

## Waiting for Godot

Thursday, December 3  
11 a.m.—12 p.m. ET  
Grades 9–12

Curriculum Connections: Language Arts, Contemporary Issues  
National Standards for Theater: 5, 6, 7, 8

### About the Program

The cast and director from the Gate Theatre's (Dublin) production of *Waiting for Godot* discuss this well-known and enigmatic classic by Samuel Beckett. They explore the play, considered a comedy of the absurd, providing insights into Beckett's view of the human condition and the characters' vacillation between hope and despair. The program also includes performance excerpts from the film version of the play at key points throughout the discussion.

Barry McGovern and Johnny Murphy in the Gate Production of *Waiting for Godot*.



### About the Gate Theatre

When the Gate Theatre was established in 1928, it offered Dublin audiences an introduction to the world of European and American avant-garde theater, as well as vibrant productions from the modern and classic Irish repertoire. Over the years the Gate has developed unique relationships with many playwrights including Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. *Waiting for Godot* was first performed at the Gate Theatre in 1988. Since then, the Gate production of *Godot* has toured extensively both at home and abroad. The first Beckett Festival was presented by the Gate in 1991 during which all 19 of Beckett's plays were performed over a three week period. The Gate Theatre presented their production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Kennedy Center in October 2006.



Johnny Murphy, Alan Stanford and Barry McGovern in the Gate's production of *Waiting for Godot*.

### About Samuel Beckett

Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), a writer, poet and dramatist, was born in Dublin, Ireland. He studied French and Italian, completing a M.A. in French at Trinity College. After traveling in England and in Europe he settled permanently in Paris, except for a brief hiatus during World War II. Beckett's time in France also coincided with an active period in Existential philosophy, most of it centered in Paris. Existentialism is a philosophy focused on existence and how a person exists in the world. The philosophy holds that people do not have an inherent nature or essence, but instead define their 'self' through their actions and choices. While Beckett is not an Existentialist, a generally existential view of the human condition comes through very clearly in the play.

### About the Play

This play is a landmark in modern drama. When it first premiered in Paris, it originally stunned audiences but within a short time, audiences came to the theater prepared for a wholly new dramatic experience. The play ran for three hundred performances in Paris and has also been translated and performed in major cities around the world. Critics and prominent playwrights have paid high tribute to the play, but other critics have been repelled or baffled by *Waiting for Godot*, their reactions most often stemming from a misunderstanding of the play.

## About the Play (cont.)

### Characters

*Two men who are longtime friends and homeless outcasts;*

**Estragon**, nicknamed Gogo

**Vladimir**, nicknamed Didi and also addressed as Mr. Albert

**Pozzo**, an overbearing man

**Lucky**, Pozzo's slave

**A Boy**, Godot's messenger

## Act I

Along a country road near a dead tree, a tramp named Estragon struggles to remove his boot. His friend Vladimir approaches, happy to see Estragon again and concerned about Estragon's welfare. As the two men talk and tease each other, Estragon wants to leave but Vladimir reminds him that they are waiting for Godot, whom they seem to hardly know. Confused, bored and frustrated, they consider hanging themselves from the tree, but then resolve to keep waiting.

Pozzo, a bullying landowner, startles the two tramps. By a rope, he holds on to this slave Lucky, whom he plans to sell. For entertainment, Pozzo orders Lucky to dance, then "think." Comedy ensues when Lucky launches into a long incomprehensible speech. After Pozzo and Lucky leave, a boy brings the message that Godot is not coming today, but will come tomorrow. Estragon and Vladimir agree to leave, but do not move.

## Act II

The next day, much is the same – except the lone tree has some leaves. Vladimir and Estragon pass the time by "blathering about nothing in particular." They debate helping Pozzo, now blind and pitiful, and Lucky, now mute, who have fallen to the ground. After Pozzo and Lucky leave, the boy arrives to say Godot will not be coming. The men once again contemplate suicide, but decide to wait for tomorrow, in case Godot comes. And so the play ends: they decide to leave, but do not move.

## Historical Context: The Curtain Rises on a World Out of "Harmony"

In 1945, World War II ended, leaving behind widespread destruction and more than 60 million casualties, including 6 million Jews and others killed in the Holocaust. For many, the world appeared chaotic and meaningless. Shortly thereafter, a new theater genre called the "theatre of the Absurd" emerged. For playwrights of this genre, "absurd" meant "out of harmony" rather than "ridiculous." Such theater startled audiences by breaking from traditional stage techniques, raising questions instead of providing answers, and expressing an inability to make sense of human actions, choices, and indeed, life itself. *Waiting for Godot* illustrates a number of significant "Absurd" characteristics:

Instead of having . . .	Theater of the Absurd . . .
A problem that is solved	Resolves nothing (Godot never arrives)
A plot with beginning, middle, and end	Features no plot (Act II in <i>Godot</i> repeats the basic pattern of Act I)
Dialogue expressing the play's meaning	Reveals meaning from both words and deeds that sometimes conflict (Vladimir and Estragon agree to leave, but neither moves)
Either comedy or tragedy	Blends elements of unlikely comedy with painful situations (Estragon loses his trousers as he and Vladimir try to figure out how to hang themselves)
Distinctive and varied characters	Features less distinctive characters (Vladimir and Estragon have similar backgrounds and dress alike; all the characters are male)



Johnny Murphy and Barry McGovern in the Gate production of *Waiting for Godot*.

### Observe & Reflect

⇒ Vladimir and Estragon are two different characters yet share many similar characteristics. Observe the actors playing these characters, taking note of their body language and how they speak. How do the actors create unique identities for these characters?

⇒ *Waiting for Godot* is set in an unspecific geographical location. Observe the setting and how the characters interact with their surroundings. How does your personal background affect your perception of the setting? How might your perception of the play change if you grew up in a different area of the United States? In a different country?

### Research & Report

⇒ Research the bowler hat. What might Beckett be trying to convey by having Vladimir and Estragon wear this particular type of hat? How might the play change if the characters wore no hats? A different style of hat?

⇒ Research existentialism. Find examples of dialogue and/or action in the play that reflect existentialist philosophy. Next, find examples that are in opposition to existentialism.

⇒ Find photographs of different productions of the play. Compare the different sets and costumes to the stage directions written in the play. How have different designers expressed a unique point of view given the same set of directions? Pretend that you are the set designer or costume designer for a new production of *Waiting for Godot*. How would you design the set and costumes? Draw a sketch or find images to reflect your interpretation of the play.

⇒ Many people have been influenced by *Waiting for Godot*. References to the play appear in books, plays, movies, art, and even TV shows like *Sesame Street*. Find an example of a reference to *Waiting for Godot* in popular culture, books, movies, or art. Share your findings with the class.



Alan Stanford as Pozzo in the Gate production of *Waiting for Godot*.

## Resources

### Select Books

Beckett, Samuel. *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot*. Ed. James Knowlson and Douglad McMillian. (Grove Press, New York) 1994.

Knowlson, James R. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (Grove Press, New York) 2004.

Taylor-Batty, Mark and Juliette Taylor-Batty. *Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot (Modern Theatre Guides)*. (Continuum, London) 2009.

### Internet Resources

The Gate Theatre: <http://www.gate-theatre.ie/>