihn loslassen. when V/E ↙ to stone
P → for voran etc with crack of whip to get L facing L midstage off centre R

Samuel Beckett's red 'Godot Berlin 75 II' Notebook for his direction of Warten auf Godot at the Schiller Theater, Berlin, 1975. University of Reading, Special Collections, MS 1396/4/4/.

7. STAGING THE END OF ACT ONE AND ACT TWO - P.47 AND P.87

The endings of Act One and Two are almost identical but it's important to avoid the temptation to simply make them *exactly* the same.

Work from p.45, "The moon rises at back", until the end of Act One.

Work from p.84, "Enter Boy", until the end of Act Two.

- **As you work through the two sections, be aware of where pace speeds up and slows down. Can you identify the different mood changes for Estragon and Vladimir in each section? What is the same, and what has changed? For the section in Act Two, do you instinctively start repeating physical movements around the stage that you did for the section in Act One?**
- **Imagine that there is a curtain that comes down at the end of each act. As the curtain falls, what image will you leave your audience with?**

8. BECKETT'S STAGE DIRECTIONS - DESIGN PREDICTIONS

Before you see the production, read the play carefully, noting Beckett's stage directions which refer explicitly to stage design. You may wish to read the play with a group of friends or classmates, with one member of the group specifically responsible for the stage directions. It is a play that needs to be heard rather than read, and as Max explains, hearing the play was particularly helpful when first approaching the text before rehearsals began.

Once you have looked at all of those directions, make predictions about the following:

- **Staging configuration.**
- **Proximity of the acting space to the audience.**
- **Use of set - the physical items that will be on stage at any given time.**
- **The use of colour, scale, realism, levels and adherence to the instructions given for various stage set pieces such as the exchange of hats, and the arrival and departure of Pozzo and Lucky.**

Samuel Beckett giving notes to the cast from the Schiller Theatre Berlin's production of *Warten auf Godot* when it toured to the Royal Court in 1976. Photograph by Douglas H. Jeffery. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

SEEING THE PRODUCTION

Draw the set: (don't forget to label it, including comments on colour)

Act One: Set sketch

Act Two: Set sketch (Hint: there are very few changes but it's important to recognise what they are and how they create comedy at points. Pay attention, too, to what object remains on stage from Act One)

DISCUSSION POINTS:

Look at the list of themes as listed on page 13 and James Macdonald's list of themes on page 17.

- **Consider what you have seen on stage during the production. In the space below, rank order the significance of the themes as you interpreted the performance (1 being the most significant). As well as considering the acting, think carefully about other creative choices made by the production's set, costume, lighting and sound designers.**

Remember that you may have a completely different list to your friends!

Theme	I think this was/was not significant because...

Are there any other themes that you would include in this list? Make sure you justify your answer!

STUDIO ACTIVITIES

CASTING ACTIVITY:

Throughout the play's history, famous pairings have often played Vladimir and Estragon, and Lucky and Pozzo.

- **Write down all of the performance skills you think are required in the four main roles within the play.**
- **Look closely at each pair of characters. What comparisons and contrasts do you think Beckett would want you to explore?**
- **After you have considered these questions, create a three minute pitch in which you cast the roles of Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky and Pozzo. Make sure that you refer to all of the discussion points above, and specific moments in the play where your casting choices would be particularly effective.**

REFLECTION:

When exploring a play or production, it can be helpful to have guided questions with which to reflect on what you have read or seen. The following questions are designed to help you form your own interpretation of *Waiting for Godot*:

- **Describe each character in 3 words (no more, no less).**
- **Describe the play in exactly five words.**
- **If you could ask Samuel Beckett one question about the play, what would it be? (don't be tempted to ask 'what does it mean'. He always refused to answer that one!).**
- **What was the most striking moment in the play, for you? Explain your answer, with specific reference to that moment on stage.**
- **This play is now over seventy years old. What relevance do you think the play has to our world and life experience in 2024 and beyond? Give examples from moments in the play to justify your answer.**

CLASS DISCUSSION:

Lucian Msamati says about the production:

"For me, what we do is not irrelevant. This is the stuff of life."

Thinking about the world around you, why do YOU think this play is important for you and your peers in the present day?

Patrick Stewart (Vladimir), Ronald Pickup (Lucky), Simon Callow (Pozzo) and Ian McKellen (Estragon) in *Waiting for Godot*. Theatre Royal Haymarket, 2009. Directed by Sean Mathias and designed by Stephen Brimson Lewis. Photograph by Graham Brandon. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

CRITICAL RESPONSES TO *WAITING FOR GODOT*

REVIEW WRITING TASK

Look at the quotations below, which come from newspaper reviews of Waiting for Godot from the original 1955 production.

- **Read through the comments, and compare them with your reflections from the task above. Once you have done that, write your own review of *Waiting for Godot* at the Theatre Royal Haymarket. Throughout this pack there are various links to online reviews which you can use as models for layout, style, language and content conventions.**

"By all the known criteria, Mr Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is a dramatic vacuum. It has no plot, no climax, no denouement; no beginning, no middle and no end. Unavoidably, it has a situation, and it might be accused of having suspense, since it deals with the impatience of two tramps waiting beneath a tree for a cryptic Mr Godot to keep his appointment with them; but the situation is never developed, and a glance at the programme shows that Mr Godot is not going to arrive. *Waiting for Godot* frankly jettisons everything by which we recognise theatre. It arrives at the custom house, as it were, with no luggage, no passport and nothing to declare: yet it gets through as might a pilgrim from Mars. It does this, I believe, by appealing to a definition of drama much more fundamental than any in the books. A play, it asserts and proves, is basically a means of spending two hours in the dark without being bored."

Kenneth Tynan (*The Observer*, August 7, 1955)

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

Cecil Wilson (*The Daily Mail*, August 4, 1955)

"It is hardly surprising that, English audiences notoriously disliking anything not immediately understandable, certain early lines in the play, such as, "I have had better entertainment elsewhere," were received on the first night with ironical laughter; or that when one of the characters yawned, the yawn was echoed and amplified by a humorist in the stalls."

Harold Hobson (*Sunday Times*, August 7, 1955)

LIVE THEATRE EVALUATION CHECKLIST

This checklist is intended to help students and teachers identify areas of the production which they might write about in their live production exam for GCSE and A Level Drama & Theatre exams. For each statement, identify whether you are RED (not confident), AMBER (quite confident, with support) or GREEN (very confident). You can then identify areas on which you need to focus in your revision.

ACTING	RED	AMBER	GREEN
I can describe and evaluate how two actors created a relationship between their characters in at least three moments during the performance			
I can describe how one or more actors used physical skills to create comedy in at least two moments in the production			
I can explain and evaluate how actors used their vocal skills in three different moments in the play to convey their character and emotion			

COSTUME	RED	AMBER	GREEN
I can describe the costumes worn by Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo and Lucky and evaluate how they conveyed characterisation			
I can use a variety of technical terms such as colour, fabric, texture, shape, distress, scale and fit to explain the designs for each of the four main characters in the play			
I can compare and evaluate the costume designs for the pairings of Estragon and Vladimir, and Lucky and Pozzo and describe how those costumes created a sense of the relationship in those two pairings			

LIGHTING DESIGN	RED	AMBER	GREEN
I can explain how lighting was used at the beginning the performance to create setting, and use appropriate technical terminology to do so			
I can describe and analyse how lighting showed the passing of time, using examples from both Act One and Act Two of the performance, using terminology with purpose and accuracy			
I can explain how lighting was used at the end of Act One and Act Two to create a sense of pathos, and evaluate the impact it had on the audience			
I can explain and evaluate how lighting created mood and atmosphere in several moments of the performance			

LIVE THEATRE EVALUATION CHECKLIST

SET DESIGN	RED	AMBER	GREEN
I can describe the set design in Act One of the production, and evaluate its impact on the audience. I can make reference to Beckett's original stage directions for the design of Act One			
I can describe the set design in Act Two of the production, and evaluate its impact on the audience. I can make reference to Beckett's original stage directions for the design of Act Two			
I can analyse and evaluate the way in which the set enabled the actors to create moments of humour and pathos in at least three moments during the play, and use appropriate technical terminology to do so			
I can describe and evaluate the set design, with specific reference to mood and atmosphere			

SOUND DESIGN	RED	AMBER	GREEN
I can accurately describe the way in which sound created mood and atmosphere in at least three moments during the production			
I can analyse and evaluate the use of sound design, in at least three moments in the production, using technical terminology appropriately and accurately			
I can describe and evaluate the way in which the sound design complemented the set and lighting design to support the concept of the characters being in "a void"			

Lucky's speech delivered by Timothy Bateson at the Criterion Theatre, 1955. Photograph by Houston Rogers. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

WRITING FOR LIVE THEATRE EVALUATION EXAMS

Whatever the focus of the exam question is, you will need a short opening paragraph which gives the basic information about the play, when you saw it and what it's about. You do NOT have to tell the whole story!

For example, in a question about acting skills you might write:

"I saw *Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett, at the Theatre Royal Haymarket on September 25th, 2024. In the play two men, Estragon and Vladimir, wait for the arrival of the mysterious Godot, who never arrives. During the play, they meet Lucky and Pozzo who have a slave-master relationship. In the play, Lucian Msamati (Estragon) and Ben Whishaw (Vladimir) used their physical and vocal skills to create both comedy and pathos and to convey their relationship to the audience.

Now it's your turn. In the box below, write your own introduction to a question about a production element of your choice:

STOP: Before you move on, have you addressed:

- **The name of the play, and where you saw it?**
- **Have you given a brief outline of what happens in the play?**
- **Have you finished your paragraph with reference to a specific production element (i.e. making it specific to a question you have been asked)?**

If the answer to any of these questions is 'no', read through your work again and see how you can edit it to make it more purposeful. Once you have chosen the specific moments that you would like to write about, dedicate at least one paragraph to each one. Ensure that you continue to use technical terminology to make your writing clear, purposeful and relevant.

TECHNICAL TERMINOLOGY

Writing about performance? Consider which of these terms might be relevant for you in your answer:

- **Vocal skills: accent, dialogue, diction, inflection, intonation, pace, pause, pitch, projection, pitch, range, rhythm**
- **Physical skills: body language, clowning, co-ordination, gait, gesture, mannerism, movement, posture, stillness, timing**
- **Facial expression: eye contact, eyebrows, eye gaze, frown, glare, grimace, head, jaw, lips, smile**
- **Consider too: actor-audience relationship, use of space, levels**

Writing about sound design? Which of these can you include in your answer?

- **Atmosphere, location, mood, period, time**
- **Amplifier, instruments, microphone, software**
- **Directorial sound, live and recorded sound, music**
- **Amplification, audio effects, distortion, echo, edited and/or mixed sound, fade, reverb, soundscape, volume**

Writing about lighting? You may have the opportunity to use some or all of the following in your work:

- **Colour, filters, gauze, gels, gobos, projections**
- **Lighting states: blackout, cross-fade, direction, fade, intensity, shadow**
- **Equipment: angle, birdies, flood, floor light focus, fresnel, lantern, moving light, profile, rig(ged), side light, strobe**

Writing about set? Although the set appears quite simple in Waiting for Godot, try to use all of the relevant terms from this selection:

- **Atmosphere, location, mood, period, time**
- **Cyclorama, drapes, flats, floor covering, furnishing, projections**
- **Entrances/exits, levels, scale, scene changes, space transition**
- **Colour, material, props, texture**

Writing about costume?

- **Atmosphere, character, location, mood, period, location**
- **Accessories, fabrics, textures, trimmings**
- **Colour, fit, movement constraints, period detail, shape, condition**

Winston Ntshona and John Kani playing Didi and Gogo at the Old Vic Theatre, London. This production was first staged at the Baxter Theatre, Cape Town, during Apartheid in South Africa, before it toured internationally. Directed and designed by Donald Howarth. Photograph by Douglas H. Jeffery. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

ADDING PRODUCTION DETAILS:

It's important to be as specific as possible in your answer. Use the list below to ensure that you refer very specifically to those actors and members of the creative team in your writing.

CREATIVES

Writer	SAMUEL BECKETT
Director	JAMES MACDONALD
Set and Costume Designer	RAE SMITH
Lighting Designer	BRUNO POET
Sound Designer	IAN DICKINSON AND NIAMH GAFFNEY FOR AUTOGRAPH
Wigs, Hair and Make Up Designer	CAMPBELL YOUNG ASSOCIATES
Casting	AMY BALL CDG
Associate Director	MAX HARRISON
Voice Coach	HAZEL HOLDER
Movement Director	LUCY HIND
Fight Director	ENRIC ORTUÑO
Production Manager	KATE WEST
Associate Set Designer	NIALL MCKEEVER
Costume Associate	JOHANNA COE
Props Supervisor	LILY MOLLGAARD
Casting Associate	ARTHUR CARRINGTON
Associate Production Manager	CHARLOTTE RANSON

Produced by Dominic Cooke and Kate Horton for Fictionhouse, Len Blavatnik and Danny Cohen for Access Entertainment, in association with Kate Pakenham Productions

CAST

Estragon	LUCIAN MSAMATI
Vladimir	BEN WHISHAW
Lucky	TOM EDDEN
Pozzo	JONATHAN SLINGER
Boy	LUCA FONE, ALEXANDER JOSEPH, ELLIS PANG
Understudy	DEAN GRAHAM
Understudy	DAVID LEE-JONES

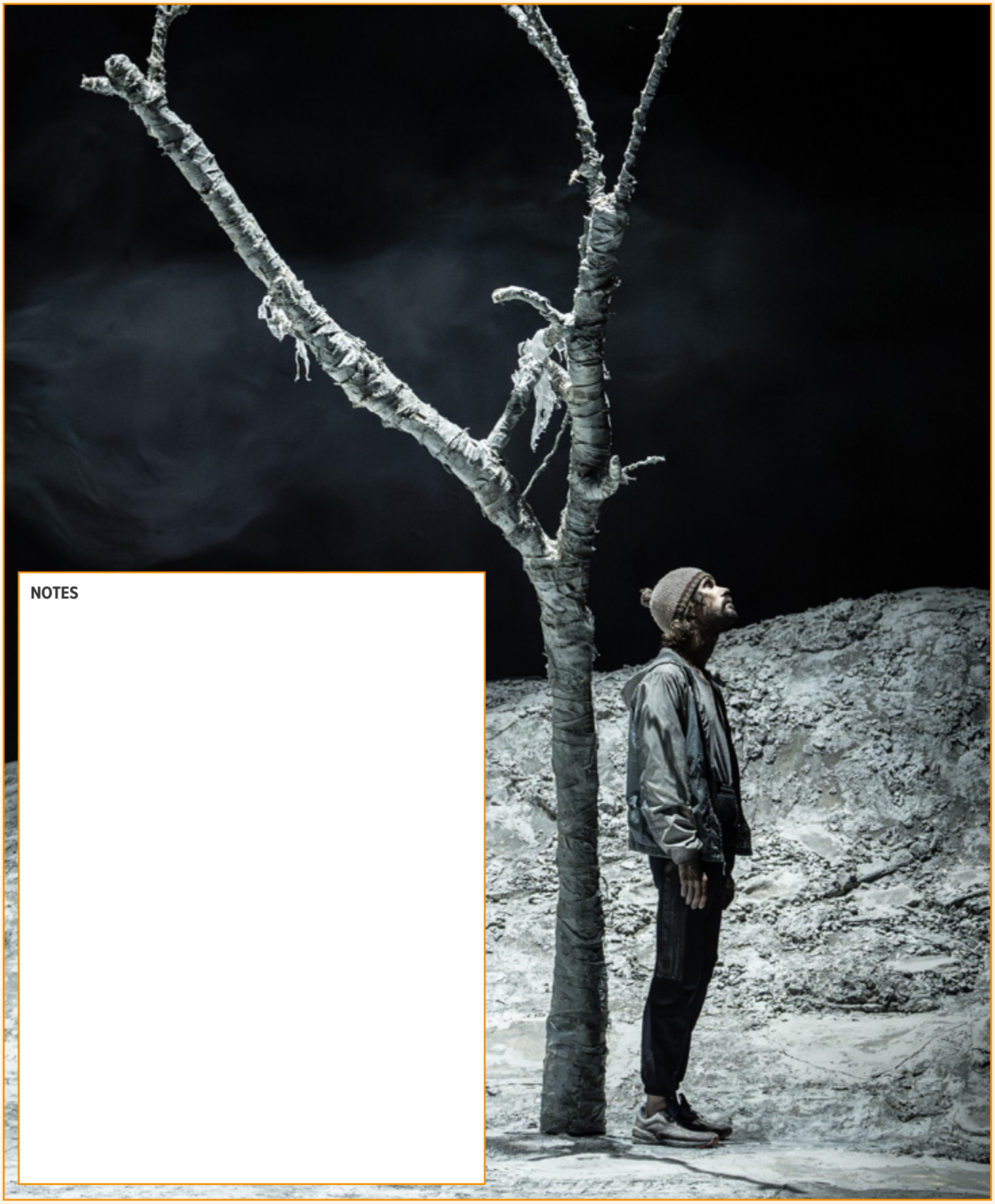
PRODUCTION PHOTOS

IMAGES FOR ANNOTATION

NOTES

PRODUCTION PHOTOS

IMAGES FOR ANNOTATION



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PRODUCTION PHOTOS

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REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

BOOKS IN PRINT

- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006)
- Cohn, Ruby (ed). *Beckett: Waiting for Godot* (London: Macmillan, 1987)
- Fletcher, John. *Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot, Endgame, Krapp's Last Tape* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000)
- Knowlson, James. *The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997)
- Mcdonald, Rónán. *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)
- Pattie, David. *The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett* (London: Routledge, 2000)
- Pilling, John (ed). *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

ONLINE MATERIAL:

- BBC Radio 4's In Our Time episode on Samuel Beckett BBC Radio 4 - In Our Time, Samuel Beckett
- Godotmania | Theatre | The Guardian
  The waiting is over! Have the times finally caught up with Godot? | Theatre | The Guardian
- In Godot we trust | Samuel Beckett | The Guardian
- *Waiting for Godot* taught me the difference between being smart and being intellectual | Nicholas Lezard | The Guardian
- Samuel Beckett story to be published 80 years after it was rejected
- 'Angry boredom': early responses to *Waiting for Godot* showcased online | The Guardian
- You'll also find British Library material on Waiting for Godot here
- CBS Documentary on Buster Keaton Buster Keaton, the "Great Stone Face"
- This TED-ED video explains the basic plot of the play Why should you read "*Waiting for Godot*"? - Iseult Gillespie

ONLINE SOURCES USED BY JAMES MCDONALD AND MAX HARRISON TO INFORM THE 2024 PRODUCTION OF *WAITING FOR GODOT*

- ***DUCK SOUP***, Marx Brothers with Edgar Kennedy (1933)
  Hat Scene Full Movie
- ***BEAU HUNKS***, Laurel & Hardy (1931)
  Hat Scene Full Movie
- ***DO DETECTIVES THINK?***, Laurel & Hardy (1928)
  Hat Scene Full Movie
- ***WAY OUT WEST,*** Laurel & Harry (1937)
  Hat Scene Dance Routine Full Movie
- Movies Mentioned by Jim Knowlson in *Damned to Fame*
  SHERLOCK JR, Buster Keaton, (1924)
  THE NAVIGATOR, Buster Keaton, (1924)
  GO WEST, Buster Keaton, (1925)
  BATTLING BUTLER, Buster Keaton, (1926)
  THE GENERAL, Buster Keaton, (1926)
  FILM, Keaton / Beckett, (1965)
  THE KID, Charlie Chaplin, (1921) Fight Scene
  THE PILGRIM, Charlie Chaplin, (1923)
  THE GOLD RUSH, Charlie Chaplin, (1925)

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT SAMUEL BECKETT AND SEEING ARCHIVAL MATERIALS FOR HIS WORK?

Schools and colleges can visit the Beckett Collection at the University of Reading, which holds over 600 manuscripts/typescripts of his work, stage and photography files for performances, interviews and a library of publications dedicated to Beckett. To get in touch about a booking, email: specialcollections@reading.ac.uk