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The Globalization of Beckett's Godot

Enoch Brater

When, in the second act of Waiting for Godot, Samuel Beckett's landmark play that premiered in Paris in 1953, Didi complains to his sidekick about not wasting any more time in "idle discourse," he delivers a stage speech rich in the implications for this work's range and accessibility:

Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we are personally needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late!

Moments later, Gogo, not to be outdone, will prove similarly universalist in his approach to the matter at hand. Pozzo, transformed and now "as blind as Fortune," and Lucky, now dumb, lie sprawled on Beckett's stage floor (and it should be noted that not every dramatist would risk placing actors in such a compromising position). Pozzo cries out for help, and he will do so more than once. On this stage space there's always time to
sparing time to fart, or so it seems; Gogo’s game plan is to call the fallen protagonists by all the names he can think of until he hits upon the right ones. A distraught Pozzo replies to the first two that come to mind, Cain, and then Abel. “He’s all humanity,” a delighted Gogo cries out in a rare instance of self-congratulation. Whether or not an agonized Pozzo is responding to the name-game, or merely repeating his frustration, is far less important than the universal reading Estragon gives to his line.

In *Waiting for Godot* Beckett’s characters move very deftly from their local situation to the global. Trapped in a manufactured tableau that always seems to yearn for a world that is both itself and yet larger than itself, they are, in fact, the first to identify their stage experience as emblematic. How quickly Beckett’s “meremost minimum” accumulates resonances far beyond the unprepossessing scenography of rock and tree and a pair of boots that do not fit. Sterile branches sprout a few meager leaves and suddenly the tree of knowledge, that biblical agent of doom, becomes a brief sign of renewal. Late in the play Gogo and Didi mythologize the lone tree, classically, as a willow (“no more weeping”)—to which these characters just might return to hang themselves, Judas-like, in some unspecified tomorrow.

The wide applicability of so many moments imagined in this play has been from the beginning the source of its appeal as Beckett’s work continues to travel from one national stage to the next. Even in its original manuscript form, inscribed in a schoolboy’s lined notebook and which this Irishman wrote in French, not in his native English (he complicated the matter by translating the play into English himself), *En attendant Godot* displays a perspective that is pan-European and everywhere internationalist. The protagonists are Slavic Vladimir, French/Spanish Estragon, Italian Pozzo, and English Lucky (Beckett once said “perhaps” he was called “Lucky” because he had no expectations). On the first few pages of Beckett’s *Godot* notebook Vladimir is Jewish “Lévy”; when questioned by Pozzo he gives his name without hesitation as Scottish/Irish/French “Macgrégor, André.” Gogo and Didi have previously been identified as “little brother” and “big brother” in at least one dialect of Chinese, not to mention the possible but unlikely Freudian references to “ego” and “id.” Taken as a whole, then, this cast of unlikely characters, to echo this play’s prophecies, may very well be intended to reflect Didi’s “all mankind” and Gogo’s “all humanity.”
Certainly within the European community Beckett’s play has traveled a well-documented path. Elmar Tophoven, a graduate student in Paris in 1953 when he was inspired by Roger Blin’s premiere production at the Théâtre de Babylone, was an early advocate and translator. Later that same year his Warten auf Godot played at the Zurich Schauspielhaus as well as on stages in his native Germany; he remained Beckett’s reliable and conscientious German voice for the rest of his life.\textsuperscript{7} Translations of En attendant Godot soon followed into the other major European languages; but it should be noted that as early as 1954 Luciano Mondolfo’s Aspettando Godot was produced in Rome at the Teatro di Via Vittoria (albeit in an unauthorized Italian), a full year before Peter Hall directed the first English version at the Arts Theatre Club in London.\textsuperscript{8}

More interesting, perhaps, especially in a study such as this on the globalization of Beckett’s Godot, is the fate of this signature play beyond its well-worn European borders. Alan Schneider, who was to become Beckett’s major director in the United States, offered an extremely colorful recollection of his own encounter with the original Left Bank production:

\begin{quote}
My French is just good enough to get me in and out of the American Express. Yet through the entire performance I sat alternately spellbound and mystified, knowing something terribly moving was taking place on that stage. When the highly stylized “moon” suddenly rose and night “fell” at the end of the first act, I didn’t have to understand French in order to react. And when, at the beginning of the second act, the once-bare tree reappeared with little green ribbons of leaves, that simple representation of rebirth affected me beyond reason. Without knowing exactly what, I knew that I had experienced something unique and something significant in modern theater. Godot had me in the beginnings of a grip from which I have never escaped.\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}

Although Schneider’s American Godot was not a success when it appeared in Miami in 1956, his subsequent Beckett productions, especially in the years from Happy Days through the short, haunting pieces of the 1970s and 1980s, marked the ascendency of the playwright’s reputation in the United States as the most significant and innovative European writer of his generation.\textsuperscript{10}

Elsewhere in the Americas, especially in Buenos Aires, Beckett was also, to quote his own Krapp, “getting known.”\textsuperscript{11} Although banned from performance by the right-wing Perón regime, Esperando a Godot first
appeared in Argentina in an unofficial, off-Corrientes workers' theater in the capital. Laura Cerrato further reports that the play also surfaced in university production, where student theater, in this case mercifully ignored and neglected, was not subject to the same imprimatur. Nor was the appearance of *Godot* in Argentina limited to an intellectual elite. The play achieved one of its most popular successes in the western town of Mendoza, near the Chilean border, where a poorly funded provincial theater presented the play before an audience of mostly agricultural workers. Since those early years of Beckett in 1950s Argentina there have been at least five major productions of *Godot* in mainstream Buenos Aires theater.  

But Buenos Aires and New York, where Alan Schneider's 1956 Miami *Godot* was revived on Broadway later the same year by Herbert Berghof, may not be the best sites from which to test the global scope of this play. Both cities, linked by their demography as well as in their cultural orientation to so many things from the other side of the Atlantic, could be counted on to receive with respect, if not downright enthusiasm, a new theater piece which was causing such a stir in major European capitals. A more telling example of the taste for *Godot* in America might be Herbert Blau's legendary San Francisco Actors' Workshop production, which he brought to the San Quentin maximum security prison in 1957. Here, indeed, as Martin Esslin famously relates in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, was an audience that knew from the start what it means to wait for something that never arrives.  

Outside of Europe and America, the appeal of Beckett's play has been in some ways even more profound. Yasunari Takahashi, who as translator and critic introduced Beckett to Japan, reimagined the play within the somber austerity of Noh theater, brilliantly demonstrating previously unforeseen parallels between drama East and West. The South African playwright, Athol Fugard, whose own work has been deeply influenced by Beckett, directed a nonwhite production of *Waiting for Godot* in 1962. In rehearsals he told his actors that

> Vladimir and Estragon must have read the accounts of the Nuremberg trials—or else they were at Sharpeville or were the first in at Auschwitz. Choose your horror—they know all about it.

Beckett later banned his work from performance in South Africa, as a protest against the hated policy of apartheid. The Nigerian playwright
Wole Soyinka, who learned a great deal about his craft in the late 1950s when he worked as playreader, writer, producer, and actor at the Royal Court Theatre in London, has been far more ambivalent in his reaction to *Waiting for Godot*. Yet his work, too, as Thomas R. Whitaker has observed, is everywhere motivated by the same “country road” that “runs across a bare stage from nowhere to nowhere”:

> The South African road through the great Karroo, that “awesome landscape of nothing” in which Fugard was born, became an insistent motif in his work as early as 1961 with *The Blood Knot*. And the hazardous Nigerian road, littered with carrion and automobile parts, has long been for Soyinka a place of both accidents and essence, ruled by the god of death and creativity and the first actor.\(^\text{16}\)

As the echoes of Beckett’s *Godot* in Fugard and Soyinka make clear, the latent political dimensions of the play have by no means been entirely unnoticed or ignored. In Europe, Brecht saw *Waiting for Godot* in strictly economic terms; he envisioned Pozzo as the cruel landowner in a system of oppression, Gogo and Didi as the struggling proletariat, and Lucky as collateral damage in a corrupt and unjust capitalist world. His student, Peter Palitsch, even tried to reconstruct the play on such strident Brechtian lines.\(^\text{17}\) But it was in Israel, where *Godot’s* prestige is so high that Shimon Levy has gone so far as to call Beckett “the ultimate Jewish writer,”\(^\text{18}\) that the most stunning political essence has been drawn from the play. I am of course referring to the famous Haifa Municipal Theatre production of *Waiting for Godot*, directed by Ilan Ronen in 1984. In this most controversial of all interpretations, Pozzo was played by an Israeli actor who spoke standard Hebrew; Gogo and Didi, on the other hand, were played by two Israeli Arab actors. They spoke their lines to Pozzo in heavily accented Hebrew, but their lines to one another in Palestinian Arabic.\(^\text{19}\) In the Middle East of today, it seems, as here and elsewhere, they are still waiting for *Godot*.

II

In the second part of this examination of “the globalization of Beckett's *Godot*” I would like to offer several tentative suggestions as to why this much-studied work continues to travel so well. In this respect *Waiting for Godot* is quite possibly unique in twentieth-century world drama; for it would be all but impossible to cite another example of a modernist
play whose reception and frame of reference have been so enduring and all-encompassing.

Let me begin by focusing on the strict economy with which Beckett sets the scene for his play. Theatrical minimalism, of course, does not begin with Godot, and it will not end with it, but few two-act plays exploit this stark dramatic style with such disarming efficiency and allure. "What"—precisely, to paraphrase Gogo—"is there to recognize" on Beckett's stage? The text doesn't offer much, other than "A country road. A tree. Evening." Assailing the set for a blind Pozzo's benefit, even Didi is forced to admit, "It's indescribable. It's like nothing. There's nothing. There'a a tree." Talk about "landscapes"! For once Gogo's complaints about the scenery are right on the money. This "Board"—and here Pozzo's suspicions ring true—could be anywhere, which is only to say that the scene is set both nowhere and everywhere. "Less is more" will later become the hallmark of Beckett's late style in the theater; but even in this early play "less" is strategic, dead center, and therefore always, theatrically speaking, in the right place. And so it really doesn't matter whether Gogo and Didi are in the Mâcon country or the Cackon country or any particular country at all. Place names are merely the words they use to satisfy their verbal yearning to find an ever-elusive home. They are, nonetheless, somewhere; that somewhere turns out to be a stage, the stage, any stage, every stage.

Stanley E. Gontarski has carefully illustrated "the intent of undoing" in Samuel Beckett's theater, the process of erasure through which the playwright rids his texts of intrusive and conspicuous referentiality. And while this holds true for much of Beckett's oeuvre, in Waiting for Godot there was always precious little to get rid of. A moon rises and falls, and in each act it does so in one fell swoop: "That's how it is on this bitch of an earth." Godot is far less parsimonious in its use of props, however; indeed, the play is literally cluttered with them: rope, basket, hats, pipe, carrot, chicken bones, vaporizer, watch, stool, turnip, napkin (my list is not complete). And though the characters relish the particularity of every object—a point of focus for every actor cast in this play ("now I chew the carrot," "now I spray the vaporizer")—for the audience each item is likely to be puzzling, even disturbing, in its uneasy provenance. Strictly speaking, objects, including Pozzo's pulverizer and his brand-name watch
and pipe, have an odd way of disappearing on this stage; and when they
do so they do so without explanation ("He's a scream," Gogo says of
Pozzo's mysterious trouble, "He's lost his dudeen"). More unsettling, per-
haps, is the strange notion that the props called into action in Godot
refuse to anchor the play with any certainty as to time or place. What we
find on "the board" of this stage is junk, the generic detritus of a world
that might be found and that could be found—give or take a carrot or
two—almost anywhere.

One of the great strengths of Waiting for Godot as a play for an inter-
national audience is the secure way Beckett structures his elsewhere with
a capital E. His scenography is anything but abstract. "This place" and
"this moment in [stage] time" have been programmed in advance for a
minimum of local specificity but a maximum of audience identification.
"All true grace is economical," Beckett told Peter Hall in 1976 when he
directed Peggy Ashcroft in his production of Happy Days at the National
Theatre in London.22 References to Ireland or to France, to "Testew and
Cunard," to the Eiffel Tower, or even to the Bonnelly whose name ap-
ppears in the French but not the English edition,23 rarely compromise our
understanding of what happens on this stage. In Godot we don't have to
know precisely where we are in order to recognize exactly where we are:
this concise and magnificent image of waiting transcends all national
boundaries.

The clarity of figurative means through which Godot reaches for
its wide audience may be best understood by contrasting its tone and at-
mosphere against the highly lyrical dynamics of other significant plays
in the twentieth-century repertory. Lorca quickly comes to mind. Yet
powerful works like Yerma, The House of Bernarda Alba, and Blood
Wedding, so startling in character conflict, psychological development,
and poetic language, depend on their particular cultural context to fulfill
their dramatic potential. Lorca's world is Spain, and more particularly
Andalusia. Even in translation, and most especially so in foreign pro-
duction, the geography of Lorca's representation must be explicit in
order for the drama to convey its vast resources of kinetic energy. Then,
and only then, can Lorca speak with astonishing immediacy to audi-
ences beyond the limits of an imagined experience of pointed cruelty
and systematic repression. "Cut her down!" insists the tyrannical
Bernarda Alba,
My daughter died a virgin. Take her to another room and dress her as though she were a virgin.... Tears when you're alone! We'll drown ourselves in a sea of mourning. She, the youngest daughter of Bernarda Alba, died in a virgin. Did you hear me? Silence, silence, I said. Silence!

Here silence will have an impact that is both chilling and absolute, and it will require no elaboration to discover the highly dramatic charge of Lorca's political undertow. If there was ever a case in the modern theater of the particular moving its audience to the general, this is it.

Drama in the United States has been similarly arrested—but also inspired—by the uniqueness of its own national character. Great plays like Eugene O'Neill's The Iceman Cometh and Long Day's Journey into Night, especially as could be seen in the 2003 Broadway revival by Robert Falls starring Vanessa Redgrave, Brian Dennehy, Philip Seymour Hoffman, and Robert Sean Leonard, depend for their stage life on a richly observed American context. So it is in the similarly staged world of Tennessee Williams, set not anywhere or everywhere but with feet planted, instead, in a seedy and sweaty American South. Machismo and decadence are by no means limited to Williams; but the paraphernalia and the puritanism, as lucid as they are local, certainly are. Even Death of a Salesman, whose theatrical naturalism Arthur Miller takes such pains to undermine as "a dream, a dream rising out of reality," never for one minute lets us forget the steady unravelling of what lurks on the vast underside of that American Dream—which in the case of Willy Loman turns out to be an ultimate, horrific nightmare, just as it has been for Blanche DuBois and Mary Tyrone. More contemporary playwrights, most particularly Sam Shepard and David Mamet, Tony Kushner and Suzan-Lori Parks, have been, if anything, even more attracted to regional settings; in their passionate and revelatory drama significant detail can be drawn upon to represent a crisis that is, strictly speaking, fundamentally American. Theirs is, too, a vision of particularity, even provincialism, but one in which anecdote has the power to unleash a cosmic—though not necessarily a global—dimension.

Earlier in this discussion of Beckett's Godot I mentioned Brecht, and here I would like to do so again in order to highlight some basic differences in the way their work is likely to affect a potential audience. Unlike Beckett's open "country road," so full of possibility that anything, including nothing, can happen, even twice, Brecht's theater is energized...
and in some sense even romanticized by historical determinism. In masterful plays like *Galileo* and *Mother Courage* the dialectic is the firm, secure filter through which we judge the action of the unfolding drama. Disdaining empathy—though in performance his plays never abandon that completely—Brecht offers in its place the epic dimensions of situation and observation. And yet, even in the most faithful renditions of Brecht, especially those like Giorgio Strehler’s *La Buona Anima di Setzuan*, performed with such integrity in the 1990s repertory at the Piccolo Teatro in Milan, there is always the sneaking suspicion that we know exactly where we are, both philosophically and geographically. *Galileo* situates us in Renaissance Italy, *Mother Courage* in the northern Europe of the Thirty Years’ War, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* in a Mafioso-turned-fascist Chicago. “Don’t rest easy, friends,” this last play concludes in a cauterizing curtain-line, “The bitch that bore him is in heat.” Even those works Eric Bentley called “parables for the theater,” *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *The Good Person of Setzuan*, set their high production values in a fixed, albeit exotic and heavily fictionalized, stage reality. There is, luxuriously, a great deal more to this stage machinery than an open “country road. A tree. Evening.” And Brecht, the un-Beckett, is anything but minimalist.

Many years after writing *Godot*, in his short play *Catastrophe*, Beckett was to have his director-protagonist descry this “craze for explicitation! Every i dotted to death!” For Beckett, as Dylan Thomas once observed, liked to think of himself as a “great enemy of obviousness.” Directors take note: the major peril in producing *Godot* is to put back in what has been so diligently left out. The text will fight you. This is, after all, the work of a writer whose favorite Latin phrase, even as a young man, was *ubi nihil valis, ibi nihil velis*: where there is nothing, I ought not to will anything—or some such. In *Waiting for Godot* this is something Beckett’s global audience seems to have understood almost viscerally.

III

It may be surprising to discover that a play like *Godot*, which continues to enjoy such a wide international and popular appeal, should also be a play with such a vast and—one might also say—esoteric allusive texture. In *Waiting for Godot* such direct and indirect references occur early and
often. Soon after the play begins we find Didi enveloped by a tough problem in biblical exegesis: why is it that only one of the four Evangelists speaks of one of the two thieves being saved? "The four of them were there," muses Didi, "—or thereabouts—and only one speaks of a thief being saved.... Why believe him rather than the others?" Didi, ever on the alert for an intellectual teaser, searches hopelessly (and hilariously) for the Gospel truth. But in this "little canter" about the so-called "Saviour" hermeneutics gets him nowhere, though it does help to pass the time (which the characters assure us would have passed anyway, only not so fast). "Who believes him" anyway? Gogo demurs, bursting Didi's academic bubble. "Everybody," according to Didi. "It's the only version they know." Conclusion: "People are bloody ignorant apes."

What does the spectator, depending on who that spectator is, make of this spirited exchange? When Beckett wrote Godot in his small study in Paris on the rue des Favorites he could count on his European audience getting the joke through their familiarity with a Christian frame of reference. But does the paradigm work equally well for Godot's global audience living elsewhere, outside the Christian world? Even in the United States, where most people at least nominally identify themselves as Protestant (with Roman Catholicism in second place), my students still need to consult the footnotes to figure out—"this is not boring you I hope"—just what in the world Didi is going on about.

I raise this point about the use of literary reference in Godot because I think it goes to the heart of the matter concerning the effect it is likely to have—or rather not have—on the popular acceptance of this play. Beckett reveals his modernist self through the steady stream of textual allusion inhabiting his stage dialogue. As in Pound and Eliot, as well as in his much venerated Joyce (the Joyce, that is, of Finnegans Wake), Beckett's allusive texture falls into predictable categories: biblical, as I have already mentioned, classical (as in the not quite accurate "Atlas, son of Jupiter!") and modern European, most particularly in the form of near-quotations from the French, German, and English writers he mastered as a student of modern languages at TCD (Trinity College, Dublin). Long before Gogo and Didi threaten to kill themselves by hanging, and fail to do so by the end of the play, we can experience with them a demanding curriculum that includes Verlaine, Dante, Shakespeare, Calderón, Shelley,
Virgil, Heraclitus, Yeats, Joyce, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Hölderlin, and Bishop Berkeley. It was just such flamboyance that prompted Vivian Mercier to tell Beckett that he made “Didi and Gogo sound as though they have Ph.Ds.” Beckett’s response? “How do you know they hadn’t?”  Unlike the earnest Americans, Pound and Eliot, but very much like his compatriot James Joyce, Beckett at least has a sense of humor about the literary game he’s playing (perhaps this comes with being Irish). This is the same Beckett who once parodied the notes to *The Waste Land* by providing a set of his own as addendum to his first published work, “Whoroscope” (pun very much intended). In his notes Beckett speculates on whether or not Descartes preferred his omelette cooked from freshly lain eggs or eggs hatched a few days earlier. So much for erudition and “the loutishness of learning.” “A very fair scholar I was too,” Beckett would later write in *From an Abandoned Work*. “No thought, but a great memory.”

What is certainly more to the point is that Godot’s literary allusions disturb, as Hugh Kenner once remarked, no surface texture. There is, in fact, little about Beckett’s quotation that either calls attention to itself or makes or breaks the scene. Under such circumstances, the Beckett actor might be well advised, as the British say, to play the line. Especially for the audience that experiences *Godot* in performance, for which it was always intended, such referentiality rarely, if ever, interferes with the spontaneity of the play’s momentum. If the audience “gets” the reference, that’s fine (and an additional finesse); if not, that’s fine, too. The play’s tempo is in either case ever-urging us “On!” This is also one of the principal reasons *Godot* captures its global audience so securely. For in *Godot* there are no barriers, intellectual or otherwise, only a highly evocative series of theatrical moments—or, as Krapp later puts it so succinctly (and here the irony is writ large), “Her moments ... my moments ... the dog’s moments.”

When Jan Jonson, then a young director who trained at the National Theater in Stockholm, agreed to direct *Waiting for Godot* in Kumla, to be cast by prisoners, his production was such a success that the Swedish government agreed to send the show on tour. One night, just before the curtain was supposed to rise on yet another country road, all the prisoners escaped. In Paris Jonson later told the playwright about the fate of
this very unlucky Godot; Beckett's reaction to this story was simple, but very much to the point: "Perhaps they had no time to wait."36

What so rich and various a history tells us, finally, about the globalization of Godot since its first appearance at a tiny pocket theater in Paris fifty years ago is that the only boundaries that matter for Beckett's play are the boundaries of a given stage. And on that stage, at any time and at any place, despite what Didi says—and maybe because of it—the only borders that matter are the borders, best kept open, of our own imagination. As the American director Alan Schneider once famously said, "Waiting for Godot is no longer only a play. It has become a state of mind."37 What audiences all over the world appreciate in Beckett's play is what they bring to it: the steady recognition that, for better or worse, this "state of mind" has now become somehow, somewhere global.

NOTES

1 Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot (New York: Grove, 1954), 51. Subsequent citations from this play in my text are taken from this edition.


6 For several early reactions and interpretations of the play, see Ruby Cohn, Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1962); and Casebook on 'Waiting for Godot', op. cit.

7 Why Beckett, 64.


9 Casebook on 'Waiting for Godot', 52.

10 See Alan Schneider, Entrances: An American Director's Journey (New York: Viking, 1986).


16 Whitaker, 214–15.


20 See Beyond Minimalism, op. cit.


22 Quoted in Why Beckett, 98.


Beckett uses this phrase, from the Belgo-Latin of Arnold Geulincx, in his novel *Murphy*, 178.

See Knowlson, 63–80.

*Why Beckett*, 75.


*Krapp's Last Tape*, 20.

Jan Jonson in conversation with this author, fall 1986.