



The Theatre of the Absurd and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989)

Compact Performer - Culture & Literature
Marina Spiazzi, Marina Tavella,
Margaret Layton © 2015

ZANICHELLI



Samuel Beckett

1. The 1950s

This decade was characterised by:

- The **destruction** of the certainties and basic assumptions of the **Victorian Age**, swept away by two world wars.
- The **decline of religious belief**.
- The **mistrust in rationalism** as a means to explain reality.
- the **disillusionment with socialist ideals**, brought about by **totalitarianism**



feeling of emptiness, uselessness, anguish



Samuel Beckett

2. Post-war drama

- There were **two main trends** in 1950s drama:
- **The Theatre of the 'Absurd' → expressed metaphysical anguish, rootlessness, the lack of purpose and inaction.**
- **The Theatre of 'Anger' → criticised establishment values.**



Samuel Beckett

3. The Theatre of the Absurd: main features

- **Absence** of a real story or plot.
- **No action** since all actions are insignificant.
- **Vagueness** about time, place and the characters.
- The value of language is **reduced**; in fact, what happens on the stage **transcends**, and often **contradicts**, the words spoken by the characters.
- Extensive use of **pauses, silences, miming and farcical situations** which reflected a sense of **anguish**.
- **Incoherent babbling** made up the dialogue.



Samuel Beckett

4. The Theatre of the Absurd: main themes

- The sense of **man's alienation**.
- The cruelty of human life.
- **The absence** or the futility **of objectives**.
- The **meaninglessness of man's struggle**.



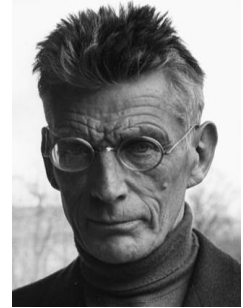
Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.



Samuel Beckett

5. *Samuel Beckett* (1906-1989)

- He was born in Dublin and graduated in French and Italian at Trinity College.
- He moved to Paris and wrote most works in French.
- He started his career writing short stories and novels, but he became famous especially for his plays.
- He developed the «Theatre of the Absurd» together with other dramatists (Adamov, Ionesco).
- His first great success was ***Waiting for Godot*** (1952)
- In **1969** he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.



Samuel Beckett.



Samuel Beckett

6. *Waiting for Godot*

- **No Setting:** a desolate country road and a bare tree.
- **Time:** no development in time. There is no past or future, just a repetitive present.



Waiting for Godot, London, Peter Hall Co.

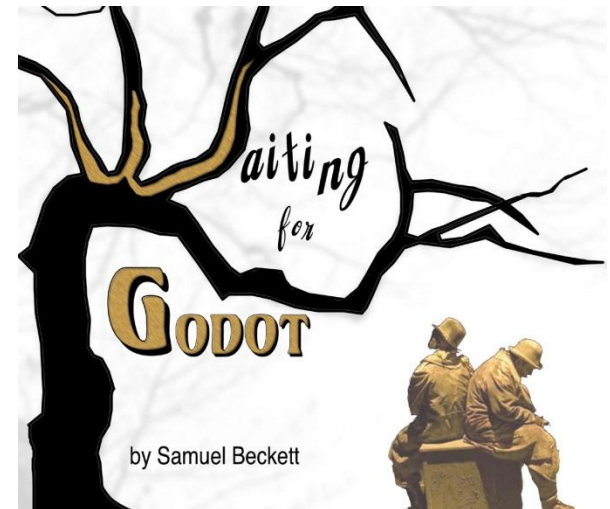
- **No plot:** meaningless events, the two tramps are waiting for a mysterious Godot, who never turns up.
- **No characters** in the traditional sense (personality).
- **No Action**
- **No dialogue** in the traditional sense (no communication)



Samuel Beckett

7. *Waiting for Godot*

- **Characters:** two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, bored by a day of nothingness; Pozzo and Lucky.
- **Theme:** the static situation of waiting.





Samuel Beckett

8. *Waiting for Godot*: characters

- **Vladimir** and **Estragon** are complementary: Vladimir is practical, Estragon is a dreamer. Estragon can't remember anything about his past and Vladimir remembers for him. They remind each other of their existence
- **Lucky** and **Pozzo** are linked by the relationship of master and servant.
- Vladimir and Lucky represent **the intellect**.



Waiting for Godot, London, Peter Hall Co.



Samuel Beckett

8. *Waiting for Godot*: characters

- Estragon and Pozzo stand for **the body**.
- The two couples are **mutually dependent**.
- The character the two tramps are waiting for is **Godot** → Biblical allusion in this name.

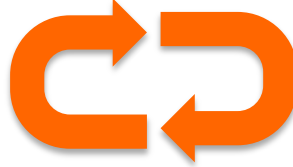


Scene from Michael Arabian's *Waiting for Godot*, Hall Co.



Samuel Beckett

9. *Waiting for Godot*: structure

- The play has a **circular structure** → it ends almost exactly as it begins. 
- The two acts are symmetrically built → the stage is divided into two halves by a tree, the human race into two, Vladimir and Estragon.
- It is pervaded by **grotesque humour**.
- Its **tone** is **tragic** and **desperate**.



Samuel Beckett

10. *Waiting for Godot*: themes

- **Human impotence** in the face of life's meaninglessness.
- **A static world** where nothing happens.
- **Absence of a traditional time** → there is no past, present and future, just a repetitive present.
- **Disintegration of language** → absurd exchanges, broken and fragmented dialogues.
- **The lack of communication** → use of para-verbal language: mime, silences, pauses and gaps.