

Waiting for Godot

by Samuel Beckett, directed by Andrew Traister

A Noise Within • October 6-December 12, 2007 (Opened, rev. 10/13e)
In repertory with The Winter's Tale, now running, and Dear Brutus, opening November 10

The half-century-old 'Waiting for Godot' has reached such status as a landmark of world drama that one imagines its premiere more like the unveiling of a Picasso or Pieta. But playwright Samuel Beckett did not pull the shroud off a fully formed work in 1953. He put his pants on one leg at a time like other playwrights, and launched his plays like them too: through a development process of trial and error.

As Johns Fletcher and Spurling write in their 'Beckett The Playwright,' "The text now available was established only after a number of versions had been tried out. The original French manuscript is still unpublished, but enough is known about it to show that it was a rather hesitant piece of work: Beckett was not sure what names to give his characters, for instance, and even whether or not to make Godot a real presence in the action by suggesting, for example, that Estragon and Vladimir have a written assignation with him, or that Pozzo himself is Godot failing to recognize those he has come to meet."

This effort to normalize 'Godot' somewhat is sparked by Andrew Traister's current staging at A Noise Within, where a solid cast and a great design provide easy access for anyone waiting for a 'Godot' that invites understanding and enjoyment. The dramatist was going to some trouble to make sweeping assertions about how we live and probably wanted as many people as possible to pick up on them. Traister and company help make 'Godot' fun and intriguing rather than foreboding and incomprehensible.

In the perfectly worn surroundings of the former Masonic Temple, Joel Svetow and Robertson Dean are Estragon ('Gogo') and Vladimir ('Didi'). Mitchell Edmonds creates a Pozzo that would make Mack Sennett weep in recognition. And, Mark Bramhall provides a perfectly ghastly Lucky – stabilized when saddled with baggage and bizarre when performing the life dance of one pitted at birth.

Michael C. Smith has given Traister and his actors a beautiful playing area: a rectangle of barren earth, raked and curling up to the distant vista, but not quite reaching it. This plot remains disconnected from the world.

The more enigmatic or ambiguous a work of art, the more we can stretch interpretation in a direction we choose. Sacred texts are the best examples of this, and indeed the sacred is part of Beckett's world. The Bible makes an early appearance with a citing within minutes. Whether 'Godot' is a direct reference to God, however, will never be answered. And it would only diminish the play to do so. However, it is clear that if Beckett had not wanted 'Godot' to be confused with 'God,' he would have given him another name.

The story of 'Waiting for Godot' is so simple that it is infinitely complex. A pair of friends with frustratingly fickle memories (echoed in Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern) have arrived at the desolate spot where they "were told" they must meet Godot. While Gogo is the more forgetful,



Joel Svetow
Robertson Dean

PHOTO CRAIG SCHWARTZ

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Didi is certain they have the appointment. He indicates that Godot is important, and infers that meeting him will be helpful. Or, perhaps it's that not meeting him will be a big problem. So they bide their time, clinging to their flimsy excuse for purpose, letting their hamster-wheel minds rattle away in confusion. Diversion arrives in the form of a man of position, Pozzo, driving an ancient servant, Lucky. Pozzo has purpose, but only so long as he has someone to abuse.

By the end of Act I a day has passed and Godot is a no-show. A boy (Alex Yeghiazarian alternating with Frankie Foti) brings Godot's apology and assurance he will arrive the following day.

A similar sequence, with the same outcome occurs in Act II, with the one difference being the hopeful appearance of foliage on the tree.

Much has been made of Beckett's wasteland, circular conversations, vanishing points and pointlessness. He paints a grim picture of the folly and crime inherent in the systems we structure to help us cope, understand and relate: The dim-witted will wander and the self-appointed powers will brutalize. There will always be masters and servants. And though they are ultimately clowns, they are nevertheless destructive.

Thank God for the clowns, though. Dean and Svetow help distinguish Didi and Gogo (with great assistance from costumer Angela Balogh Calin). Svetow is intense and worrisome; Dean is glum and thoughtful. The chemistry is something actors must bring to 'Godot' and these two have an enjoyable mix. Their characters are not as frustrating as others often are. Edmonds, however, again establishes himself as one of the finer character actors in town. His Pozzo is marvelously rich. He can snap back and forth between the threat and the comic undercut like a master. Calin again serves him well, with a ringmaster's costume of jodhpurs with pink piping, a showman's vest and whip to invoke Beckett's circus theme.

Traister helps remind us that for all the ideas this play offers, the visual metaphor is of Vaudevillians yanked from their routine and dropped into an existential landscape without answers. Everybody's got to see 'Waiting for Godot' some day. Traister makes this one rewarding. Edmonds makes it a treat. Don't wait.

WITH Mark Bramhall, Robertson Dean, Mitchell Edmonds, Joel Swetow **PRODUCTION** Michael C. Smith, set; Angela Balogh Calin, costumes; James P. Taylor, lights; Byron Batista, hair/makeup; Yolanda A. Baños/Rache Berney-Needleman, stage management