

drama

**'Waiting
for
Godot'
at
the
best
theater
on
the
coast
outside
of
Frisco**

The cold, gray, wet Eugene winter is upon us. Fuel and energy are in short supply. The executive leadership of our country is crumbling from "internal disorders" (a euphemism for dishonesty, hypocrisy and insipient psychosis). It is therefore appropriate during this period (era?) of acute need—for warmth, energy, order, purpose and a renewal of faith—to turn to the work of Samuel Beckett. It is appropriate because Beckett shows man trying to conceal and protect his own feeling of weakness on frigid mother Earth; man in quest of an escape from the isolation of his mind and body; man in search of meaning and purpose in a chaotic universe which man can understand only as the source of his suffering.

And so I recently expended some of man's remaining fuel and some of my waning energy to drive to Ashland to see the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's fall production of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Un-ecological (and un-ego-logical) as this venture might seem, the experience of this "modern classic" does demonstrate the way in which we misuse our limited time and energy to maintain a no-risk, no-fault lifeless stasis. As we dissipate our resources, we dissipate ourselves. But enough of this existential sermonette. Let's look at the play and then at the Ashland production.

The situation of the play is simple. We can't call the structure a "plot", since this term implies a linear progression in time, a beginning, middle and end, a change or climax induced by a conflict. Here it is always evening, always the same desolate plot of ground, always the same unresolved tension of the ambivalent gray sky linking light and dark, life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness. It is here that two disheveled old wayfarers come every evening to wait together for a mysterious, white-bearded being named Godot who will, they hope, give their lives meaning and direction—who will tell them why they live, suffer and wait. Like God, he represents all that these two lost, frightened old men need to justify their lives. What they need, they lack; what they lack, they hope for. While they hope, they wait, while they wait they are impotent and purposeless. So it appears they create their own situation—or at least it is a vicious circle which always excludes the possibility of change.

The two bums form a kind of complementary relationship. Vladimir, the more rational and outer-directed of the two, supports the hope of redemption via Godot: "Let's wait till we know exactly how we stand." The fat, childlike Estragon (a former poet) suggests repeatedly two alternatives to waiting—either they go their separate ways or hang themselves. But Vladimir reinforces their mutual dependence, saying to his friend, as he might of Godot, "You are my only hope." The system, frustrating and painful as it may be, must be maintained, because to institute any change is to take a risk, assume responsibility and to give up hope. Their difference can be seen in the following passage:

ESTRAGON: (He raises what remains of the carrot by the stub of leaf, twirls it before his eyes.) Funny, the more you eat the worse it gets.

VLADIMIR: With me it's just the opposite.

ESTRAGON: In other words?

VLADIMIR: I get used to the muck as I go along.

ESTRAGON: (after prolonged reflection) Is that the opposite?

VLADIMIR: Question of temperament. Nothing you can do about it...One is what one is...The essential doesn't change.

Although Estragon goes along with his friend's acceptance of their condition in hope of Godot's miraculous arrival, we get the feeling it is a question of compassion, not authentic choice.

As they wait, they pass the time. Estragon eats, sleeps, dreams, and struggles with his shoes. The shoes, which connect him to the earth (and life), are too tight, just as his relationship to life is one of constricting pain and frustration. Perhaps this is why the recurrent desire to hang himself is so attractive—in that "elevating experience", he would certainly transcend the annoyances of the earth-bound. While Estragon lives in the present (he has no memory and forgets why they're there), Vladimir lives in the reminiscences of the past and the hope of a better future. It is Vladimir's hat, that which orients him to the higher faculties of intellect and spirit, which mysteriously bothers him. He clings to the evasive abstractions of his intellect and the tenuous control of his conscious mind—tenuous because he is subject to uncontrollable urinary and sexual drives and lives in fear of the dream-world which his friend tries to share with him. Together they maintain stasis.

During the two evenings which the play presents, the one major

diversion is the appearance of Pozzo, a kind of Prussian circus-master, and his slave, Lucky, to whom he is tied by a rope, the noose of which is around the latter's neck. Just as Estragon and Vladimir are "married" to each other by loneliness and the need to create a purpose for their lives, just as they are both tied to Godot as the potential release from their actual despair, so too Pozzo and Lucky are mutually dependent on one another for a semblance of identity and order. All of the couples are bound by a need to evade the reality of a purposeless life in the face of death. We all get married, raise families, become employees or employers, etc., in order to play at filling the void, passing the time, concealing our solitude, denying our essential freedom and ignoring death.

Such endeavors constitute man's creative urge. It doesn't change anything to create religious frameworks, such as that of the Godot myth, or to form social alliances, such as marriage and Pozzo and Lucky's slave-master relationship. But we must do something with the time and energy at our disposal, limited though it may be.

ESTRAGON: We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?

VLADIMIR: (impatiently) Yes yes, we're magicians.

The maintenance of the illusion of security (in stability), identity (in labels) and purposeful activity (in following artificial value systems) is itself the purpose of living. Awareness makes it difficult, but doesn't present any real alternatives. Toward the end of the play, Estragon complains to Vladimir: "I can't go on like this." To which his friend replies, "That's what you think."

Both acts end in the same way. Each evening, a wide-eyed young boy appears with a message from Godot, and, like a Presidential press secretary, renders the previous day's promised reality "inoperative." They begrudgingly accept the pronouncement that Godot won't come and release them from their expectant suffering. But tomorrow for sure. For sure. The countdown to the millennium begins again. The concluding lines of each act are the same:

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.

(They do not move.)

The way I've presented the play makes it sound morbid and depressing, but such is not necessarily the case. In the Ashland production, the musical hall burlesque and patter brought repeated torrents of laughter and the love of Vladimir and Estragon was strongly emphasized. Director Andrew Traister interprets *Godot* as "a warm human kind of show that reaffirms the basic values of faith and friendship." While I believe this is, if not misinterpretation, at least an over-emphasis, it is a fairly popular approach to Beckett's work. Many critics write about humanistic, Christian, Buddhist and mystical currents in Beckett. While I see the hope of redemption, and the illusion of meaning as that which leads to fear and despair, many readers try to evade the decay, anxiety and purposelessness which he portrays. This eliminates the possibility of catharsis and acceptance of the human condition of limited energy and time. (Is that damn existential sermonette back on?!!)

The acting at Ashland is superb. Jim Edmondson as the quasi-sophisticated Vladimir is a precise and graceful foil to Cal Winn's bear-like, rubber-lipped Estragon. They are indeed a pair of polished clowns, and their show of love for one another is moving. In addition to the occasional bear-hugs called for in the text, director Traister has them periodically stare into each other's eyes in moments of compassion, understanding and acceptance. Like an old married couple, one of whom is becoming senile and despairing, they help each other through the evening with the hope of Godot and the certainty of night. Richard Riehle's Pozzo is an erratic autocrat madly clinging to his tenuous power. He is poised and powerful. The Lucky of Jeff Brooks dazzles. He has one long, piercing speech of metaphysical word-scramble which he spits out distinctly. (As a matter of fact, all over the press sitting in the front row). The set of Richard Hay is particularly creative and effective—a desolate, chaotic rock garden encircled by a donut-shaped ramp on which the circular action takes place without beginning or end.

Good seats are still available for the final two weekends. It's the best theater on the coast outside of San Francisco, so take the time to drive down and wait. It's just the inspiration we all need as we look ahead to spring, a new President, the Second Coming and the Rebirth of Wonder. Now the only problem is the mean time (pun intended).

Gavin McComas

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