

“Nothing to be done”: Thoughts on Talawa Theatre Company’s *Waiting for Godot*

by Dr. Patrick Duggan

“You know the story of...?”

I’m about 15; I’m sitting in a theatre in Belfast watching a play that seems to have gone on interminably and in which, as far as I’m concerned, absolutely nothing has happened. I am bored and I want to leave. The interval comes (I hope it’s the end) and as I exit the auditorium the woman who has been sitting beside me says to her companion, “it’s about us, about Belfast and Northern Ireland. It’s so powerful...”. I think she’s mad. But then, I’m only 15 and despite going to school in Belfast at a time when ‘political instability’ doesn’t quite cut it as description of what was taking place in the province and city at the time, I am pretty content with my lot in life. My drama teacher, Joan McPherson, tells me I’ll ‘get’ *Godot* one day.

A decade later and I’m sitting in a theatre in London watching a play that seems to have gone on interminably and in which, as far as I’m concerned, everything has happened. I’m bored and captivated in the same moment. The interval comes (I’m looking forward to the second half) and as I exit the auditorium I turn to my companion and say, “it could be about me”. I’m 25 years old and despite living comfortably and not having too many cares in the world, I’m doing a job that is interminably dull and I’m waiting for something more exciting, something more ‘me’. I’m waiting for my own *Godot*.

“Getting” *Godot*?

Estragon: [*Giving up again.*] Nothing to be done.

Vladimir: [*Advancing with short, stiff strides, legs wide apart.*] I’m beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I’ve tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven’t tried everything. And I resumed the struggle. [*He broods, musing on the struggle. Turning to Estragon.*] So there you are again.

Estragon: Am I?

‘In *Waiting for Godot*, the fact that nothing significant happens is central to what the play is about. To some it suggests that there is no ultimate meaning or purpose to life, that, in the real world as much as on the stage, we while away the time thinking, arguing, struggling and looking for a truth which will never arrive. Meanwhile, Beckett refused to admit that his play was about anything at all.’
(Shepherd and Wallis 1998: 74)

Waiting for Godot, the play where nothing happens. Twice. This descriptor has been common currency since Vivian Mercier put it in his *Irish Times* review of the play in 1956, and while it is not without foundation there is much more in and to this play. Discussion of what it might be ‘about’ have raged since its first production in Paris in 1953 and plethora literature exists on the play.

In 1965 Martin Esslin argued in his influential book *Theatre of the Absurd* that the work of Beckett (and others) flouted the standards by which drama has been judged for many centuries. This, he claimed, set down a challenge to the preconceived norms of

theatrical endeavor for centuries previously as well as being a provocation to theatre audiences expecting to find a safe, well-made play:

If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold a mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings. (Esslin 1983: 21 - 22)

He goes on to state that despite all evidence pointing towards the possibility that Beckett and others were writing what we might term bad-plays, they worked; they have had an effect at social, political and, perhaps above all, theatrical levels. This effect is still being felt today and despite the play's complexity *Waiting for Godot* maintains its place as one of the most important plays written in the last 100 years, beguiling, confusing and intriguing audiences around the world. Indeed, in 1999 *Waiting for Godot* was voted the most significant English language play of the 20th century in a poll of 800 theatre professionals and journalists conducted by the Royal National Theatre.

The play's acknowledged importance is testament to its enduring capacity to speak from residual structures of feeling (*vide* Raymond Williams) to the dominant one(s). At this time of financial – what, depression? Stasis? Apocalypse (no, it's not *Endgame*)? *Waiting for Godot* seems to have found particular purchase again if the number of professional productions produced in the last 4 years are anything to go by. The play seems explicitly to speak to the contemporary sense of stasis, or crisis, that we might argue the West is currently occupying at a fiscal level. Indeed, *Godot* might be seen as reflexive of the ontological realities of many peoples' existence at the moment as they wait for their own personal Godots who are always (and seemingly forever) 'come[ing] tomorrow... without fail'.

Of course, we may not support the idea of the play as a sort of cultural mirror to the existential crisis that might be seen to have been caused by the near collapse of global capitalism. However, while it is not a play of popcorn escapism its slight esotericism and abstraction enable it to function as a space into which audience preoccupations can be focused for contemplation and reflection in order, as Susan Sontag suggests audiences have a want to do, '[to] feel strengthened and consoled by having their sense of reality affirmed and transfigured by art' (Sontag 1994: 48).

And, of course, there is hope in the play – 'the tree has four or five leaves'...

Talawa's *Godot*

'What do you think an all Black cast could bring to *Waiting for Godot*?' This is the question I was asked when approached to write this piece. I had lots of initial reactions. At first I thought about discussing the way in which the play can speak to the history of slavery in Britain, but this seemed both slightly obvious and also to be imposing something onto the script. Admittedly the Pozzo – Lucky relationship certainly speaks to

this history and while, as Benjy Francis said of his own all black production in Cape Town in 1976, the image of Pozzo with a whip entering with his tethered 'slave' Lucky 'was very provocative in South Africa, as it graphically depicted the master-servant relationship engendered by apartheid' (ctd. in Smith 2009: online), I don't particularly feel this is what an all black production in the contemporary British epoch is exploring.

It might also, it occurred to me, be possible to theorize the production as a response to the growing sense of *ennui* and disenfranchisement that palpably pervades newspaper reports about the daily grind of everyday life. I might then have gone on to propose that the work could be seen as a statement about the black British diaspora's wait for equality within wider social discourse. And perhaps then to look at the production as a similar statement by Talawa about the place of black British theatre within the wider theatrical landscape (see Cumper in Igweonu 2013).

Or, might it be that an all black cast would highlight a set of ideological, political and social concerns which seem constantly to be circulating in the news media – institutional racism, immigration, disintegration of communities, youth violence, stop-and-search policing? Well, perhaps; but I think it might be much more simple than this.

In a recent lecture on art, ethics and politics with some MA students, I was discussing the fact that, as Raymond Williams tells us, 'culture is ordinary'. Cultural practices are an every day fact and thus art is not a rarefied, complex beast that is the preserve of the educated élite and the bourgeoisie. This, it occurs to me, offers a sideways route into answering what an all black cast brings to *Godot*, which is (somewhat appropriately given the play) that it brings precisely nothing.

I am of course being deliberately disingenuous here; the production will invariably *do* something in/to/with the wider socio-political landscape in which it is being produced. But I doubt – and I hope – that this is less to do with the fact of its 'whiteness' or its 'blackness' than with its direction and the artistic accomplishment of the production. *Godot* is a malleable play and while Beckett was careful to insist that it was not *about* anything in particular, in performance it cannot fail but comment on the particular conditions of the time and environment in which it is made. The semiotic conditions of staging the piece with an all black cast will have an impact upon the reading made by the audience of the theatrical text, and as such it may be that many of the initial readings I proffer above will come to the fore. But principally it is the play and the quality of the production that should come through; the possibility of it's speaking to the contemporary epoch and to recent events in Britain would be, I should think, natural readings of this play were it staged by another company with an all white cast. Importantly, though, one thing that an all black cast can and should highlight is that it is entirely credible and possible to cast a black actor in a role in a canonical play that is traditionally associated with white performers without fundamentally changing the meaning and impact of that piece.

The play's malleability is something that David Bradby comments upon when he suggests that it has the 'ability to speak, like a parable, to [the] particular conditions' of any given social context but especially to those living within 'oppressive circumstances' (Bradby 2001: 162). And he goes on to point out that the political force, or potential force, of the play is often overlooked because it can be seen as a 'safe bet', a classic play that will pull in the punters so that they can wallow in the glory of this important classic and thus gaining some cultural capital for themselves. Despite this, the piece still

holds provocative potential (cf. Bradby 2001: 162 – 179) and undoubtedly the best productions of it will in some way engage that potential. Elin Diamond has convincingly proposed that it is clear that *Godot* is a play that explores political behaviors (Pozzo establishes a connection with Vladimir and Estragon because he recognizes their mutual human-ness and then they proceed to collude in oppressing and abusing Lucky). However, she goes on to insist that to assume one interpretation or allegorical reading of *Godot* (whatever it may be) is fundamentally to misunderstand its power (cf. Diamond 2000). So while Talawa's 'all black' production may offer a mirror to the 'state of things' now, it is doing so because of its dramaturgical structure and the conditions of the context in which it is staged and not because of its all black cast.

Vladimir: Well? Shall we go?

Estragon: Yes, let's go.

[They do not move]

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