

In Godot we trust

As major new productions of Samuel Beckett's masterpiece *Waiting for Godot* open in Britain and on Broadway, **David Smith** argues that the playwright's genius lay in creating a work that, more than half a century on, still speaks to audiences, particularly in troubled times. Opposite, we speak to those involved in some landmark productions

Two homeless old men wait in a bare road with a single tree. They are in no particular time or place – nowhere and everywhere. Over two days they argue, get bored, clown around, repeat themselves, contemplate suicide, and wait. They're waiting for the one who will never come. They're waiting for Godot.

Vivian Mercier wrote in the *Irish Times* in 1956 that Samuel Beckett had "written a play in which nothing happens, twice". Fifty-six years after its first performance, a watershed in world drama at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris, nothing is still happening, twice – twice over. A new UK production of *Waiting for Godot*, with Sir Ian McKellen as Estragon and Patrick Stewart as Vladimir, began a national tour last week at the Malvern Festival Theatre and comes to the West End at the end of April. And an American revival, with Nathan Lane and Bill Irwin as the time-torn tramps, opens next month on Broadway.

Does theatre have a purpose when the world's financial system is in downturn, or rather recession, or rather depression? There may be a play to come that will dissect the avarice, incompetence and structural causes of the malaise. But often the most eloquent response is the most indirect. *Man on Wire*, the Oscar-winning documentary about Philippe Petit's high-wire walk between New York's Twin Towers in 1974, has been described as the most powerful 9/11 film yet made, precisely because it does not mention 9/11.

Waiting for Godot seems to have a unique resonance during times of social and political crisis. As a modernist existential meditation it can at first appear bleak: "They give birth astride of a grave," says Pozzo. "The light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." But it is also funny and poetic, and reveals humanity's talents for stoicism, companionship and keeping going.

Now it resonates again. Another towering human structure, capitalism, is trembling at the foundations. Where there was certainty, there is now doubt and angst. Consumerism is on the retreat, and the acquisition of material objects is a dead end. It is a moment for introspection and stripping down to bare essentials. There is no drama more stripped down and essential than *Godot*, whose mysteries Beckett refused to elucidate beyond "the laughter and the tears".

"It speaks to us in extremis," says Sean Mathias, director of the new UK production. "It's perfect timing to do it here because many individuals are affected by what's happening in the world with economics. The ground is shifting – for some dramatically, for others subtly – underneath our feet. When you have to rearrange your outside life – people worrying about their lack of money and all those kinds of things – it can't not have an effect on your inside life."

"This play speaks about what it is to be human at the most animal and spiritual level, so subtly that it's like a big beautiful poem or piece of music. It doesn't lecture you, it's not polemic, it's not coarse. It's written so subtly that its lessons are almost biblical. It teaches you in a very gentle, intelligent way and I think it's very relevant today."

Landmark productions of the play



Tramps for our times: Ian McKellen, left, and Patrick Stewart in rehearsals for the new production.

in the past half century have touched a nerve, or been designed as a catalyst for change, in troubled societies all over the world. An all-black *Godot* in South Africa implied a wait for the end of apartheid. Productions in California's San Quentin prison and in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina captured a restless present and yearning for renewal.

Susan Sontag's production in a Sarajevo under siege in 1993 was dubbed "Waiting for Clinton". She said simply: "Beckett's play, written over 40 years ago, seems written for, and about, Sarajevo." There were objections that its world view was too pessimistic for people already in despair. She replied that not everyone, even in a war zone, craves popcorn escapism. "In Sarajevo, as anywhere else, there are more than a few people who feel strengthened

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and consoled by having their sense of reality affirmed and transfigured by art."

It might have been about Sarajevo, but it is about all the other places, too. Like Shakespeare, *Godot* is a receptacle into which audiences can pour their preoccupations. Even a great work such as Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* operates on two discernible levels: the literal story of the Salem witch trials, and the metaphorical narrative of McCarthyism. But Beckett is taut and unyielding, his art abstract, his conclusion opaque. An explanation would be an intrusion. Who, or what, is Godot? Whatever you want it to be.

Sir Tom Stoppard, who first saw it in Bristol in the late 1950s, says: "The play is a universal metaphor precisely because it wasn't designed as being a metaphor for anything in particular. The true subject matter of *Waiting for Godot* is that it's about two tramps waiting for somebody. It's not the case that the true subject matter is in the metaphor. Plays which are designed to be a metaphor for particular correlatives have, I imagine, a very short lifespan. And then of course, there's the writing and the humour."

"On one level *Godot* is like a long poem. Certainly it doesn't need to gain strength from its time and place; it has its own strength. It's one of the few plays that

really stand the test of time because there's just nothing spare in it. When plays and books go off like fruit, the soft bits go first. *Godot* doesn't really have any of those."

If it is like anything, *Godot* is a piece of music, reaching beyond the literal. Ronald Pickup, who worked with Beckett in the 1970s ("it was like meeting Mandela or Gandhi"), recalls: "One of the great discoveries I had working with him was his huge sense of rhythm. When we follow the sheer music – because, along with everything else, he's a great poet – the play flows and eddies and twists and turns and stops and sweeps quite beautifully."

Pickup, who plays Lucky in the new British production, adds: "It is simply so tuned to people in any situation, whether in Sarajevo, or here in London in the recession, or in Zimbabwe with everything that's going on there. There is so much to instantly relate to without even having to make an effort. It leaps off the stage and is hugely emotional and compassionate and funny. You forget it's a metaphor and just engage with it."

Beckett stayed true to his writing. A recurring theme emerges from those who worked him: he had no wish to "explain" the metaphor, to clear up the mystery of Godot's identity. Sir Peter Hall, who directed the British premiere at the Arts Theatre in 1955, and has come back to the play four times since, recalls: "He didn't operate like that. It was practicalities: he would say, Estragon and Vladimir are like a married couple who've been together too long, they grow old day by day. If you said to Sam, 'What does that line mean?' he'd take the book and say, 'What does it say?' That's quite a good thing for a dramatist to do."

"It's fairly obvious *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."

Director Anthony Page, currently rehearsing the new Broadway *Godot*, worked with Beckett when he directed Britain's first uncensored version of the play in 1964. "Beckett didn't want to theorise," he remembers. "He said he'd written the play without knowing what was going to come next. He just wrote it, hearing these voices. He simply wanted to communicate the tone of the voice, what was happening between the characters. He said that the laughter and the tears were all that mattered."

Neither of the new productions will attempt to spin a directorial interpretation around the crashes of the City or Wall Street. For the text is the perfect statement of futility and redemption, of lying in the gutter but looking at the stars, and audiences who seek the pattern of their own fears will find it for themselves. A hundred years from now, the recession, it must be hoped, will be in the history books, but Vladimir and Estragon will still be on a stage somewhere – still waiting for Godot.

Waiting for Godot is on tour until 25 April then at Theatre Royal Haymarket, London SW1, from 30 April. Details at waitingforgodottheplay.com



BERLIN, 1975

Samuel Beckett, left, during rehearsals for *Waiting for Godot* with Horst Bollmann (front) and Stefan Wigger, at the Schiller Theatre, Berlin, 1975. AKG-Images/Ullstein Bild

SARAJEVO, 1993

‘Every single day we thought that our Godot would come’

Haris Pasovic
Produced Susan Sontag’s staging in the besieged Sarajevo in 1993. Now director, East West Theatre Company in Bosnia.

“Susan Sontag came to Sarajevo in 1993; her son David was reporting on the war, and she offered to help in whatever way she could. Her decision to stage *Waiting for Godot* helped make history: the production brought so much media attention to Sarajevo. Ultimately it was the journalists who saved Sarajevo and the production of *Waiting for Godot* played a role in that. At one point the *Washington Post* referred to the play as “Waiting for Clinton” and we were very happy with this connection.

“Susan initially wanted to stage Beckett’s *Happy Days*, but when I explained that what we were doing in Sarajevo was waiting, she decided on



Sarajevo, 1993: Sontag, centre at the back, with the cast. Paul Lowe/PANOS

Waiting for Godot. At that time, people really thought it was just a matter of time before somebody would rescue the city. It was outrageous that, at the end of the 20th century, on live TV, the world could see daily bombardments of the city, and do nothing. Every single day we thought that our Godot would come and every night we understood that he wouldn’t.

“The production featured three different couples playing Vladimir and Estragon, one all-female, one all-male

and one mixed. I liked this staging because it suggested that the couple’s plight was universal. People risked their lives coming five to 10km on foot to the theatre because there was no public transport. We performed by candlelight because there was no electricity. Trying to find candles was a major problem, as was the malnourishment of all of our actors. Susan stole rolls for them from her hotel breakfast. Yes, it was a struggle to put on the show, but it brought our message to the world.” **IMOGEN CARTER**

NEW ORLEANS, 2007



Kyle Manzay, left, and Wendell Pierce (aka Bunk from *The Wire*) amid the debris of flooded homes in the New Orleans production.

‘We performed the play in the ninth ward, surrounded by miles of destroyed homes. The show allowed us to grieve and to rebuild’

Wendell Pierce
Starred as Vladimir in the Classical Theatre of Harlem’s outdoor production in New Orleans, 2007.

“My family lost everything to Hurricane Katrina, so when Christopher McElroen, the director of the Classical Theatre of Harlem, asked if I was interested in performing in his production of *Waiting for Godot* – set in post-Katrina New Orleans – I immediately accepted. Chris had seen a photograph of two guys floating on a door during the floods which immediately reminded him of Gogo and Didi [Estragon and Vladimir] and inspired him to direct *Waiting for Godot*.

“Initially, we performed on a New York

stage flooded by 15,000 gallons of water. Later, in collaboration with the artist Paul Chan and Creative Time, we mounted the production outdoors in New Orleans’s ninth ward, surrounded by square miles of homes that had been destroyed. The show was not only commemorative but also cathartic; it allowed us to grieve and to rebuild.

“People identified Godot as FEMA [the Federal Emergency Management Agency] in its lack of response to the crisis. But we knew that Godot also symbolised our very existence which had disappeared; our neighbourhood was no longer there, and we feared it would not return. After Katrina, many survivors were asking ‘Should I give up?’ and *Waiting for*

Godot offered the answer, ‘We must go on.’

“I remember another pertinent line from the play: ‘At this moment, at this place and time, all mankind is us; let us do something while we have the chance.’ The audience’s reaction was stunned silence – it was like a prayer recited on hallowed ground. A classic such as *Waiting for Godot* speaks across generations directly to each audience member.

“We’ve lost an understanding of the role that the arts can play in our communities, but years from now, when kids ask ‘What did you do when we lost the city of New Orleans?’, I’ll feel proud to say I performed a play that gave hope to thousands of people and honoured those we had lost.” **IC**

FRANCE, 1991

‘You are very limited in your possibilities, because Beckett specified how to play it’

Bruno Bussagol
Directed a rare all-female production for Brut de Béton Theatre Company at the Avignon festival in 1991

“I put *Waiting for Godot* on the same level as the Greek plays: it asks questions of theatre that are extremely difficult to resolve. I chose only to use women in my 1991 production for Avignon because I was convinced that female actresses introduce a range of acting possibilities that is broader than for men. When putting on *Waiting for Godot*, you are very limited in your possibilities, because Beckett specified how it should be played. So using just female actresses was an enormous step. Perhaps, because the actor is a woman, there is an anomaly that is consistent

with Beckett, a writer who is completely unexpected and unpredictable. The Beckett estate said I didn’t have the right to do it, so then it became a question of principle. For me, no writer can impose his view on a production. So I launched a case to put the production on in Avignon and it was the first time in the history of the French theatre that a director has had his production upheld by the law.

“The play was boycotted by the press, but the audience was full and no one walked out or complained; there was lots of applause. I believe that I was truer to Beckett than lots of other directors. I wanted to try to recapture the atmosphere of when *Waiting for Godot* was first put on. There was a real shock, an intellectual shock to the public.” **ALLY CARNWATH**



Brigitte Marion as Pozzo in the all-female French production of 1991.

SAN QUENTIN, 1962 & 63

‘My cell partner came back, high on the experience’

Rick Cluchey
Played Vladimir in two productions in San Quentin Prison in 1962 and 1963. One of the pioneers of theatre in prisons, after parole he worked with Beckett. Now runs Theatre in Prisons

In 1957, the San Francisco Actors Workshop put on *Waiting for Godot* in San Quentin Prison. It was highly anticipated – the Actors Workshop was probably the greatest American theatre at the time. I was an inmate, but I didn’t see it: my sentence was life without parole for a violent armed robbery, and they wouldn’t unlock my cell after dark. My cell partner came back from seeing it; he kept me up all night, everyone was high on the experience. I remember him saying “everyone was puzzled until one guy came in with a rope around his neck and another guy whipping him and guess what his name was? Lucky!” That spoke to everyone in the audience.

In 1962, we set up the San Quentin Drama Workshop and staged *Waiting for Godot* in a boxing ring. Having the most wicked of sentences, I needed something to relieve the despair.

In prison, you’re in limbo, trapped in the greyness of your own uniform of flesh. *Waiting for Godot* resonates with the incarcerated because it depicts a vacant landscape and characters imprisoned within themselves, but with great humour. Beckett approved of our work at San Quentin and we later became great friends. He told me that, when he fled from the Gestapo with his wife in 1941, they spent many nights in abandoned prisons, and I’m sure that influenced his work in some way: empty prisons are full of ghosts. **IC**

SOUTH AFRICA, 1976

‘I wanted to use the show to depict my own struggle under apartheid’

Benjy Francis
Directed and starred as Pozzo in an all-black production at the Market Theatre, Cape Town, 1976. Now director of Afrika Cultural Centre, Johannesburg.

“Before I staged *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett had refused to let anyone perform his play in South Africa because he was so opposed to apartheid. When I began work on the show, I became the Market Theatre’s first resident black director; until then, blacks couldn’t work in the theatre and mixed-race audiences were forbidden.

“I deliberately had an all-black cast, but I didn’t intend to create the “Waiting for the end of apartheid Godot”: I wanted to depict my own struggle under apartheid. The desolation and boredom in *Waiting for Godot* was reminiscent of what we were going through in the Seventies. Political movements were banned and there was a conspiracy of silence that echoed in Beckett’s work.

“It was very difficult for me to walk on stage as Pozzo with a whip and my slave, Lucky, tethered to me by ropes. That image was very provocative in South Africa, as it graphically depicted the master-servant relationship engendered by apartheid. In fact, I wasn’t even supposed to play Pozzo, but the original actor couldn’t leave home following the Soweto riots of June 1976, which saw hundreds killed and postponed the opening of my show by several weeks.

“Ultimately, *Waiting for Godot* is a very positive play, which talks about the resilience of human beings. The tree was central to my staging; when it started to sprout leaves in act two, that sent a powerful message to oppressed people – it suggested new life and resolution, an image of hope against all the desolation. Every night, the show received standing ovations. Its impact was monumental: *Waiting for Godot* provided a powerful metaphor of our struggle which allowed me to get past the censor and speak to my people.” **IC**