

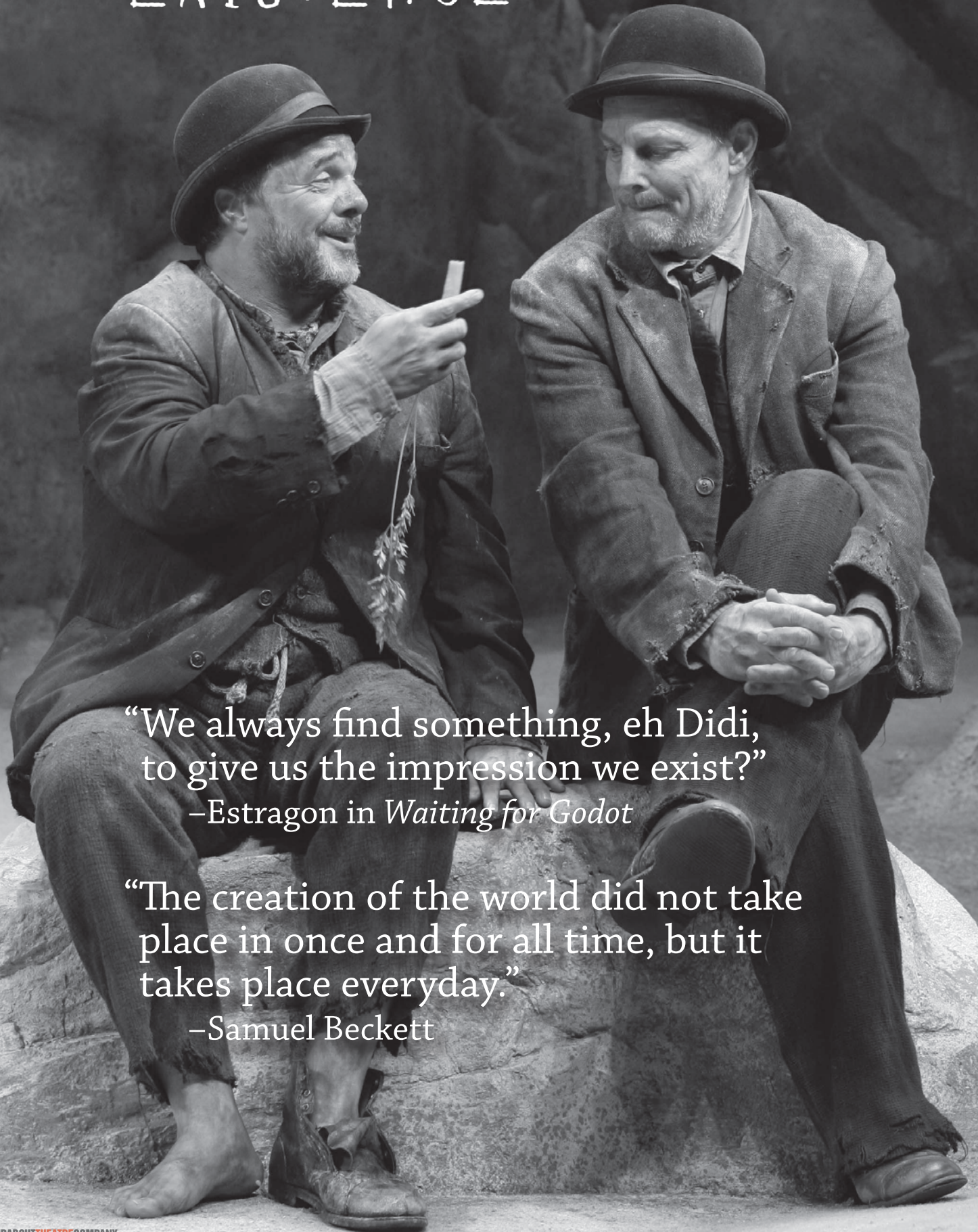
UPSTAGE

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EXISTENCE

the state of being



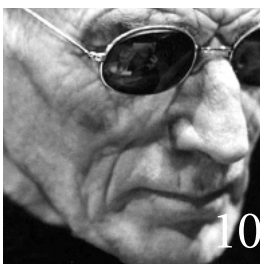
“We always find something, eh Didi,
to give us the impression we exist?”

—Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*

“The creation of the world did not take
place in once and for all time, but it
takes place everyday.”

—Samuel Beckett

WAITING FOR GODDOT



Waiting for Godot premiered (as *En Attendant Godot*) in 1953 at the Theatre de Babylone in Paris. The Irishman **Samuel Beckett** originally wrote the play in French, the language of his adopted home, and the Parisian audience greeted *Godot* with puzzlement. Some enjoyed the play, while others were perplexed, and still others simply hated the piece. It was clear that this play was something different, but what that “something different” really meant was a bit foggier. The play was translated into English by the playwright himself and was met with similar confusion in England and the United States. And who could blame the audiences for not knowing what to make of a play in which, as has been famously stated, nothing happens—twice! After all, *Godot* had made its appearance at a time when kitchen-sink dramas and the stuff of gritty realism were the new trend on stage. Beckett’s existential work, playing with time and memory, quietly tackling the big questions without following rules of logic or rationality, was an utter anomaly. But the play gathered enough champions who recognized that, for a play in which nothing happens, quite a lot was happening in this seemingly simple portrait of two men on a country road, standing under a tree, waiting.

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The EXISTENCE of Directing

UPSTAGE SAT DOWN WITH TONY® AWARD WINNING DIRECTOR ANTHONY PAGE TO DISCUSS SAMUEL BECKETT AND HIS UNDERSTANDING OF *WAITING FOR GODOT*.

So, in this production you are pronouncing Godot, Gah-doe?

Accent on the second syllable. There's a joke in the play: Godot or Pozzo.

Why did you want to direct this production?

Well, it was Bill Irwin who initiated the production and we talked about it. I directed it formerly in '65, with Beckett there most of the time. So I still had the confidence that I knew, more or less, what he was after. And the production works very well. I said, "yes, I'd do it." It's difficult to get a really good cast and all the first people we rang up wanted to do it to my somewhat surprise.

Do you see it as a revolutionary play?

Yes, I guess it probably is. I suppose the technique is revolutionary; its technique is pretty unique. You know, it was written for a small theater in Paris. That's where it first got started. Beckett wrote the play not knowing what was coming next. He started hearing these voices and just wrote what he heard, that's what he said. He didn't know what was coming next. He just wrote and he heard these voices arguing.

You've mentioned that Beckett was very much into the details.

Yes, any play that you do you've got to get the details right. Beckett was into what they found in life; what their relationship was; what the moment-to-moment tensions were. But he didn't want to talk about the meaning or theorize about it. When he came to rehearsals, he was just very precise. It was very good. He just knew at certain points what he intended and that saved a lot of time.

How did you find him as a person and as an artist?

He had an incredible concentration and he sat there and was completely concentrated on the stage and every single detail so that he could speak about it very precisely afterwards. He didn't like theorizing about the play. Sometimes we'd meet in the evening and we'd have a meal and he'd talk about the piano duets which he liked: Schubert, Mozart. I played the bass and he played the treble. I felt very harmonious with him at those points. He was an amazing person. He never got riled and he concentrated very, very hard. One point in the rehearsal, Nicol Williamson, who was playing Vladimir, had a kind of break down. I don't know if it

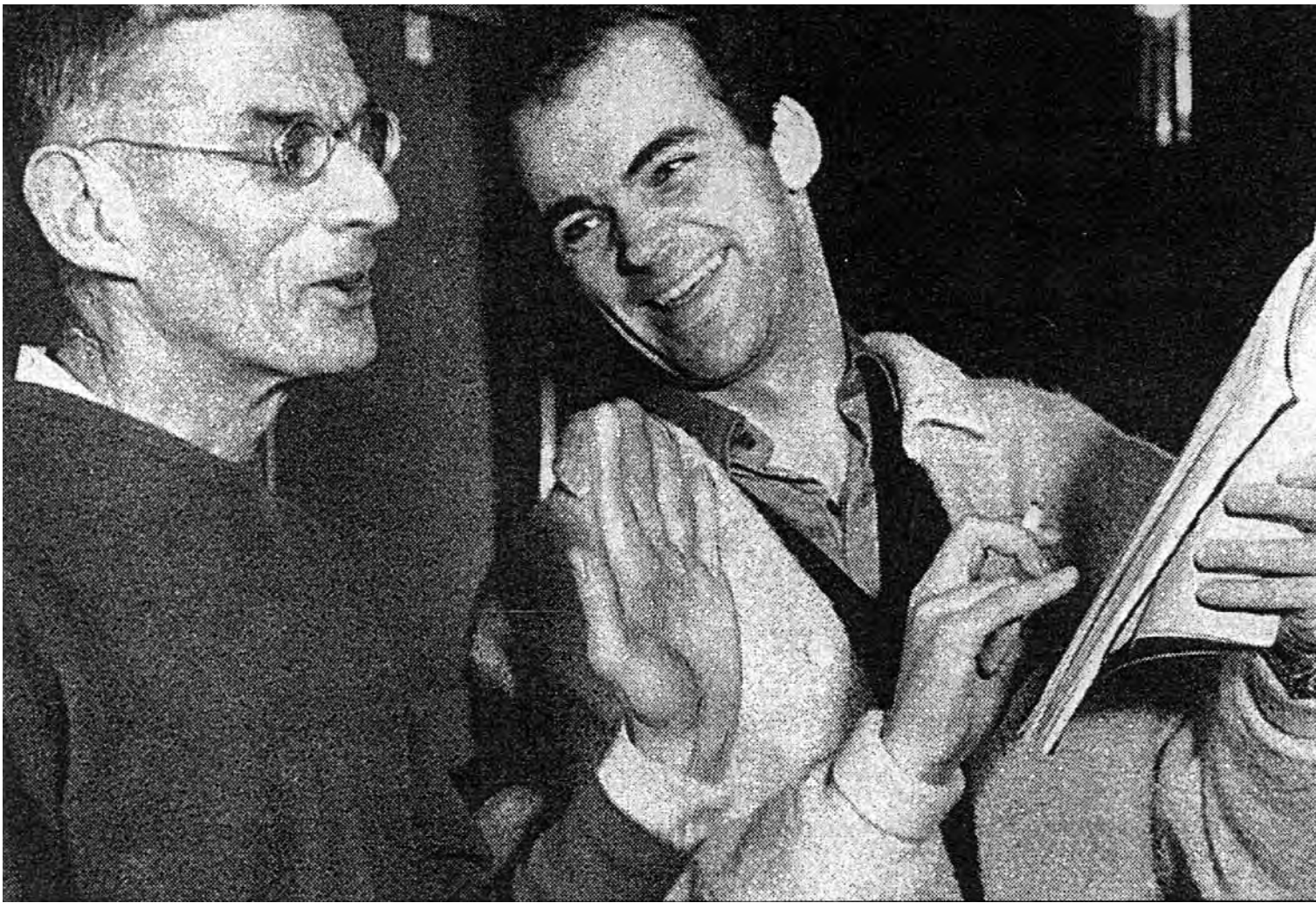
was the material or what, but he just disappeared and he didn't come back to the theater for two days and we just waited. We didn't know where he was. And Beckett just waited very patiently. He didn't complain. He waited until he turned up again. Eventually I found out where Nicol was and persuaded him to come back.

When you talk about what the play is about, what do you say?

There are these two people, Vladimir and Estragon, who are waiting for someone who is going to give meaning to their lives. I mean it is not penned out specifically who this person is. And this person probably never will arrive. I think you can interpret the play in many ways. I think Beckett was probably quite religious when he was young which is why in the play he expresses some bewilderment and pain about it. Also, there is a passage in the second act: both of them are depressed and they start talking about these dead voices; what they sound like and that's all there is. It's a beautiful passage. I remember Beckett wanted the actors to be very still. But he never gave any cut and dried interpretation. I think that Vladimir is determined that Godot is coming and is more optimistic and Estragon is much more nihilistic about it. He actually keeps hanging himself. So I wouldn't put too clean an interpretation on it. I think it takes away some of the mystery of the play. Basically it's about the fact that the universe is Godless, and that's how it is.

What do you look for in actors for this particular play?

They've got to make it their own. I never like imposing things. I think they've got to make it seem very natural. I don't like productions where they're going through stylized moves, obviously been drilled in a certain way. It can be rather weird. Actually what we've done with this production, which Beckett wouldn't have liked, is given it a rather elaborate set. He wanted a very plain stage with just a tree and a mound on it and this moon that rises in the sky. I felt we needed it now that we are in a big theater, a bigger theatre than it was created for. When we did it at the Royal Court in '65, we actually stripped away some of the set we had. I don't think Beckett even thought of a theater when he wrote it. But it was always done in very small theaters. I thought it was really important to give it some atmosphere for the audience as well. This may be cowardly, but I think it will help it.



Samuel Beckett with Anthony Page, director of the Royal Court's *Waiting for Godot* in 1964

Does the play have resonance for you?

Well, I wouldn't do it if it didn't. I think it's an amazing play.

As you get older, do you think it speaks more to immortality or mortality?

Immortality? No, I think it speaks to mortality. I mean it's pretty mortal to be trapped like roaches and be still here, you know. You feel you're nearer the end.

For me, it's a fascinating play because it forces you to grapple with so many different ideas, and it feels like poetry.

It is poetry. I know when I saw it in 1955 . . .

You saw the first British production directed by Peter Hall?

Yes. I was about 20 and I didn't really understand it at all, but it did make me think about things. I couldn't really say about what. It had an incredible effect, just making the mind go to other places. I don't think it's so rare now because people have come to terms with things in the play much more.

Did you see it as absurd when you first saw it?

I don't know what I thought. I was fascinated by it. It was certainly unlike anything I had seen. Subsequently I don't think it was the best production of the play that

could have been, but it brought it to London. I think they did too many tricky things.

For the benefit of young people who fancy a career as a director, what advice do you give when someone says, "I want to be a director?"

I actually trained as an actor, and I think that's the most important thing. They're the people that are doing it on the stage and I think the more you know about actors and how to deal with them, the better you are as a director. To me the most important thing, the vital thing, is the actors; so I think the more you know about that, the better. I directed at University, but I'd done some training at the Gate Theater in Dublin which was run by Hilton Edwards and Micheál MacLiammóir, and Hilton told me a method which was about plotting all these moves into the script. So I used to work out productions like this and I'd struggle with the actors, making them do it; and it wasn't until I trained with Sanford Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse, I realized there's no point in plotting a play until the actors know what it's about, what they're objectives are.

Is there anything about the play I haven't asked you that you wish I had?

Beckett said "In theater, the laughter and the tear are everything." 

The

EXISTENCE of Acting

UPSTAGE RECENTLY INTERVIEWED TONY® AWARD WINNING ACTORS NATHAN LANE AND BILL IRWIN REGARDING THEIR DISCOVERIES IN THE ROLES OF ESTRAGON AND VLADIMIR.

Why did you want to play these roles?

Bill Irwin: I was relieved the other day to hear that Nathan's been reading this play for years because so have I. It's just the weirdest, most resonant play. I've felt an affinity, always, with this guy, Vladimir. He's kind of hollow, liberal sometimes, and he blows like a weathervane, but there's something about the core of this voice in the play that I respond to. And that's all I can say.

Nathan, why did you choose to play Estragon?

Nathan Lane: Well it's a play I've always wanted to do. I feel like it's always been in the back of my mind. Really, the deciding factor was Bill Irwin—doing it with him. That made sense to me, because that's the key to the whole thing. If that balance isn't right, it just won't work; that and the fact that I've always loved the play. When I was in high school I did a scene from *Waiting for Godot* and a scene from *Inherit the Wind*. Somehow I convinced people to let us do this in the cafeteria. And there was a large group of students who came and watched us do a scene from *Godot* and a scene from... *Wind*. It was the section where they talk about all the dead voices. I thought it was such beautiful poetry. I always thought the play was funny and haunting and beautiful. I've seen it done badly... and I've seen it done well. So I hope we're aiming towards doing it well. It's the most difficult piece of material I've ever encountered. It's really about this relationship that Bill Irwin and I have in the play and being brave enough to trust the play; and being simple with it, not over-complicate it; and trust that when it's funny, it's funny and when it's sad, it's sad. That's just sort of like life.

Do you remember, as a high school student, how you came upon the play? Did you find it in the library?

NL: I think either my oldest brother had a copy of it or I just must have read about it and then read the play itself. I don't really remember how I first discovered it. I think I saw this book called *Case Book on Godot* before I read the play. I found the whole description of the first production in Miami and dealing with Bert Lahr who wanted to incorporate the phrase "Nnnahnnng Nnnahnnng Nnnahnnng" (from the Cowardly Lion in *Wizard Of Oz*) when he said: "What do we do now," "Let's go," "We can't," "Why not," "We're waiting for Godot... Nnnahnnng Nnnahnnng Nnnahnnng." And also

Lahr wanted the big Lucky speech cut. He said "Well they're coming to see me, not Lucky." All of that was sort of hilarious.

Have you made discoveries about your roles that have surprised you? Do you know what the most challenging aspect of it is?

BI: Yes. Mr. Lane is tired of hearing me on the subject. For me, the opening of the play is very tricky. It's exciting, but it's one of the greatest challenges for me as an actor. I read the play habitually, as a young acting student and I'd think, "This is so great." And now to see how tricky it is to make it real, to make it work, to make it connect, to make sense; I know it can be done, but I haven't cracked it quite yet. That's my challenge.

NL: Well, the most surprising thing is when you start to get it up on its feet, you have to let go of certain things and embrace — I keep calling it the music of the play — and just play the notes and don't think about how it is your going get there. I think sometimes you just have to embrace the rules of the play. You can theorize and you can read all of the material and all of the essays and books that have been written about the play, but ultimately it's about two guys, waiting on a road for someone who doesn't come. And you have to go moment to moment. It's as real for them as you can make it and yet there's also an awareness that they're not just in this situation — this limbo — they're also on a stage doing a play. It walks this line — as it walks this line with comic and the tragic — it walks the line of we're really in this situation and how are we going to resolve it; and it's also we're putting on a play, we're trapped in this play, in this theatrical situation.

BI: I think it calls on actors who have a background and deep roots in clowning, but it is not a clown piece. I used to think, maybe it was, but it is not. Beckett acknowledges the audience and there's sort of an awareness that we're in a theatre doing a scene. So when my character's confused, my character says at one point, "but that is not the question. What are we doing here? That is the question." And it's both what are we doing here making a piece of theatre and what we are doing here on earth? It's a piece of theatre that's most like a dream. All plays are kind of like a dream, in some way. The rules of the road here have to do with what dreaming is.

If Beckett were in the rehearsal hall with you, what question would you ask him?



Nathan Lane

NL: Do you find Paris expensive?

BI: I met Beckett...

When?

BI: It was near the end of his life. It was a very brief meeting. And that's interesting because he didn't really want to talk about the play. I said, "Mr. Beckett there's a section called "the Board" that you've written, could I ask you..." and he said, "Ah well, I'd have to look at the French." He clearly didn't want to talk about the play. We made a little small talk about sports and Irish politics and could have talked about Parisian real-estate, but...

NL: I mean, famously, he didn't want to talk about the plays and what they meant, especially this one. He said "Everything you need to know is in the play. There's nothing more I can say. I said everything in the play and I think it's enough."

BI: And he was legendarily clear about where he wanted you to stand. How he wanted you to say it –quick, slow, pause there...

NL: Well then you know in '75 he finally directed *Godot* in Berlin. So by that point he had had some theatrical experience with the play and had observed other productions. Yes, he was very precise about the movement and yet when you look at the notes that he kept about the play, he was very open to the actor's ideas



Bill Irwin

and adjusting things to the specific people who were doing the play in that particular production.

BI: I have a theory that he might not know what to make of our take on it, just from generational differences. But I do think that we are at least setting out to serve his play, his vision. He came from a really different set of theatre conventions.

How do you memorize this? It seems absolutely insane! Is it?

NL: It's a technical thing that you have to do. It just comes with the job and it's tedious, but necessary. Very necessary. In this case the director suggested we learn it beforehand. So we did do that. Bill Irwin and I would get together during the month before it started and just run lines together and we found that helpful. So, we had a little leg up when we started. Yea, it's tricky. It's tricky because there's so much repetition and similar phrasing at times.

BI: But there's a beauty like poetry. I didn't mention this to you, Nathan, but I read an article on memory and how the human brain is set up to remember things musically. You know (sung) *Don't go in front of a tiger when he's hungry*. You tend to learn lines in a certain musical way and then it's very hard to break that and that's what I'm working on now, breaking up the music

that I put in to my head with these lines. Break it up and really listen to what Estragon is saying and let the response come out of that.

NL: “Don’t go in front of the tiger when he’s hungry?”
Beyonce’s recording that, by the way. It’s a very touching ballad of a visit to the zoo, that didn’t end well.

BI: I want to hear Beyonce’s “Leviticus.”

How do you keep yourselves inspired?

NL: Seeing other pieces of theatre or other actors is inspiring. Other works of art can be inspiring. You can read something that ignites an idea or an emotion. You know, everything is inspiring. Obama is inspiring. Seeing actors like Bill Irwin, John Goodman, John Glover; that’s inspiring.

BI: I was just going to say it’s inspiring watching Nathan Lane and John Goodman especially – John Glover and I both feel this – they often un-cork things with a sort of knowledge of other people’s work. Nathan Lane says, “Oh that’s the Jack Benny approach.” And Goodman does a Jack Benny imitation. It’s very illuminating. It’s amazing. It feels like we’re just horsing around with imitations, but it’s actually uncorking relationships.

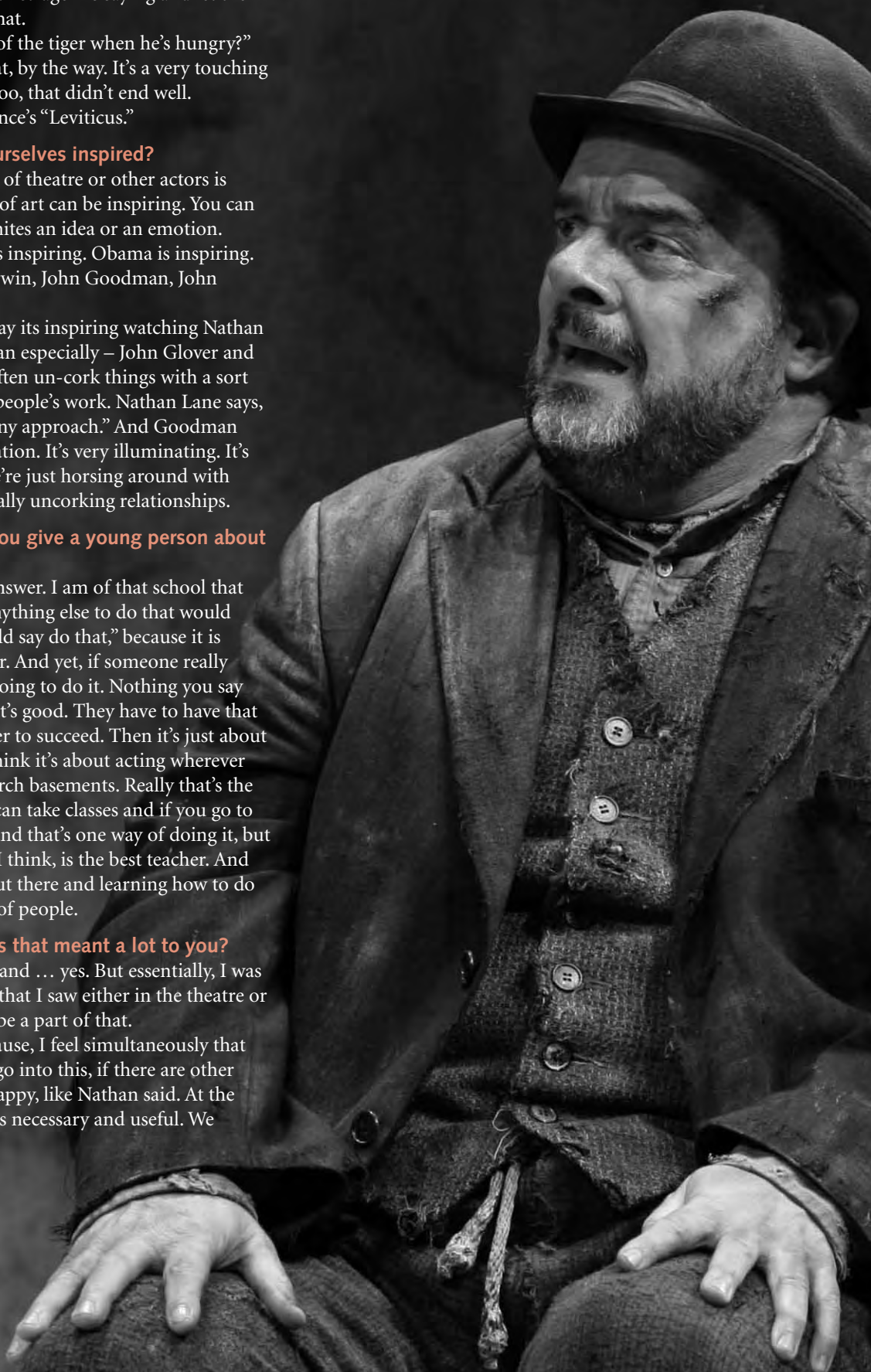
What advice would you give a young person about being an actor?

NL: It’s so difficult to answer. I am of that school that says, “If you can find anything else to do that would make you happy, I would say do that,” because it is a difficult life and career. And yet, if someone really wants to do it, they’re going to do it. Nothing you say will stop them. And that’s good. They have to have that kind of mindset in order to succeed. Then it’s just about working. You know, I think it’s about acting wherever you can -including church basements. Really that’s the only way to learn. You can take classes and if you go to Juilliard, that’s terrific and that’s one way of doing it, but ultimately, experience, I think, is the best teacher. And it’s just about getting out there and learning how to do that in front of groups of people.

Did you have teachers that meant a lot to you?

NL: Yes, in high school and ... yes. But essentially, I was just inspired by people that I saw either in the theatre or in film and wanting to be a part of that.

BI: It’s paradoxical because, I feel simultaneously that you shouldn’t casually go into this, if there are other things that make you happy, like Nathan said. At the same time, the theatre is necessary and useful. We





have to have that faith or otherwise we'd feel like we were being frivolous with our lives. It's necessary and useful work and it serves an important purpose in the culture and society. So if you feel called, do it as much as possible.

Bill, do you have teachers that you remember that made a real impression on you?

BI: Yes, in high school and in later training. I feel like I'm never grateful enough, especially when I go and teach.

Is there a question I should have asked that I didn't ask?

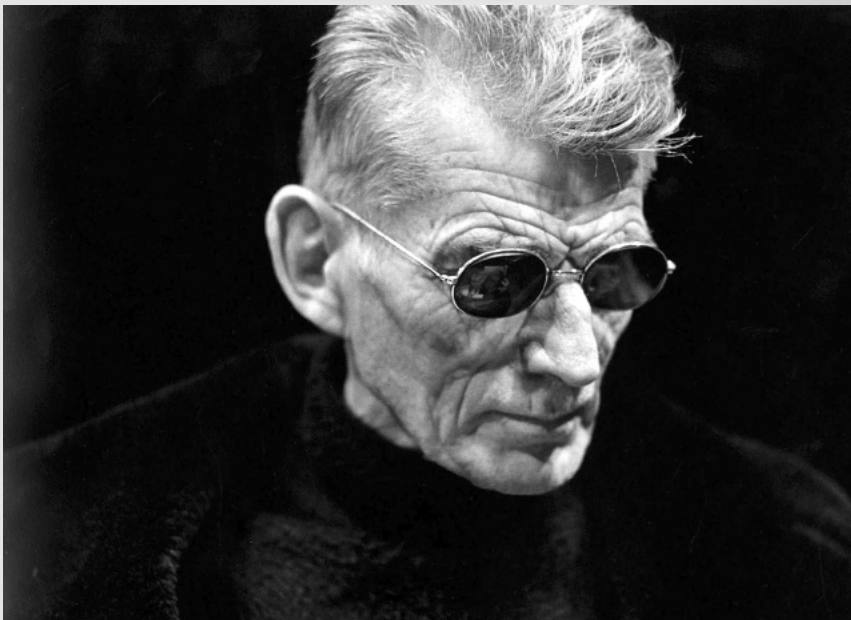
BI: This came to my mind. I was reading this thing—because I need to make myself read something other than the script sometimes. “I have ten minutes; I better look at my lines.” As my wife says, “Yeah, well put it down, live some life.” That's something I heard recently, when someone was giving advice to young actors, they said, “When you're doing a show, live a lot during that day. Don't sit and think about the show all day because if you live a lot, then you have something to offer an audience.” That really meant something to me, because it's very easy to get into, “I shouldn't go out and walk. No, I can't, I should get ready for the show.”

NL: I guess what one hopes is that when people come see this play, and there are people who hate the play, who just actively hate it, because usually they tend to want a story, they want “they steal the diamonds and go to Rio and high-jinx ensue.” This is more about getting lost in this allegory, this metaphor of life, whatever this is. And it is like a dream. It's about how can we go on? What are we waiting for? Let's do something. I think they're the big questions. By the time the little boy comes on and says Godot's not coming, it should be very emotional. I get so... those scenes are so emotional to me. And if we can convince the audience that Godot is coming; if we can convince the audience that this person is going to show up this time; then we'll have done our job. It should also make the audience uncomfortable with the silences. We try to fill the silences, but we can't because the silence keeps seeping in. It's like a dream, or a poem, but it's also terribly funny and sad and all those wonderful things. And for kids seeing it for the first time, that's a wonderful responsibility for us. **UP**

Nathan Lane and Bill Irwin in *Waiting for Godot*.

The

EXISTENCE of Samuel Beckett



Born in Dublin in 1906, Samuel Beckett was raised by an Irish Protestant family. By 1927, he had graduated from Trinity College where he received top honors in French and Italian literature. Afterwards, he moved to France, where he would remain for the majority of his life. While working as a lecturer at the Ecole Normale-Supérieure, he became aware of the Dada movement and, later on, Surrealism. Beckett experimented with poetry, fiction, non-fiction and drama. His most famous play, *Waiting for Godot*, was not written until after World War II, in which significant traces of not only Beckett's personal history but the history of the world are displayed.

During and after World War II, as Nazism, Socialism, Fascism, Communism, Totalitarianism and Capitalism interwove on the world map, the political arena was divided and attacked from all sides. The Absurdist and Existentialists belonged to a generation of writers who were suspicious of language that had been worn out by jargon, slogans and propaganda.¹ As art had become so politicized during the interwar years, the postwar generation of writers and theorists detached themselves from the political and economic tendencies of the interwar years.²

On a trip to Hamburg in 1936, Beckett saw the impact first-hand. Back in Paris, in 1940, he witnessed Jewish friends being assaulted and abused as their properties were vandalized with anti-Semitic slogans and forced to wear the Star of David.³ In 1941, because he "simply couldn't stand by with his arms folded," Beckett joined the French Resistance.⁴ Central to the Allied forces' intelligence, the Resistance helped transport valuable knowledge to England via small cells of Resistance agents. Beckett worked for Gloria SMH (In reverse HMS—His Majesty's Service).⁵

"It's fairly obvious that Godot can be anything you want. The great thing Beckett did was to say there is such a thing as metaphorical theatre. Godot's a metaphor for religions, philosophy, belief, every kind of thing you can think of, but it never arrives. We do die, however—this we know. But Sam didn't talk about death; he didn't give lectures about what his play meant."

—Peter Hall, Director of the 1955 London Production

In 1940, after being turned in by a double-agent and pursued by the Gestapo (German police forces), Samuel Beckett and his partner Suzanne—she later became his wife—were forced to flee their apartment leaving everything behind. Wandering from home to home and living on almost nothing, they finally made their way to the small village of Rousillon, a mountainous town in the south of France. Here they waited for the war to end. Waited to be free. They worked, but mostly they waited.

Many find traces of Beckett's time in Rousillon within the lines of *Godot*. Rousillon stands on a hill with imposing cliffs of red ocher, where even the garden soil is red; it is there where Beckett found himself working for a grape farmer for a time. The two difficult years spent in Rousillon, hiding and waiting, are portrayed through vagabond characters of Didi and Gogo, who according to Alfred Simon, "owe much of their existence to the Sam-Suzanne couple."⁶ In *Waiting for Godot* written in 1948, Vladimir recalls his similar time as a grape picker in the French version of *Godot*, drawing upon Beckett's memory of Rousillon ("but down there, everything is red!")⁷ While there are numerous interpretations of meaning and theme throughout history's analysis of Beckett, in *Godot* there remain specific traces that are unique to Beckett's style. These allow us to see clearly the necessity of ambiguity in his writing, the genius in his simplicity and the idea that one piece can have many points; any object can be seen in many different lights. In *Godot* Beckett raises questions about the religious, political, psychological and existentialist beliefs of humankind. Through mocking and aping daily functions and questions that arise in our lives, Beckett helps us to see ourselves in a different light⁸. By pairing comedy shown through minimalism and repetition with complex character relationships and lyrically, poetic language, Beckett questions our everyday truths, instilling in us a sense of doubt.

Although many agree that Beckett was not a dominantly political writer, it has been said that history and politics have "stamped him with its pain" and like many of the writers of that time, tried to blur specificity and strive for the universal⁹.

Plays by Samuel Beckett

- Eleutheria (1940s; published 1995)
- Waiting for Godot (1952)
- Act Without Words I (1956)
- Act Without Words II (1956)
- Endgame (1957)
- Krapp's Last Tape (1958)
- Rough for Theatre I (late 1950s)
- Rough for Theatre II (late 1950s)
- Happy Days (1960)
- Play (1963)
- Come and Go (1965)
- Breath (1969)
- Not I (1972)
- That Time (1975)
- Footfalls (1975)
- A Piece of Monologue (1980)
- Rockaby (1981)
- Ohio Impromptu (1981)
- Catastrophe (1982)
- What Where (1983)



Nathan Lane and Bill Irwin in *Waiting for Godot*.

THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

“The theatre of the Absurd did not seek the unreal for its own sake. It used the unreal to make certain explorations because it sensed the absence of truth in our everyday exchanges, and the presence of truth in the seemingly far-fetched.”

—Peter Brook, director influenced by absurdist theatre.

The influences for Theatre of the Absurd date back to mid-nineteenth century during the Industrial Revolution when a “mass production in word and thought was growing in awareness.” People were starting to feel bored with a society so consumed with mass production of not just products but everything; therefore poets like Gustave Flaubert, Charles Baudelaire, Stéphan Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud tried to inflate literature, language, and love with irony to make it full of black comedy. In France, after World War II, Theatre of the Absurd—as first termed by writer Martin Esslin—was starting to take shape, because “language was beginning to lose its power to persuade and shock.” An art form described as “a phenomena of the post-war years,” Theatre of the Absurd tried to be the absence of ideas—anti-psychological, anti-realistic, anti-philosophical and apolitical. Playwrights, like Samuel Beckett and his contemporaries (Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, Fernando Arrabal and, later on, Tom Stoppard and his play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*), omitted plot, plausible settings, comprehensible human relationships and rational language in order to remove the familiar forms of theatre from the audience’s grasp. In their places circus, vaudeville, melodrama and parody techniques became an important way to illuminate the everyday life in a grotesquely humorous distortion. A preoccupation with death, clowning, isolation, futility and minimalism can be viewed in many absurdist plays as the playwrights’ aims were to provide a lot of humor with

minimal joy. Particularly important in Theatre of the Absurd is that, as theatre is meant to be seen on a stage, messages were conveyed more frequently in astounding manners and physical contexts rather than simply in words themselves.

Without the crutch of language, silent movies demonstrated that the most powerful theatre language was that of gestures, rhythms and silences. Charlie Chaplin, one of the first absurdist heroes, was introduced through silent movies, giving the world an image of “the trampled, little man who somehow hangs on.” Silent movies paved the way for Apollinaire who was one of the early surrealist playwrights. His theatre was an example of “the reasonable use of the improbable.” During his play, *Mamelles de Tirésias*, balls were thrown at the audience to break the barrier between the stage and audience. **UP**

¹ Ibid., xix.

² Weisenberg, David. *Chronicles of Disorder: Samuel Beckett and the Cultural Politics of the Modern Novel*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000.162.

³ Knowlson, James. *Damned to Fame*. New York, NY: Touchstone, 1996.279.

⁴ Ibid., 279.

⁵ Ibid., 279.

⁶ Friedman, Alan Warren, Charles Rossman, and Dina Sherzer, ed. Lamont, Rosette. “Crossing the Iron Curtain: Political Parables”. *Beckett Translating/Translating Beckett*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987.79.

⁷ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 305.

⁸ Cohn, Ruby. *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1962, 211.

⁹ Lamont, “Political Parables”, *Translating Beckett/Beckett Translating*. 79.

¹⁰ Gaensbauer, *French Theatre of the Absurd*, 3.

¹¹ Ibid., 3.

¹² Gaensbauer, Deborah B. *French Theatre of the Absurd*. Boston: Twayne Publishing, 1991. xvii.

¹³ Ibid. xvi, ix.

¹⁴ Ibid. xvi

¹⁵ Ibid. xvi

¹⁶ Ibid. xviii

¹⁷ Ibid. ix

¹⁸ Ibid., 7.

¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

²⁰ Ibid., 8.

²¹ Ibid., 8.

The

EXISTENCE

of Stage
Management

UPSTAGE RECENTLY SPOKE WITH THE PRODUCTION STAGE MANAGER OF *WAITING FOR GODOT*, PETER HANSON, ABOUT HIS ROLE IN BRINGING THE PLAY TO LIFE.

Peter, how do you define the role of a stage manager?

When people ask me this, I say that it is an occupation that has two distinct time frames. The first is the several-month long period of getting a show to opening night and the second is maintaining the show for the months (and sometimes years) after it has opened. Prior to opening, you are the point person for all of the myriad departments that have anything at all to do with an individual production. From the Director down to the dressers, everyone is crucial to the process. My job, ultimately, is to help facilitate everyone else's work. I am not really a member of the creative team, nor am I involved in the nuts and bolts technical decisions but I do need to be comfortable in those realms and understand their vocabulary. I'm the person who does all of the rehearsal scheduling and I need to keep everyone's needs in mind as we put together even an individual day. Between rehearsals, costume fittings, press events, etc. scheduling can be complicated but it is all in the service of making sure everyone can do their best work. After a show opens the task becomes a different one. Fundamentally, my most important job is to make sure the show actually happens every night. This might sound easy enough but when a flu bug runs through your company or your sound console breaks down at half hour, your resourcefulness will get tested. Past that, your task is to insure that every night the show looks and sounds just like it did on opening night, even if you have two understudies on and a sub-drummer playing his (or her) second show. There is no better compliment for a stage manager than when anyone from the original creative team comes back to a show months later and declares it to be in great shape.

How did you become a stage manager? What's your background? Did you study to be a stage manager or did you start somewhere else and find your way into stage managing?

My background and degree in college was in journalism and, ironically, one of the first jobs I got out of college was working for the late, great, weekly casting newspaper called *Show Business*. Prior to that in high school and college I had no real interest in the theatre at all. During my year at *Show Business*, I met and interviewed people in all aspects of the industry from actors to directors to playwrights to designers and

really got a feel for the world of the theatre. One of the common traits I kept running into was the passion that all of these people had for their livelihood. This had great appeal for me—so much so that I decided to take a flier on being a journalist and try my hand at the theatre. I answered an ad (in *Show Business*, funnily enough) from a summer-stock theater in Central Pennsylvania that was looking for Technical Apprentices. For \$45 dollars a week (and housing) I built scenery, ran the light board, worked backstage and got an amazing crash course in the history and craft of the theatre. I apprenticed there for two summers and became the technical director in my third summer. This was all in the early 1980's.

Did you actually stage manage at that same theatre?

Actually, no. But I certainly decided there that stage managing would probably be the job where my abilities would be best utilized.

And then you came to New York?

Well, I grew up on Long Island so New York was always home. Those first few years I spent the winters mostly doing lighting work for various off-Broadway theatres (including Roundabout). I started stage managing shows on tour and off-Broadway around 1983 and then split my time between tech directing and stage managing. By the late 1980's I was almost exclusively stage managing, working in New York, on the road and even occasionally overseas. I was working regularly, enjoying it immensely and hoping to just continue on in this fashion.

When was your Broadway debut?

The 1994 revival of *Damn Yankees*. I had worked off-Broadway for the two lead Producers of that show and they were kind enough to bring me on-board.

***Damn Yankees* with Jerry Lewis?**

Yes, well, ultimately with Jerry Lewis, but we opened the show with an incredible company that included Victor Garber, Bebe Neuwirth, Jarrod Emick and the great Dick Latessa. Jerry took over for Victor in the second year and we then took the show on the road for two years, finally ending in the West End of London.

You've worked with quite a number of stars, is there any specific advice you give to people working with stars in terms of stage management?



I don't think that going into rehearsal with a star is really that much different than going into rehearsal with any seasoned actor. Once you find out their particular needs, you try to provide them with the best environment for them to achieve their best work. Frankly, this rule of thumb would apply to anyone in the company.

If everyone in the company (including the star) feels that as the stage manager your only agenda is to help make the show be as good as it can be, then usually you make out fine.


If someone told you they wanted to be a stage manager on Broadway, what advice would you give?

There is great value in learning as much as you can about every single facet of the theatre, so that you have a pretty good notion of everybody's job. Learn how to read a blueprint; build or paint some scenery; hang and focus a stage light; discover how a costume is built for a quick change. The more you know about all of these disciplines, the easier it will be to offer an opinion or solution when something crops up in tech rehearsals or in the middle of a show. We also haven't spoken much about calling shows—the nightly process of actually running a performance. This is one of the great parts of stage managing—taking the house lights down and (as we call it) flying the plane. When you are doing this on opening night, or when the Times is in the house, or when the Lincoln Center Library is making their archival tape, you had better be on top of your game. The sooner you put on a head set and get behind the console, the better.

What about acting? Do you encourage stage managers to act so they know what that is about?

I do. In my summer stock years, whenever they needed a cop or a butler or a night watchman (my definitive role in *The Philadelphia Story*), I would come up from the shop, throw on a costume and jump in. For me it served to give me a greater appreciation for the process that actors need to go through and is certainly helpful when it comes time for understudy or replacement rehearsals when often times you need to play a character or two.

Is there anything about *Godot* or stage management that you would like to say just in closing?

Well, as I think we have seen here today, it is not an easy occupation to describe. I think sometimes the very title of stage manager doesn't quite cut it. As the technology of shows gets more complicated, the job gets more complicated. But the stage manager (by any name) is still an integral member of any production team and I am extremely proud to be a member of the relatively small group of men and women who can call it their profession. After 11 Roundabout shows in as many years, I still get a huge kick out of being in the room on the first day of rehearsal and looking around at many of the top actors, directors, designers and technicians working today. It is not everyone who can say they really do work at the top of their industry. That, ladies and gents, is still very cool. 

The

EXISTENCE

Language

Vocabulary

Absurdism: philosophy, often translated into art forms, holding that humans exist in a meaningless, irrational universe and that any search for order by them will bring them into direct conflict with this universe; an act or instance of the ridiculous.

Caryatids: A supporting column sculptured in the form of a draped female figure.

Charnel house: a house or place in which the bodies or bones of the dead are deposited.

Dadaism: A counter-culture movement protest against institutions and ideologies believed to have influenced World War I, Dada heavily influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher. With its revolutionary ideas, Dada followers targeted language; filling productions with nonsensical dialogues, “noise” poems and chanting.

Dudeen: A short tobacco pipe

Existentialism: A philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one’s acts.

Fob: A small pocket at the front waistline of a man’s trousers or in the front of a vest, used especially to hold a watch.

Impertinent: intrusive or presumptuous, as persons or their actions; insolently rude; uncivil; not pertinent or relevant; irrelevant, inappropriate, incongruous, absurd, trivial, or silly.

Indefatigable: incapable of being tired out; not yielding to fatigue; untiring.

The Macon Country: (pronounced Mah-CAWN) in the Burgundy area of France, it is a lively city and busy port located on the west bank of the Saone River. The area’s vineyards are grown into the vast uplands and harvests grapes that makes the area renowned for it’s wine.

Mandrakes: a southern European plant having greenish-yellow flowers and a branched root. which was once believed to have magical powers because its root resembles the human body.

Mollify: to calm in temper or feeling; soothe or pacify; to lessen in intensity or temper; to reduce the rigidity of; soften

Pyrenees: A mountain range of southwest Europe extending along the French-Spanish border from the Bay of Biscay to the Mediterranean Sea.

Supplication: To ask for humbly or earnestly, as by praying; begging.

Surrealism: Promoted disorder, intuition and chance, they rejected realism and integrated the fantastic during the 1910s Surrealism tried to tap into irrational and imaginative forces like that of dreams and desires, and the freedom of children to “transcend the mundane surface realities” and reach the powerful forces of the unconscious. In combining black humor and “violent lyricism” Surrealism played with language and was a movement that touched most of the absurdist playwrights.

Zenith: The upper region of the sky; also -high point, summit, culmination.

Resources

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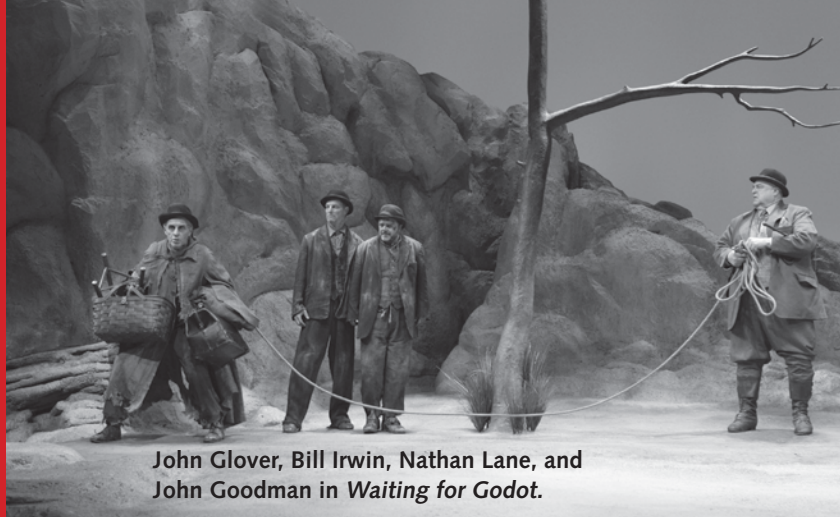
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John Glover

ACTIVITIES TO EXPLORE THE EXISTENCE OF GODOT



John Glover, Bill Irwin, Nathan Lane, and John Goodman in *Waiting for Godot*.

Before you see the play:

1. What does the title suggest to you?
2. When you are waiting for someone think about the emotions you experience.
 - a. Choose a partner to work with during this exercise.

Choose a situation where you'd have to wait for someone to show up.

- i. Identify where you are. What does it look like? What's in the space?
 - b. Decide what each one of you wants from the person on whom you are waiting.
 - c. Using a single sheet of paper, taking turns with writing your own lines of dialogue create a short scene that expresses the emotions you feel while waiting.
3. Did you decide to leave or to continue waiting? Why?

While watching the play:

1. Notice how Estragon (Gogo) and Vladimir (Didi) are different and how that affects their relationship.
2. Some theatre experts believe that Gogo represents the body and Didi represents the mind. Notice each of the actor's behavior, do you agree with this statement or not? Why?
3. How do they support each other?
4. Notice if any of their emotions are similar to the ones in your scene about waiting.
5. How are their choices similar or different from the ones you and your partner made in your scene?
6. Why do you think the characters repeat dialogue throughout this play? How does the meaning change with each repetition?
7. What are some examples of symbolism you observe during the play?
 - a. What do you notice on the set?
 - b. In the costumes?

After watching the play:

Based upon your experience of seeing *Waiting For Godot* here are some activities to connect with the play going experience:

1. Consider what you think Lucky's speech was about? What were some of the words or phrases that struck out to you?
 - a. Play brainstorm speakeasy as a class:
 - i. Identify topics that are important to your or your class about our contemporary society.
 - ii. Choose teams: Each team has two minutes to speak about at least three of the topics.
 - iii. Reflect on what you heard: What topic was most important to everyone? How do you know? What were some of the points of view you heard expressed in the game?
2. Lucky and Pozzo appear twice in the play. They are greatly changed the second time we see them. What do you think happened to them to cause those changes? Write the scene that explains what happened to Lucky and Pozzo to transform them as we see them in the second act.
3. What do you think Lucky would say if he could speak in the second act? Write a monologue that expresses what he would want us to know if he could speak.
4. As the curtain comes down on the play what do you think happens to Gogo and Didi the next day? Does Godot ever come?
 - a. Write the next scene in the play. What happens if he comes or if he doesn't? What will happen to Didi and Gogo?

Send your work to Roundabout, and we'll share it with the artists who created *Waiting for Godot*.

Mail to: Education Department
Roundabout Theatre Company
231 West 39th Street, Suite 1200
New York, NY 10018

Or email to: education@roundabouttheatre.org

When you get to the theatre...

BELOW ARE SOME HELPFUL TIPS FOR MAKING YOUR THEATRE-GOING EXPERIENCE MORE ENJOYABLE.

TICKET POLICY

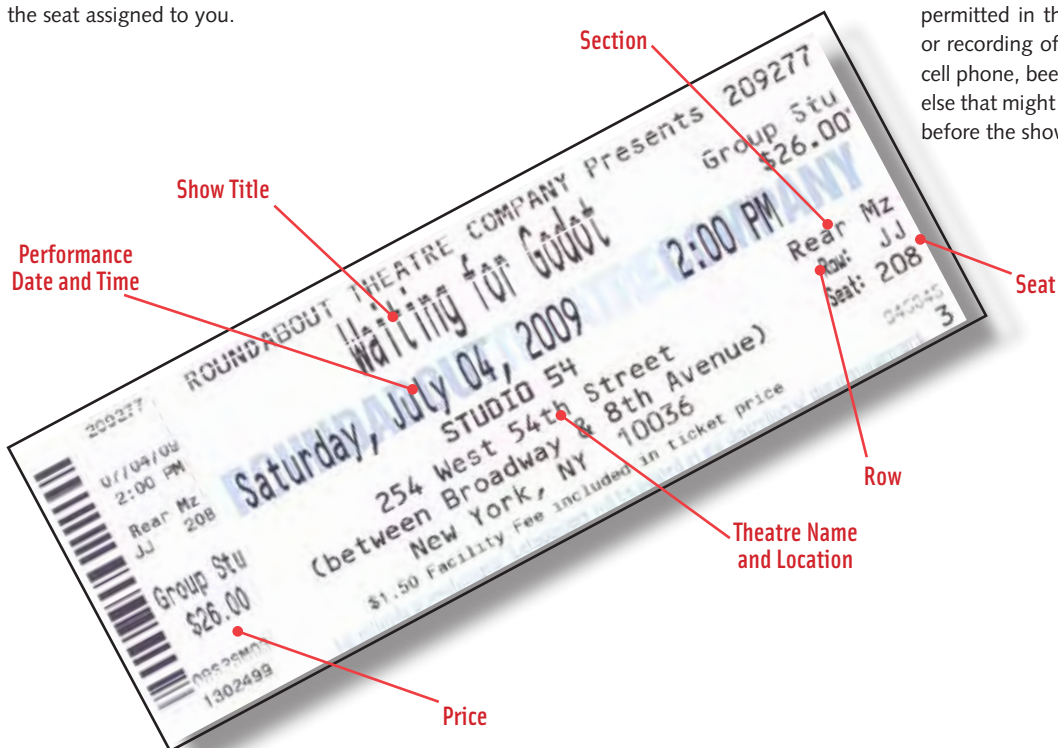
As a student participant in Producing Partners, Page To Stage or Theatre Access, you will receive a discounted ticket to the show from your teacher on the day of the performance. You will notice that the ticket indicates the section, row and number of your assigned seat. When you show your ticket to the usher inside the theatre, he or she will show you where your seat is located. These tickets are not transferable and you must sit in the seat assigned to you.

PROGRAMS

All the theatre patrons are provided with a program that includes information about the people who put the production together. In the "Who's Who" section, for example, you can read about the actors' roles in other plays and films, perhaps some you have already seen.

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

As you watch the show please remember that the biggest difference between live theatre and a film is that the actors can see you and hear you and your behavior can affect their performance. They appreciate your applause and laughter, but can be easily distracted by people talking or getting up in the middle of the show. So please save your comments or need to use the rest room for intermission. Also, there is no food permitted in the theatre, no picture taking or recording of any kind, and if you have a cell phone, beeper, alarm watch or anything else that might make noise, please turn it off before the show begins.



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