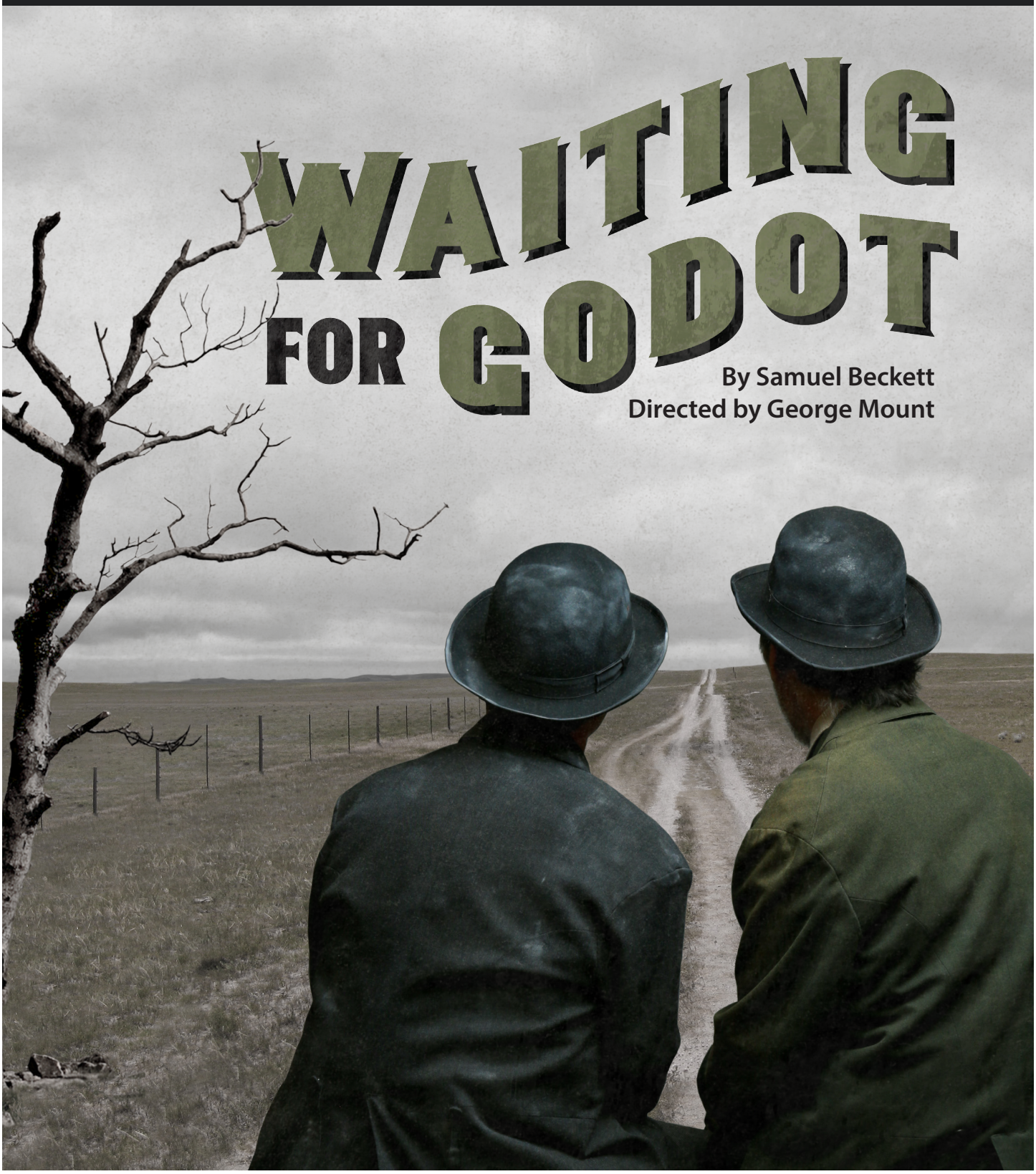
SEATTLE SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

EDUCATOR RESOURCE GUIDE



All original material copyright © Seattle Shakespeare Company 2014

Dear Educators,

Welcome to *Waiting for Godot*. With this show, Seattle Shakespeare Company is taking a foray into new territory: we are producing Beckett for the first time; we are performing in a new venue; and we are adding a fifth show to our season that starts earlier in the year. These new and exciting developments give our theater the same "back-to-school" excitement that many of you are surely experiencing this fall.

Here in the Education Department, we are in fact going back to school in a more concrete way, with summer camps wrapping up and in-school programs taking center stage for us this fall. Student matinees are already selling for this season, and we've begun to think about residencies in Puget Sound area schools. *Godot* is just the beginning of our season, and we've got a lot in store for the coming year.

So with that in mind, and with all the energy and excitement of a new year, I would like to simply welcome you to our 2014–2015 Seattle Shakespeare Company season, and thank you for bringing your students to see *Waiting for Godot*.

Best,
Michelle Burce
Education Director

www.seattleshakespeare.org/education
206-733-8228 ext. 251 or education@seattleshakespeare.org

PRODUCTION SPONSORS

ARTSFUND

TUXEDOS AND TENNIS SHOES
CATERING AND EVENTS

KUOW 94.9
kuow.org

"Waiting for Godot" is presented by special arrangement with Samuel French, Inc.

CONTENTS

Plot Synopsis 1

Characters 1

Samuel Beckett Biography 2

Godot: Complexity in Simplicity 3
A look at how one of the 20th century's most influential plays evades interpretation.

Theatre of the Absurd 4
What is the function of a play with no plot?

Placing the Production 5–6
Take a look inside the director's inspiration and thoughts for the production.

Reflection and Discussion Questions 7
Students consider themes in pre-show reflection questions, and think about the production in post-show discussion questions.

Activity: Absurdist Drama 8
Students develop the concept for their own Absurdist play.

Activity: Waiting 8
Students explore the experience of waiting in their own lives.

SYNOPSIS

Two friends, Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo), meet near a tree. They talk and soon it is revealed that they are meeting someone named Godot at that very spot. Didi and Gogo try to amuse themselves to pass the time, bantering, bickering, trying to recall old jokes. Gogo often wants to leave, but Didi always says they must wait for Godot.

Their conversation is interrupted by Pozzo, a merchant, and his silent servant, Lucky. The arrogant Pozzo talks to Didi and Gogo about his travels while he eats lunch, which is torture for the hungry Gogo. Wanting to entertain his new friends, Pozzo commands Lucky to dance, to which Lucky does awkwardly. Pozzo then tell Lucky to think. Lucky begins to speak, but his words quickly turn into mindless nonsense and is only interrupted when Didi removes Lucky's hat. Pozzo and Lucky leave, as Didi and Gogo wonder if they have met them before.

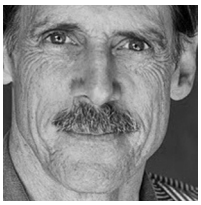
A boy comes in with a message from Godot, who says he will come tomorrow. Didi asks the boy questions before releasing him. Didi and Gogo resolve to leave the tree and find shelter, yet make no attempt to do so.

The next day, Did and Gogo are at the same spot. Gogo says he slept in a ditch and was beaten, yet seems to be uninjured. Didi tries to talk to Gogo about the previous days events, who can't recall them at first. As they wait for Godot, they play games and even pretend to be Pozzo and Lucky.

Suddenly Pozzo and Lucky appear. Pozzo is blind and cannot remember meeting them yesterday. His arrogance is gone and he seems to be in utter despair. Lucky eventually leads him away and Gogo goes to sleep. The same boy from the day before enters and informs Didi that Godot will not come today, but will tomorrow. Desperate, Didi begs the boy for more, but the boy has no memory of talking to him before. He exits and Did and Gogo sit at the tree to wait. They mull over the idea of killing themselves and resolve to bring some rope tomorrow in case Godot doesn't appear. They keep on waiting.

CHARACTERS

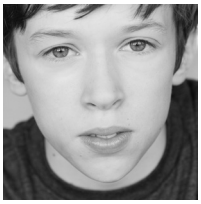
ESTRAGON (GOGO)



VLADIMIR (DIDI)

POZZO: A MERCHANT

LUCKY: HIS SERVANT



A BOY

SAMUEL BECKETT BIOGRAPHY

Samuel Beckett was born on April 13, 1906 in Dublin, Ireland. He was a natural athlete and showed early signs of an interest in writing. Beckett went to Trinity College, where he studied French, English and Italian. He took a teaching post in Paris, where he met a fellow Irish author, James Joyce. The two became fast friends and Joyce became a huge influence on Beckett's early authorship. Beckett helped with the research that would result in Joyce's novel, *Finnegan's Wake*, and he became a huge supporter of Joyce during the controversy surrounding Ulysses and Finnegan's Wake.

Beckett's early writings were far from what eventually would make him famous. He primarily wrote essays and literary criticisms. His first published work was a defense of his friend James Joyce. In 1930, he left Paris and returned to Dublin to work at his old school Trinity College, but soon found no fulfillment in an academic career. He travelled Europe over the next eight years, writing short stories, poetry, and even a novel. In addition, he continued to write essays and critical reviews. Following the death of his father, he spent time in England to undergo psychiatric treatment. Beckett's travels were cut short when he was stabbed and nearly killed in Paris in 1938. James Joyce helped him recover and Beckett remained in Paris, which he would call home for the rest of his life. He was an active member of the French Resistance during World War II. He continued to write, but soon he began writing primarily in French and began to shift his work in a new direction.

In 1945, Beckett began to actively strike out from under Joyce's shadow. The two men remained close, but Beckett was compelled to move in a different direction, focusing less on knowing, and more on ignorance and impotence as primary themes. His process focused on removing what he thought to be superfluous and unnecessary. *Waiting for Godot* became Beckett's most famous expression of this. Of all Beckett's work, it is the most popular and frequently performed all over the world. Beckett himself translated the play into English and worked closely with the artists in all of *Godot's* initial productions.

Samuel Beckett had gained fame and notoriety, but he continued to write plays, essays and poetry. His plays continued to demonstrate his desire to minimize. Besides *Waiting for Godot,* the plays *Krapp's Last Tape, Endgame,* and *Happy Days* became some of his best known works. As his life and career progressed, Beckett continued to slowly strip at the structure of realism and make his work even more compact. He shunned publicity and lived a very private life. Fame and wealth were of little interest to him. Upon winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1969, he promptly gave away all the prize money and continued to keep to himself.

His later works continued to attack the realist tradition and paved the way for playwrights like Pinter and Stoppard, and other writers, poets and musicians to mirror Beckett's minimalism. His later plays were whittled down to essential elements and were even more unusual. For example, *Not I* was set in total darkness with only a mouth being lit.

His final work, the 1988 poem *What is the World* ("Comment Dire"), was written while in a nursing home and hospital. His wife Suzanne died in July 1989, and Beckett himself died December 22, 1989. He was buried in Paris with his wife, in the Cimetière de Montparnasse. They share a gravestone that follows his wish that it be, "any color, so long as it's grey."

GODOT: COMPLEXITY IN SIMPLICITY

On its surface, *Waiting for Godot* has a simple plot: two people are waiting for "Godot," someone who fails to show up but whose messenger encourages them to keep waiting for him. From this tiny plot comes a large amount of discussion, writing, and debate about the meaning of the play, and about what can be gained from watching it.

While many people have tried to interpret *Waiting for Godot* as being Christian symbolism, a Freudian or Jungian psychological analysis, or even an allegory to the cold war, Beckett himself discouraged this sort of speculation. His introduction to the initial abridged production in 1952 read,

> **" I don't know who Godot is. I don't even know (above all don't know) if he exists. And I don't know if they believe in him or not — those two who are waiting for him. The other two who pass by towards the end of each of the two acts, that must be to break up the monotony. All I knew I showed. It's not much, but it's enough for me, by a wide margin. I'll even say that I would have been satisfied with less. As for wanting to find in all that a broader, loftier meaning to carry away from the performance, along with the program and the Eskimo pie, I cannot see the point of it. But it must be possible . . . Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo, Lucky, their time and their space, I was able to know them a little, but far from the need to understand. Maybe they owe you explanations. Let them supply it. Without me. They and I are through with each other."**

Beckett suggested that the piece was simple, and there was no conscious deeper meaning buried in the play. This has not stopped people from interpreting it in different ways in the many years since it was written.

It is a very polarizing piece of theatre, with plenty of fans and detractors. When initially produced in 1953, critics were kind to the play, with reviews ranging "from tolerant to enthusiastic." Some audiences were less kind, hooting and whistling at the actors during a performance. However, despite the variety of responses to the play, it has become a hallmark of theatre of the absurd, and is generally considered an important and influential piece of theatre in the 20th century.

Beckett's *Godot* was an early piece of theatre of the absurd, preceded by only a couple of plays also written originally in French. His contemporaries, particularly in the London theatre scene, were Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and John Osborne, writers who wrote realistic plays with strong emotional arcs. In stark contrast to that, *Waiting for Godot* was Beckett's attempt to strip theatre down to its bare essentials. There was no realism in the play. The characters were simple as was the setting. The action of the play was that very little happens. In fact, the two acts of the play more or less mirror each other.

Beckett and *Waiting for Godot* influenced his contemporaries and beyond. Edward Albee, Harold Pinter and David Mamet all have Beckett's imprint on their work. Tom Stoppard went so far as to lift the central plot — or lack of it — of Godot and apply it to Shakespeare in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, first produced in 1966. His work has influenced not only writers, but painters and musicians as well. Beckett's influence can even be seen in television and film, especially in the work of directors of Hal Hartley and Jim Jarmusch.

Sir Patrick Stewart as Vladimir and Sir Ian McKellen as Estragon.

Productions of *Godot* often reflect what the artists themselves see the play being about. The celebrated 1988 production with Steve Martin and Robin Williams emphasized comedic elements that balanced out the more somber tone of the play, playing to the strengths of the actors. The 2013 production with Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellen was also very funny and was undoubtedly informed by the personal friendship of the two leads, giving the play a lift of optimism amid the bleakness of the situation.

Waiting for Godot is a challenging piece of theatre, and one that audiences have loved and hated over the years. Much like modern productions of Shakespeare, individual productions of *Godot* can be vastly different from each other, and sometimes feel as if the audience is seeing an entirely different play. Its simplicity leaves room for interpretation. Audiences are asked to let go of traditional notions of plot and emotional arc, and instead to experience this play — and its simplicity — and see what they can make of it.

1 "Ruby Cohn on the Godot Circle" in Knowlson, J. & E., (Ed.) *Beckett Remembering – Remembering Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 122

2 Cohn, R., *From Desire to Godot* (London: Calder Publications; New York: Riverrun Press), 1998, pp. 153.

THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

A scene from the original 1953 production of *Waiting for Godot* in Paris, France.

At first glance, it seems like nothing happens in *Waiting for Godot,* which is why this play is very rarely produced. However, when examined carefully, *Waiting for Godot* can be extremely useful when beginning to understand not just the internal struggles of the play, but the Theatre of the Absurd.

"Absurd" was originally a musical term, meaning "out of harmony," and the Theatre of Absurd doesn't argue about the absurdity of the human condition, it just presents it. Most plays aim towards showing the audience an unusual "day in the life," the moment when a pattern gets broken or something new happens, but Beckett wanted to write something that stood out. When writing about "immobile tragedies," playwright Maurice Maeterlinck made an important distinction: that when we are not shown the break in the everyday life like many other stories show us, we do not see "the exceptional moment of life," we see "life itself." *Waiting for Godot* is a play about people who are trying to figure life out and they never do. They never will. No one does.

On one hand, this revelation could be depressing. On the other hand, this thought is hopeful; if a path has not already been designated for us, we may still have power over how we spend the remaining amount of time we have. What you may notice is that, while the main action of the play might be waiting and that may not be spectacular to behold, they never stop waiting. These people are on a proverbial ship headed east, but they don't know it, so they still feel happily productive in their attempts to crawl west. The best dichotomy about the Theatre of the Absurd is the dramatic shift in the feeling of these plays between the characters and the audience: their circumstances are only bleak if one knows resistance is futile, and Didi and Gogo are unaware of this.

Simply because Vladimir and Estragon don't seem to be doing anything does not mean they are doing nothing. This is the best thing about *Waiting for Godot*: If you asked those two men what they were doing and where they were going, they may concede that they do not travel, so to speak, but they actually do quite a lot. They pass the time, and in such a barren wasteland that not dying of boredom is a commendable feat. For Beckett's heroes, reality is less like crawling westward on a boat that is headed east and more like crawling around on the deck of a ship that they're not sure is going anywhere in particular. All they know about waiting for Godot is that were they to miss him, it would be a terrible thing. Even in the absence of direction, there is no specific hope, but rather a compelling hope for change of any kind.

As humans, we have two choices: we can surrender to the overwhelming inevitability of mortality and relinquish all control, or we can fight fruitlessly against our impending demise, making sure that what little time we have on Earth, we put to good use. That is what Didi and Gogo try to do as they wait. As J. R. R. Tolkien writes Gandalf saying, "all we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us."

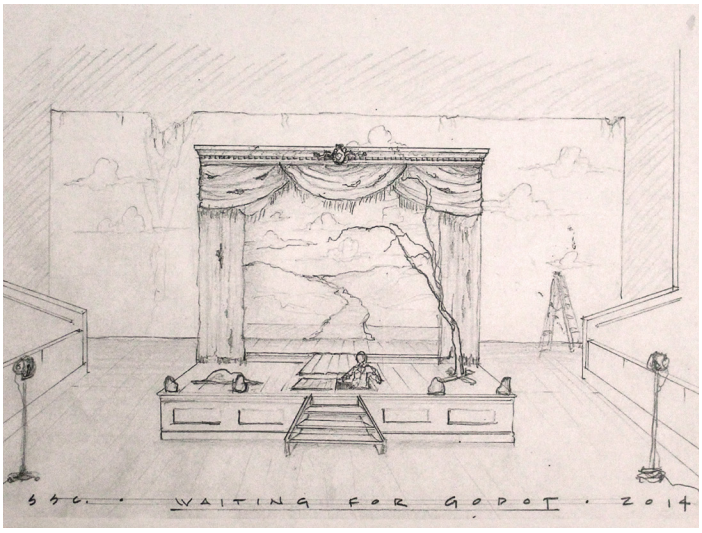
Esslin, Martin. "The Absurdity of the Absurd." Introduction. The Theatre of the Absurd. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961. p. 5. Ibid, p. 6.

Maeterlinck, Maurice. "The Tragic in Daily Life." A Maeterlinck Reader: Plays, Poems, Short Fiction, Aphorisms, and Essays. New York: Peter Lang, 2011. p. 32.

PLACING THE PRODUCTION

Director George Mount is playing with the intersection of theater and reality in this production of Waiting for Godot. He is exploring ideas of theater versus reality, performance versus life, and character versus self. To do this, George has set Didi and Gogo as actors who have been playing the same show for so long that their perceptions of fiction and reality have blurred together. They lapse in and out of their "act," repeating sections of dialogue, and they question the nature of their reality.

The inspiration for this concept comes from old vaudeville performances and silent film, which both were influences on Beckett as well. The set is initially an obvious theater set, with fake moon and tree, but gradually transforms into a more lifelike representation of reality. This highlights the trouble that the actors have telling the difference between what is real and what is not, and takes the audience along on the same journey of blurred distinctions.



Pictured: Inspiration images, set design by Craig Wollam, and costume design by Doris Black.

ESTRAGON (GOGO)

VLADIMIR (DIDI)

BOY

LUCKY

POZZO

PRE-SHOW REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Before watching the show, have students reflect on the following questions, either in a large group, small group, or individually in a journal.

While waiting for Godot, Vladimir and Estragon get bored with the monotony of their lives, wondering how long they have been waiting. Can you think of times in your life that you have felt bored, waiting for something to happen or for something to change? What can you do to change your situation?

The characters in *Waiting for Godot* come in pairs, with each character dependent on their partner for something. Who in our lives are we dependent on? Are there people who depend just as much on us as we do on them? What do we need from other people?

Waiting for Godot features two characters searching for meaning in their lives. What sorts of things make a life meaningful? Didi and Gogo wait endlessly for Godot, hoping he can tell them what the meaning of it all is. What would you do to find out a definitive meaning of life?

PRE-SHOW REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Beckett directly denied that there is overt symbolism in *Waiting for Godot*. This leaves the audience free to interpret the show for themselves. The following questions are intended to spark discussion. Some possible answers are included, but students should be encouraged to come up with their own suggested answers and interpretations.

What is the overall tone of the play?

- The overall tone is hope that things can change from the first act to the second act.
- The tone is despair that no matter how much things change, they are doomed to keep repeating everything.
- There is a tone of frustration that Godot will never actually come.
- There is a tone of resignation that Vladimir and Estragon will have to keep waiting.

How does memory function in this play? What can each of the characters remember or not remember?

- Pozzo and Lucky cannot remember meeting Vladimir and Estragon the previous day.
- Neither of the main characters can remember how long they have been waiting.
- Lucky can remember a long speech until his hat is knocked off.
- Vladimir can remember more than Estragon.

Who is Godot? Why are Vladimir and Estragon willing to wait for him?

- Godot is their only hope of finding meaning in their lives.
- They were told to wait for Godot, and so they feel like they need to follow instructions.
- Godot represents fulfillment, and so he will not come until they have made their own meaning.
- Godot is a trap, and is not really coming. As soon as Vladimir and Estragon realize that, they will be truly free.

In the first act, the tree is bare. In the second act, is has "four or five leaves" on it. Why? What might these leaves represent?

- These leaves show the audience that time is actually passing, and it is a different day.
- The leaves represent spring and new life.
- The leaves represent renewed hope that Godot will appear.
- The presence of the leaves show that it's possible for things to change.

ACTIVITY: ABSURDIST DRAMA

Waiting for Godot is an absurdist drama. There is a tradition of absurdist theater, and a set of characteristics that generally describe absurdist theater. In this activity, students will work in groups to pitch an idea for a new absurdist piece of theater, using as many of the characteristics as possible in their pitch.

Here are some characteristics of absurdist drama that students should try to incorporate into their pitch for a new play. They can use some or all of these:

- The plot of an absurdist drama, if there is one at all, generally ends up where it started. Nothing is accomplished, and the characters are the same at the end of the play as they were at the beginning.
- Often there are two main characters in a play, dependent on each other and trapped in a world that they do not understand, and/or cannot change.
- The rest of the characters are often flat and stereotypical.
- Dialogue is usually either very naturalistic, full of pauses and interruptions and lost trains of thought, or it is all nonsensical cliches — characters saying phrases that do not communicate anything meaningful. In either case, the dialogue usually goes nowhere.

With this list in mind, have students work in groups to come up with a premise of an absurdist drama, and write down as many details as they can about how the play would go.

Once students have come up with the idea for their play, have them create a title and a short marketing description, and a poster for the show. Then each group will present their pitch to the class.

For example, there is an absurdist drama titled *Fuddy Meers*, described as, "An amnesiac wakes up every morning a blank, and her family must fill her in on the details of her life ever day." The poster might be the face of a clock, with a more detailed drawing of a person at every hour, and a blank at midnight. This story includes the idea that the plot goes around in a circle and ends up exactly where it started every morning.

Another popular absurdist work is *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*. This is a play that could be described as, "Two minor characters from *Hamlet* are stuck in a world that they neither comprehend nor affect, as they ponder their existence and themes of life and death." The poster for this show could be show recognizable drawings of characters from *Hamlet*, surrounding photos of the actors playing the two title roles. This would indicate that the two main characters are trapped in this world, and all the other characters are flat and stereotypical.

ACTIVITY: WAITING

At times, waiting for something to happen can make time feel like it is going more slowly than usual. In *Waiting for Godot,* it is in this waiting that Didi and Gogo attempt to pass the time by talking about other things, philosophizing, and making observations of their surroundings. At one point, they even comment on this saying:

VLADIMIR: That passed the time.

ESTRAGON: It would have passed in any case.

VLADIMIR: Yes, but not so rapidly.

In this activity, students are asked to write about what it is like to be waiting for something that feels like it will never come: the end of a boring class, a text message from a crush, the bus to arrive, the rain to stop, etc.

Describe this period of waiting with as much detail as possible. What did you do to pass the time? What did you think about while waiting? What were your surroundings like? Were you relaxed, anxious, afraid, or something else? Were you waiting with someone, or were you alone?

What is something that you have waited for? What did you do to pass the time?

This is a creative writing exercise, and can be written as an essay, or as a dramatic scene.

SEATTLE SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

Mission Statement

With the plays of William Shakespeare at our core, Seattle Shakespeare Company engages our audiences, our artists and our community in the universal human experience inherent in classic drama through the vitality, immediacy and intimacy of live performance and dynamic outreach programs.

ABOUT US

Seattle Shakespeare Company is the Puget Sound region's year-round, professional, classical theatre. The company's growing success stems from a deep belief in the power and vibrancy of the time-tested words and ideas of Shakespeare and other classical playwrights along with a commitment to artistic excellence on stage. The results have been provocative performances that both challenge and delight audiences while fostering an appreciation for great stage works.

Our combined programs — which include indoor performances, free outdoor productions, regional tours, educator and youth programs — reach across barriers of income, geography, and education to bring classical theatre to Washington State.

EDUCATION STAFF CONTACTS

In-School Residencies and Camps

Michelle Burce, Education Director
206-733-8228 ext. 251
michelleb@seattleshakespeare.org

Touring Productions

Casey Brown, Education Associate
206-733-8228 ext. 241
caseyb@seattleshakespeare.org

Student Matinees

Lorri McGinnis, Box Office Manager
206-733-8228 ext. 220
studentmat@seattleshakespeare.org

General

Ticket office: 206-733-8222
Administrative offices: 206-733-8228
Fax: 206-733-8202
Seattle Shakespeare Company
PO Box 19595
Seattle, WA 98109
www.seattleshakespeare.org

EDUCATION PROGRAMS

In-School Residencies, Matinees, and Workshops

- In-School Residencies bring active, customized curriculum into schools across Washington State. Professional teaching artists plan with teachers to tailor each residency to fit the needs and objectives of the classroom. Seattle Shakespeare Company residencies inject vibrant, active exercises into lessons that unlock the text, themes, and actions of a Shakespeare play.
- Student Matinees bring over 3,000 students annually to our mainstage productions in the Seattle Center. Teachers are provided free study guides, and student groups are invited to stay after the show for a free Q&A session with the cast.
- Pre-show and post-show workshops can be booked to accompany mainstage matinees. These workshops include an introduction to the play itself, student activites, and insights into direction and design choices of our specific production.

Touring Productions

- Fresh and accessible 90-minute productions tour across Washington State each Spring, reaching more than 14,000 students and adults. These nimble productions perform as easily in school gymnasiums as professional theatre facilities. Teachers are provided free study guides and students enjoy free post-show Q&A sessions with the cast.
- Schools have the opportuniy to book accompanying in-school residencies with touring productions, led by members of the touring cast and additional teaching artists.

Camps and Classes

- Our summer "Camp Bill" series in Seattle and Edmonds offers young actors a variety of camps to choose from or combine. Camps range from a One-Week Introduction to a Three-Week Production Intensive, with many options in between.
- In our Fall and Spring after-school "Short Shakes" programs, young actors develop their skills and gain hands-on performance and production experience.
- Seattle Shakespeare Company occasionally offers adult classes and workshops to our community featuring guest artists who work on our stage.