

Godotmania

Its premiere 50 years ago was ignored. When it arrived in London, it was derided. But, says Peter Hall, since Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, theatre has never been the same

Peter Hall
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I have been brooding in my bath for the last hour and have come to the conclusion that the success of *Waiting for Godot* means the end of the theatre as we know it." Robert Morley, the famous character actor, made this prophecy in 1955. His generation - middle-aged - mostly endorsed his gloom. My generation of twentysomethings was glad.

The process began exactly 50 years ago, on January 5 1953, when *Godot* was given its first performance in a 75-seat theatre in Paris. France was where you went for radical theatre in those days. Whether it was the surrealistic images of Eugene Ionesco, the classical splendours of Jean-Louis Barrault and Madeleine Renaud, or the political philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, Paris continually outshone London.

And then came Samuel Beckett, soon to be recognized as the master innovator of them all. But he did not appear so at first - in fact, it took *Godot* several years to conquer. I heard of the play when it opened in Paris. But I am ashamed to say I did not see it. I had no idea that it would shortly dominate my life.

Godot returned theatre to its metaphorical roots. It challenged and defeated a century of literal naturalism where a room was only considered a room if it was presented in full detail, with the fourth wall removed. *Godot* provided an empty stage, a tree and two figures who waited and survived. You imagined the rest. The stage was an image of life passing - in hope, despair, companionship and loneliness. To our times, the images on the cinema screen are real, though they are only made of flickering light. Since *Godot*, the stage is the place of fantasy. Film is simile, lifelike; theatre is metaphor, about life itself.

In 1955, two years after the Paris premiere, I was 24 years old and a very lucky young man. I had been given a theatre - the Arts, in Great Newport Street, London - and charged to provide it with a play every four weeks. The resources were minimal and the money was not good (£7 per week and luncheon vouchers), but the opportunity to direct new plays (I began with *The Lesson*, the first Ionesco in Britain) and classics on a shoestring seemed too good to be true.

Then *Godot* came. In the early summer, when I was directing Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, I found a script waiting. Donald Albery, a leading West End impresario, informed me that he could persuade no actor to be in *Godot* and no director to direct it. It was still running in the small theatre in Paris. Beckett had now translated it and Albery wondered if I would like to do the English-language world premiere. I ransacked my memory. The name was faintly familiar. There were novels, I knew, and I seemed to remember a connection with James Joyce.

I read the play and decided to do it. I won't claim that I saw it as a turning point in 20th-century drama: that came later. And it certainly took a month of intensive rehearsal for me to realise that the play was a masterpiece. But from the very beginning, I thought it was blindingly original, turning the undramatic (waiting, doubt, perpetual uncertainty) into tense action. It was exquisitely constructed, with an almost musical command of form and thematic material. And it was very funny. It took the cross-talk tradition of music hall and made it into poetry.

With *Mourning Becomes Electra* safely launched, I set off for a high-minded holiday in Spain. I took the 12 volumes of Proust with me. I was completing volume nine when a telegram arrived: *Mourning Becomes Electra* was failing in the summer heat. *Godot* must begin at once. I returned and went straight into rehearsal. I have never finished Proust.

Rehearsals were, I suspect, more enjoyable for me than for the actors. I had found it very difficult to cast the play: actors were bewildered by it. Who were these people? Where did they come from? Where were they going? Were they clowns or symbols? Or just tramps?

I soon felt secure in Beckett's rhythms. This was real dramatic poetry, not applied but organic. And I wondered less and less about what the play meant as day followed day. It clearly meant what it said. Two men were waiting for Godot. Who was Godot? That would depend on the audience and their beliefs - or lack of them.

By the time we opened, I was confident that we had something special. The first night therefore came as something of a shock. There were cheers, but there were also what are known as counter-cheers. On the line, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes. It's awful", a very English voice said loudly: "Hear! hear!"

The critics next morning were not reassuring. Bafflement and derision were everywhere. "The language is flat and feeble," said Philip Hope-Wallace in the Guardian. "An evening of funny obscurity," was the Telegraph's verdict. "Mr Samuel Beckett (an Irishman who used to be Joyce's secretary and who writes in French, a combination which should make anybody smell a rat) has produced a really remarkable piece of twaddle." So said the critic and columnist Bernard Levin.

It looked as if the play would have to close at the end of the week, but I begged the theatre owner to wait for the Sunday notices. Perhaps Godot would come, though frankly it didn't seem very likely.

Happily, he did - in the person of Harold Hobson, the critic of the Sunday Times. He found himself on the theatrical road to Damascus. He went on to write about the play for the next seven Sundays. Kenneth Tynan was also enthusiastic, although (unlike Hobson) it took him some weeks to recognise the size of the Beckett revolution. He wrote that the play "forced me to re-examine the rules which had hitherto governed the drama; and having done so, to pronounce them not elastic enough". That did for a beginning.

To my amazement, Godotmania gripped London. It was discussed, praised, analysed and abused; cartoons were drawn about it, Panorama discussed it, Malcolm Muggeridge derided it. It was seen as an allegory of the cold war. Metaphor had repossessed the theatre. And the way had been made straight for Harold Pinter, Joe Orton, Edward Bond and subsequent generations.

It is often thought that 1956 and the first night of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* was the reinvention of British theatre. It is certainly true that Osborne changed a generation. So out went the slim volumes of verse and the imitations of Lucky Jim, and the Royal Court revolution was under way. All this was wonderful, but faintly parochial, which *Godot* certainly was not. *Look Back in Anger* was a play formed by the naturalism of the 1930s and the cosy craft beloved of the old repertory theatres. It now looks dated because it uses the convention of the well-made play. I think also that my generation heard more political revolution in it than was actually there, largely because we needed to.

By contrast, *Waiting for Godot* hasn't dated at all. It remains a poetic masterpiece transcending all barriers and all nationalities. It is the start of modern drama. It gave the theatre back its potency and its poetry. And it no longer seems obscure. In 1997, I directed *Godot* again at the Old Vic. My 16-year-old daughter was baffled by the programme material detailing the play's controversial history. "What on earth is there to understand?" she said. "It's perfectly clear what it is about. You only have to listen." How stupid it seems now that, 50 years ago, people denied that this play was a play. But I suppose new tunes are always by definition unfamiliar and disturbing. From that August evening in London, the play went everywhere. It is no exaggeration to say that it went round the world, and its success continues.

At the end of 1955, the Evening Standard drama awards were held for the first time. Because I had directed it, I was a non-voting member of the judging panel when *Godot* was considered. Feelings ran high and the opposition, led by the conductor Malcolm Sargent, threatened to resign in high public dudgeon if *Godot* was awarded the prize for best play. An English compromise was worked out that changed the title and thus the nature of the award. It also happily ensured the future of the Evening Standard awards. *Godot* was crowned most controversial play of the year. It is a prize that has never been given since.