



# ON BECKETT

WITH **BILL IRWIN**

**50**  
YEARS | **A.C.T.**  
AMERICAN  
CONSERVATORY  
THEATER



**JAN 10-22**  
**@THE STRAND**

# FROM THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

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Dear Friends,

For decades, Bill Irwin has drawn inspiration from the mordant wit and existential musings of the great Irish writer Samuel Beckett, whom he met in person only once but whose language and worldview seem perfectly in tune with Bill's own artistic sensibility. Perhaps because Bill first trained as a clown, he has always felt an affinity for the hapless denizens of Beckett's universe, as they struggle to find meaning and joy in a totally mysterious world.

It is with great pleasure that we present Bill's *On Beckett* during A.C.T.'s 50th-anniversary season, in which we are celebrating many of the artists who have made major contributions to A.C.T. over the years. Fifteen years ago, we worked with Bill on his remarkable version of Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*, a performance that found him cascading down a mountain of dirt and wrestling with what it means to be alive. Subsequently we collaborated on *Endgame*, Beckett's "family drama" about a chair-bound man at the end of his life trapped in a room with his alter ego and berating his parents who live inside two trash cans. A frequent and brilliant teacher in our Master of Fine Arts Program, Bill was in town several years ago teaching a class when he asked to show us an exploration of Beckett that he was contemplating. We gathered in a studio on a very hot afternoon and spent an hour watching this magical actor channel his favorite writer, ending with an homage in the form of a little soft-shoe routine.

Today's presentation is the next step in Bill's journey with Beckett; it is a production that will undoubtedly continue to evolve over many years. *On Beckett*, which is part of our @TheStrand series of off-subscription performances, is exactly the kind of artistic experiment we dreamed about when we conceived of The Strand. It is a singular pleasure to welcome Bill Irwin back to this intimate and generous space, where he can speak directly to you through the words of his favorite writer. Thank you so much for joining us.



Carey Perloff  
Artistic Director

**A.C.T.** AMERICAN  
CONSERVATORY  
THEATER

**Carey Perloff**, Artistic Director **Peter Pastreich**, Executive Director

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PRESENTS

# ON BECKETT

CONCEIVED AND PERFORMED BY

**BILL IRWIN\***

Lighting Designer **Robert Hand**

Stage Manager **Deirdre Rose Holland\***

Assistant Stage Manager **Hal Day**

**Special Thanks**

Jessie Amoroso

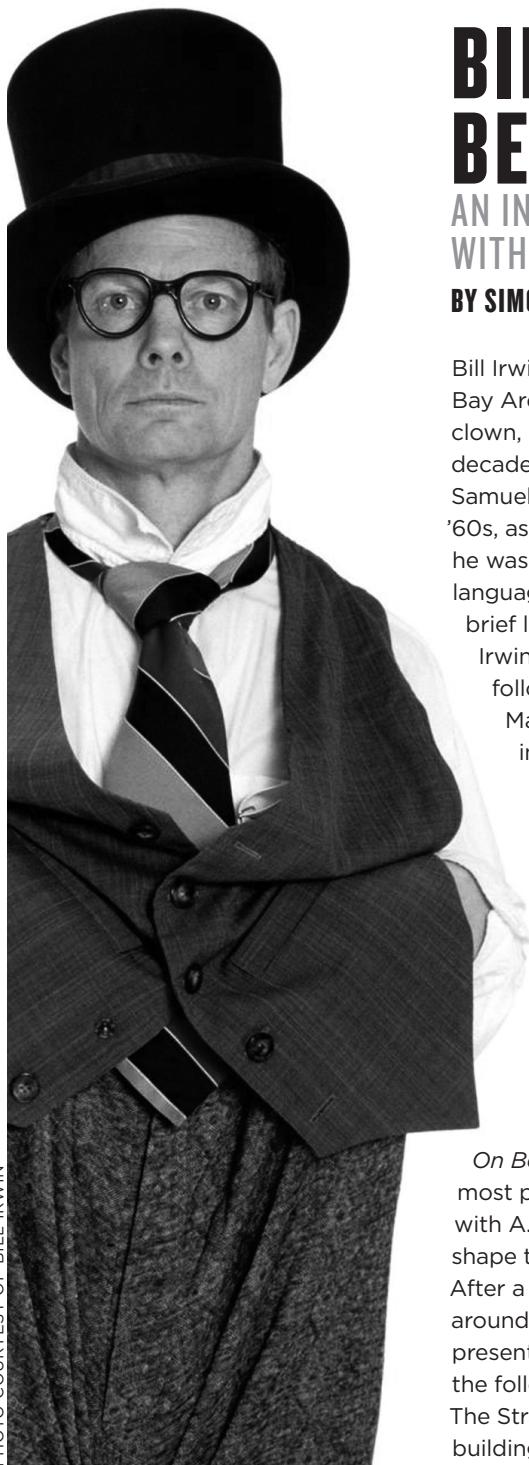
Edward Beckett

Nick Gabriel

Marjorie Perloff

Hamish Wyllie

\*Member of Actors' Equity Association, the union of  
professional actors and stage managers in the United States



# BILL ON BECKETT

AN INTERVIEW  
WITH BILL IRWIN

BY SIMON HODGSON

Bill Irwin may be best known to Bay Area audiences as a master clown, but he has also spent five decades immersed in the words of Samuel Beckett. It was in the late '60s, as a student at UCLA, that he was introduced to Beckett's language. In 1987, after exchanging brief letters with the playwright, Irwin met Beckett in Paris. The following year, Irwin joined Steve Martin and Robin Williams in *Waiting for Godot* at Lincoln Center Theater.

Over the last two decades, Irwin and A.C.T. have developed a partnership for his Beckett explorations. In 2001, he performed *Texts for Nothing* at The Geary Theater, and in 2012, he followed up with *Endgame*, directed by Carey Perloff.

*On Beckett* represents his third and most personal Beckett collaboration with A.C.T. "The idea began to take shape three years ago," says Irwin. After a handful of performances around Seattle in 2014, Irwin presented the embryonic production the following year in three shows at The Strand, a theater that is rapidly building a reputation as a home of

dynamic new work. “The Strand is a good box for this package,” says Irwin. “It’s a space with a good sweet spot in relation to the audiences’s seats. It feels right in size, physical contours, and checkered history. It’s the right spot for the sharing I have in mind.” Before Irwin arrived at The Strand, we caught up with him to talk about Beckett, biographers, and baggy pants.

### **What is your first memory of Samuel Beckett’s plays?**

The first thing I ever read was *Act Without Words I*. I was struck by the style and clarity of the stage directions (it’s all stage directions). Very memorable—though it’s ironic to me now because that play is one of Beckett’s writings that calls to me least, at present. I’m drawn to his use of spoken language now.

### **What was it like meeting Beckett?**

It was 30 years ago; I was about to play Lucky in *Godot*—that’s what we spoke of most. I was very stiff, nervous, and not as knowledgeable about his work as I wish I’d been. I wish I could meet him now—with his voice and language having echoed in my mind. I’d have asked about *Texts for Nothing* and about the structure of *Godot* and *Endgame*.

### **Contemporary playwrights are sometimes compared to Beckett.**

#### **What makes him such a yardstick?**

His is an unforgettable voice, whether it’s your taste or not, and he changed everything. Anyone whose characters look at questions of existence—with humor, not pedantry (and sometimes humor about pedantry)—is going to get compared to Mr. Beckett.

### **How does your clowning experience inform your performance of Beckett’s work?**

It’s as much instinct as anything else. These two threads of work—baggy-pants comedy and Samuel Beckett’s writing—they just seem to connect. Beckett and his family went to the variety theater often; a point which his biographers make. His descriptions of physical business, his stage directions, and his description of characters’ costuming often seem to echo the business of music-hall comics. When it came to casting, Beckett was interested in baggy pants practitioners: Chaplin, Keaton. He was not a “clown-writer”—he wasn’t writing for clowns—but he seemed an aficionado.

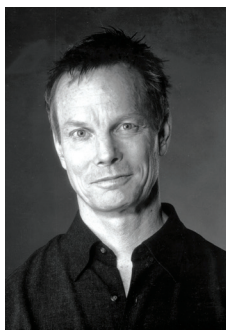
### **What has been your favorite Beckett-related experience?**

I don’t have a single favorite experience—but sometimes speaking his language, and combining it with motion, or certain character movement through my body, can begin to feel strangely right, joyful even. It feels it may be reaching an audience in a way that I’d like it to, perhaps in a way Mr. Beckett might.

I wouldn’t presume to know Mr. Beckett’s intentions in his writing—he famously said that he doesn’t claim to know them either—but sometimes things feel close to something valuable. The passages I’ve included in *On Beckett* are mostly passages that I’ve had in my head, that I’ve worked with as a performer for a long time. I want to share them with audiences. I hope to share the place they’ve come to occupy within me.

# ARTIST BIOS

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**BILL IRWIN\***, an A.C.T. associate artist, is a founding member of San Francisco's Pickle Family Circus. His original works, with many collaborators, include *Fool Moon*, *Old Hats*, *Largely New York*, *Mr. Fox: A Rumination*, *The Happiness Lecture*, *Time It Was/116*, and *The Regard of Flight*. Other theater credits include Broadway productions of *Waiting for Godot* and *Bye Bye Birdie*; Broadway and West End revivals of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (2005 Tony Award); *Waiting for Godot* at Lincoln Center Theater; *Scapin* at Roundabout Theatre Company; and *The Tempest*, *Garden of Earthly Delights*, *Texts for Nothing*, *The Seagull*, and *A Man's a Man*. Television credits include *Monday Mornings*, *Lights Out*, *CSI*, *Bill Irwin: Clown Prince*, *Sesame Street*, *Subway Stories*, *Law & Order*, the closing ceremony of the 1996 Olympic Games and, coming soon, *Legion* on FX. Film credits include *Rachel Getting Married*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Igby Goes Down*, *Lady in the Water*, *Dark Matter*, *Raving*, *Popeye*, *Eight Men Out*, *Silent Tongue*, *Illuminata*, *My Blue Heaven*, *Scenes from a Mall*, and *Stepping Out*. He has been granted a National Endowment for the Arts Choreographers Fellowship and is a MacArthur Fellow, as well as a Guggenheim and a Fulbright Fellow.

**SAMUEL BECKETT** was born on April 13, 1906, in Dublin, Ireland. When he was 17 years old, he began studies at Trinity College in Dublin, where he learned to love literature. In 1928, he took a post as a lecturer in English at l'Ecole normale supérieure in Paris, France. There, he met the Irish author James Joyce, who would later become his mentor. In Paris, Beckett began to publish his first pieces—mostly academic works, but also some poems and short stories. Over the next decade, his career was interrupted by family difficulties, health problems, and World War II, but after the war, he began to write in earnest, focusing on universal explorations of poverty, failure, exile, and loss. His work includes the plays *Eleutheria* (1947), *Waiting for Godot*

\*Member of Actors' Equity Association, the union of professional actors and stage managers in the United States



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(1953), *Act Without Words* (1957), *Endgame* (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *Happy Days* (1961), and *Play* (1963); the novels *Murphy* (1938), *Molloy* (1951), *Watt* (1953), *Malone Dies* (1956), *The Unnamable* (1958), and *How It Is* (1964); the short-story collections *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934) and *Texts for Nothing* (1967); and the poetry collections *Whoroscope* (1930), *Echo's Bones and other Precipitates* (1935), *Poems in English* (1961), and *Poèmes* (1968). He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969, but refused to attend the ceremony and gave the prize money to needy artists. Beckett died on December 22, 1989.

**DEIRDRE ROSE HOLLAND\*** (**Stage Manager**) has worked on many regional theater projects and productions, including the 2016 New Strands Festival, *Chester Bailey*, *Let There Be Love*, and *Ah, Wilderness!* at A.C.T.; *The Liar* at Santa Cruz Shakespeare; *Othello*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Lady Windermere's Fan* at California Shakespeare Theater; *Daddy Long Legs*, *Cyrano*, and *2 Pianos 4 Hands* at TheatreWorks; *The Big Meal*, *Game On*, *Next Fall*, *Next to Normal*, *A Christmas Carol* (2011 and 2012), and *Spring Awakening* at San Jose Repertory Theatre; *The Laramie Project: 10 Years Later* and the world premiere of *Bonnie & Clyde* at La Jolla Playhouse; *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* (2010) and *The Mystery of Irma Vep* at The Old Globe; and the Shakespeare Festival 2011. Holland holds an MFA in stage management from UC San Diego.

**HAL DAY** (**Assistant Stage Manager**) started at A.C.T. as a stage management fellow in the 2015–16 season, during which she worked on *Monstress*, *Satchmo at the Waldorf*, and the limited run of *On Beckett*. Most recently, she was the production assistant for *A Christmas Carol* (2016). Day has worked previously in different capacities with Santa Cruz Shakespeare, where she was the assistant production manager in the 2016 season. When she's not stage-managing, Day freelances in the Bay Area as an electrician and stagehand.

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THE LATEST HIT FROM  
**PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING  
PLAYWRIGHT ANNIE BAKER**

# JOHN

**FEB 22–APR 23**

## **JOHN**

BY

**ANNIE BAKER**

DIRECTED BY

**KEN RUS SCHMOLL**

**“A true masterpiece!  
Revolutionary!”**

*Slate*

A haunting drama that took off-Broadway by storm, *John* is the latest hit from American theater's hottest new voice—Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Baker (*The Flick*). Twentysomethings Jenny and Elias arrive at an old bed-and-breakfast in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania—he wants to tour the historic battlefield, she wants to be left alone. But in the creaking Civil War house,

amid the shelves of smiling dolls and the ghostly landlady, every crack between the couple starts to surface. Echoing with tension, humor, and unease like a modern-day Chekhov, playwright Annie Baker creates a twenty-first-century nerve-jangler that had critics raving. “*John* is so good, on so many levels, that it casts a unique and brilliant light” (*The New Yorker*).

**50**  
YEARS

**A.C.T.** AMERICAN  
CONSERVATORY  
THEATER

**act-sf.org/john | 415.749.2228**



**AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER**, San Francisco's Tony Award-winning nonprofit theater, nurtures the art of live performance through dynamic productions, intensive actor training, and ongoing engagement with our community. Under the leadership of Artistic Director Carey Perloff and Executive Director Peter Pastreich, we embrace our responsibility to conserve, renew, and reinvent our rich theatrical traditions and literatures, while exploring new artistic forms and communities. Founded by William Ball, a pioneer of the regional theater movement, A.C.T. opened its first San Francisco season in 1967. We have since performed more than 350 productions to a combined audience of more than seven million people. Every year we reach more than 250,000 people through our productions and programs.

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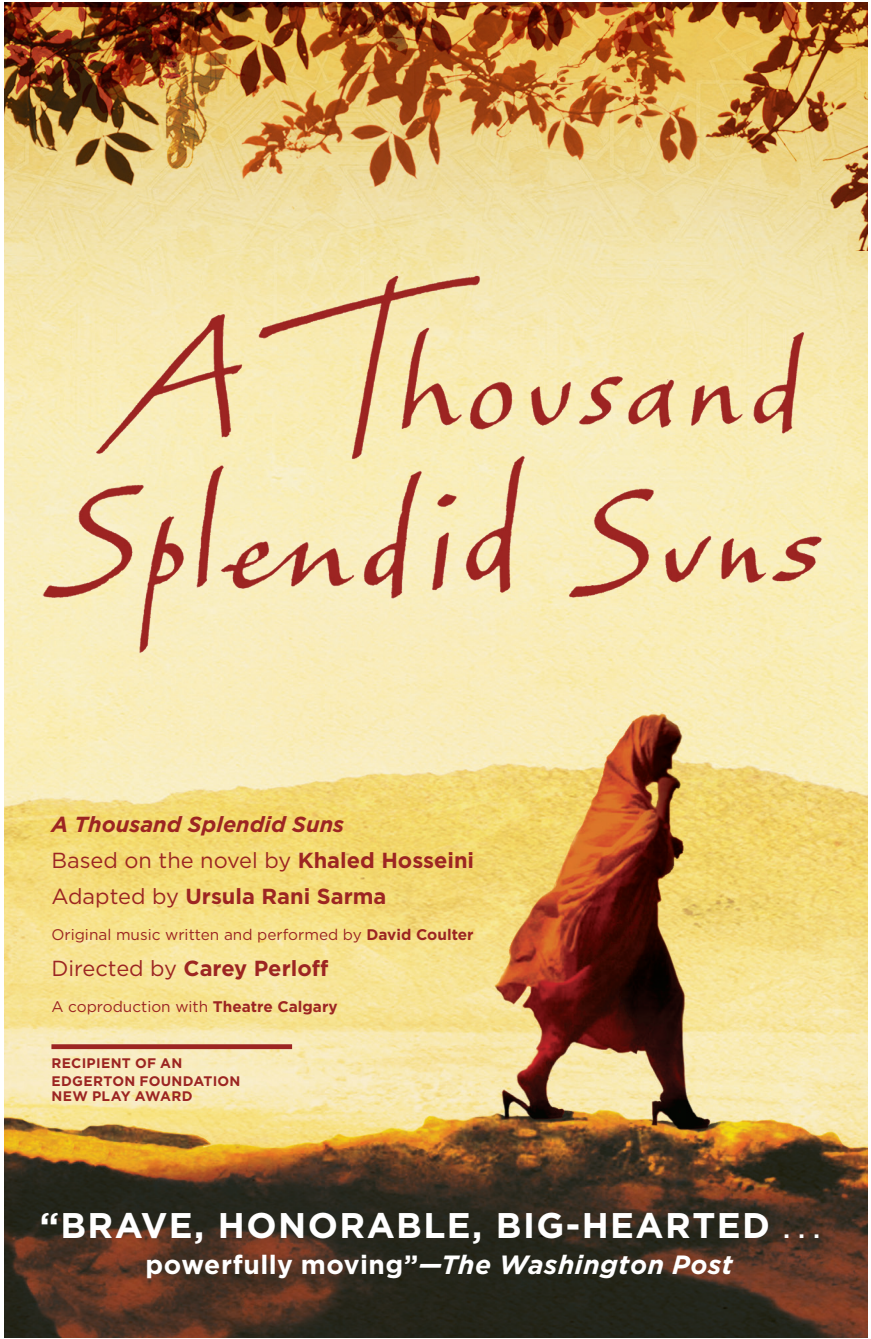
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# A Thousand Splendid Suns

## ***A Thousand Splendid Suns***

Based on the novel by **Khaled Hosseini**

Adapted by **Ursula Rani Sarma**

Original music written and performed by **David Coulter**

Directed by **Carey Perloff**

A coproduction with **Theatre Calgary**

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