

WEST YORKSHIRE PLAYHOUSE AND TALAWA THEATRE COMPANY

WY PLAY
HOUSE

3 to 25 February

Director **Ian Brown**
Designer **Paul Wills**
Lighting Designer **Chris Davey**
Sound Designer **Ian Trollope**
Movement **Aline David**
Casting Director **Pippa Ailion**

Cast: Fisayo Akinade, Guy Burgess,
Cornell S John, Jeffery Kissoon,
Patrick Robinson



WAITING FOR
GODOT

By **Samuel Beckett**



Teacher Resource Pack

Introduction

Hello and welcome to the West Yorkshire Playhouse and Talawa Theatre Company's Educational Resource Pack for their joint Production of 'Waiting for Godot'.

'Waiting for Godot' is a funny and poetic masterpiece, described as one of the most significant English language plays of the 20th century. The play gently and intelligently speaks about hardship, friendship and what it is to be human and in this unique Production we see for the first time in the UK, a Production that features an all Black cast.

We do hope you enjoy the contents of this Educational Resource Pack and that you discover lots of interesting and new information you can pass on to your students and indeed other Colleagues.

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Company Information

West Yorkshire Playhouse

Since opening in March 1990, West Yorkshire Playhouse has established a reputation both nationally and internationally as one of Britain's most exciting producing theatres, winning awards for everything from its productions to its customer service.

Ian Brown, appointed Artistic Director and Chief Executive in 2002, following the 12-year tenure of Jude Kelly, has continued to develop the largest regional repertory theatre outside of London and Stratford, realising one of the most expansive and vibrant artistic policies in the country.

The Playhouse provides both a thriving focal point for the communities of West Yorkshire, and theatre of the highest standard for audiences throughout the region and beyond. West Yorkshire Playhouse produces 16 of its own shows each year in its two auditoria, approximately a third of which are world or British premieres. It stages over 1000 performances, workshops, readings and community events, watched by over 250,000 people, while countless others use the building as a meeting place for business and pleasure.

Talawa Theatre Company

Founded in 1986, Talawa is Britain's foremost Black-led Theatre Company. Over 25 years Talawa has brought a range of theatre to audiences across England: from Shakespeare to Soyinka; Oscar Wilde to new Black British work. Under the artistic direction of Patricia Cumper Talawa has been proud to enrich British theatre by nurturing practitioners and producing challenging, innovative work informed by the diversity of modern Britain.

Believing the power of theatre reaches beyond the stage, Talawa delivers a range of inclusive outreach activities for a wide variety of participants of all ages. Throughout their Participation Programme, the company works closely with teachers, group leaders and participants to create bespoke projects and residencies that meet both individual and group needs. As a result of this high level of collaboration, the shape of their workshops and projects varies widely: from curriculum-based work with schools to poetry workshops in prisons; from diversity training with the NHS to devising with young theatre-makers.

"My grandparents have spoken to me about my history but Talawa Theatre Company have taught me more and have inspired me to believe in myself"

Year 10 student, Southgate Schoolmore.

Cast

Estragon.....	Patrick Robinson
Vladimir.....	Jeffery Kissoon
Pozzo.....	Cornell S John
Lucky.....	Guy Burgess
The Boy.....	Fisayo Akinade
Director.....	Ian Brown
Designer.....	Paul Wills
Lighting Designer.....	Chris Davey
Sound Designer.....	Ian Trollope
Movement.....	Aline David
Casting Director.....	Pippa Ailion
Assistant Director (Birkbeck Trainee).....	Emily Kempson
Deputy Stage Manager.....	Marisa Ferguson

Samuel Beckett Life and Works

- 1906** 13 April – Samuel Beckett born in Foxrock, Dublin to May and William Beckett. His family live in a prosperous suburb of Dublin and belonged to the Church Of Ireland.
- 1920** He attends the Portora Royal boarding school in Enniskillen, County Fermanagh, Ireland, where he continues to excel in academics and becomes the light-heavyweight boxing champion. Schoolmasters often label him moody and withdrawn during his time here. Beckett is consistent in his loneliness.
- 1923** Enrols at Trinity College Dublin to study for a Degree in French and Italian. Although, academically Beckett flourishes at Trinity, he is often described as an unhappy young man there.
- 1927** Beckett receives his BA in Modern Languages and graduates with First Class Honours.
- 1928** He takes up a teaching post at Campbell College Belfast – a School with an international academic reputation. Beckett leaves Campbell College to take a position at Ecole Normale Superieure in Paris. It is during this time in Paris that he begins to get acquainted with James Joyce and becomes part of the 'Existentialist movement'.
- 1930** Beckett returns to Trinity University, Dublin, to begin an appointment as a lecturer.
- 1933** Beckett's father, William dies.
- 1935** Publishes 'Echo's Bones and other Precipitates' a collection of thirteen poems.
- 1936** Afraid of the confines of routine, Beckett leaves Ireland to go travelling across Europe and spends a lot of time in Germany. On his journey he meets a variety of people in different circumstances he may not have come across during his time in Ireland and France – perhaps these meetings influence Beckett's writing.
- 1937–38** Returns to live in Paris. Shortly after he arrives he is stabbed in Montparnasse by a stranger in the street. After his recovery, he visits his assailant in prison. When asked why he had attacked Beckett, the prisoner replied "Je ne sais pas, Monsieur", a phrase hauntingly reminiscent of some of the lost and confused souls that would populate the writer's later works.
- 1939–44** Great Britain and France declare war on Germany. Beckett flees with his wife Suzanne.
- 1947** Beckett writes his first play in French, 'Eleutheria', which centres around a young man's attempts to separate himself from his family and obligations.
- 1953** En attendant Godot 'Waiting for Godot' premieres at the Théâtre de Babylone in January 1953. The play becomes an instant success.
- 1957** A performance of 'Waiting for Godot' is performed at the San Quentin Penitentiary for an audience of over fourteen hundred convicts.
- 1958** Endgame performed at Royal Court London to huge success. Endgame was originally written in French, entitled Fin de Partie, and is regarded as one of Beckett's most important works.
- 1961** Beckett marries. Publishes Happy Days – a play in two acts which searches for the meaning of existence where theatre is stripped to its bare essentials and offers two characters, Winnie and Willie.

Samuel Beckett

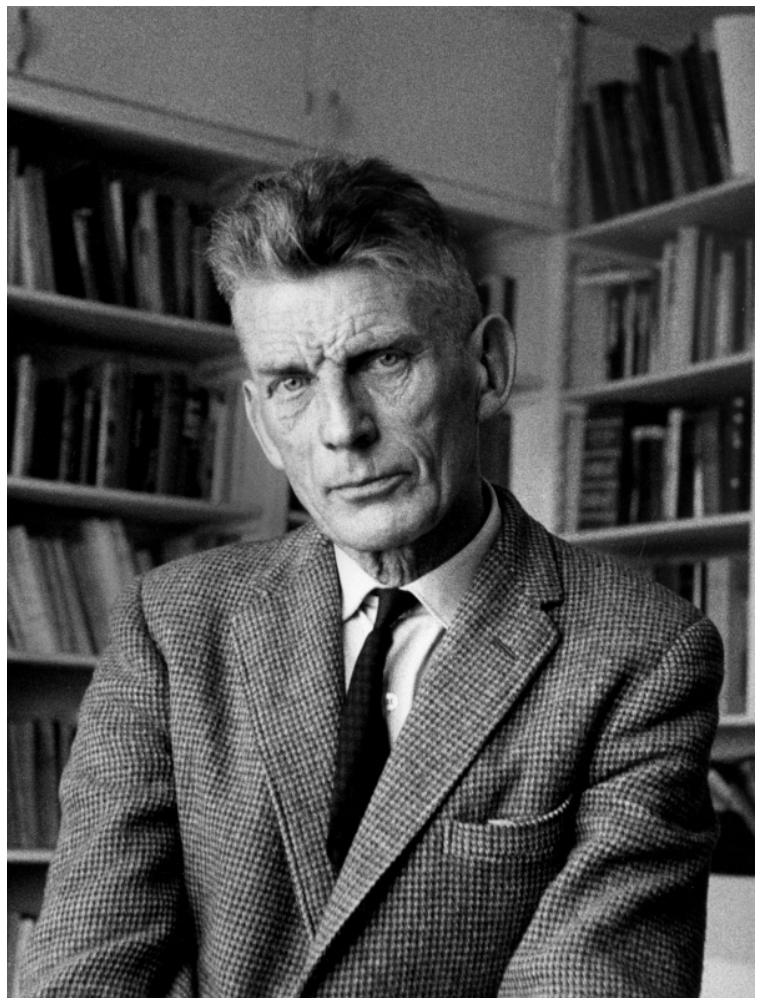
Life and Works

1966 Come and Go is a short play, considered by some as one of Beckett's most 'perfect' plays.

1976 Directs Billie Whitelaw in Footfalls – a play first performed at the Royal Court Theatre as part of the Samuel Beckett Festival. Billie Whitelaw, for whom the piece had been written, plays May, whilst Rose Hill voiced the mother. Billie Whitelaw worked in close collaboration with Beckett for 25 years and is regarded as one of the foremost interpreters of his works.

1981 Rockabye and other Short Pieces

1989 22 December — Death of Samuel Beckett.



Existential Thought and Theatre of the Absurd

‘Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself.’

Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism and Human Emotion.

Existentialism is essentially a philosophy concerned with finding ones self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. It is a philosophy that believes in human free will; a realisation that things are very rarely rational; and that freedom will structure the individual, not rules laid down by society. Existentialist ideas and philosophy started to appear after the Great Depression in America and after World War 2. Existentialist belief also proclaims that one must go on a search and take their own journey to gain true personal meaning in life. It is believed that rules set down by people in power dehumanize people and they become objects rather than unique individuals.

Out of this philosophical belief emerged a unique style of performance called: The Theatre of the Absurd. Beckett was one of the defining Playwrights of Theatre of the Absurd. Traditionally Theatre of The Absurd refers to a period in history, particularly the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, when a number of European Playwrights expressed the belief through their writing, that human existence has no meaning or purpose. The term ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ was originally coined by the critic Martin Esslin who saw a direct link between the writing and an artistic articulation to Albert Camus’ philosophy that ‘life is inherently without meaning’ in his work ‘The myth of Sisyphus’.



Absurdist Theatre went against the grain of conventional theatre and abandoned clear plot, character development, and action which resulted in a very different and, at times, disorientating experience for an audience. Suddenly time, place and setting was irrelevant – subsequently, sets were very minimal and basic with little indication pointing towards where the characters are and indeed very little information about the characters themselves. It is a very powerful and brave form of theatre that encourages the audience to ‘strip’ down their own lives and existence

and question their place in the world. Unlike more conventional and traditional forms of theatre, there is no where to hide in absurdist theatre – everything is seen in harsh reality. Absurdist drama is often compared to having a dream or a nightmare – from which there is little escape... this is particularly prevalent in *Waiting for Godot* where we re-visit the same place time and time again. Even though time moves forward we feel like it is standing still- that no progress is ever made. The characters are not stuck in the present however- but in the past or the future – they are not **living** in the present. It is interesting that this form of theatre really came to fruition during and after World War 2 when the world was stripped of all previous rationality and meaning, given the horrendous events people lived through.

Another prolific Absurdist writer was Eugene Ionesco. His writing loses conventional language and replaces words with repetitive sounds and actions – one may be convinced on hearing it that verbal communication is irrelevant. In both Ionesco’s and Beckett’s writing there is a strong element of despair and this is fully realised in the cyclical nature of Vladimir and Estragon’s lives in *Godot* – they wait and wait and wait... but what are they waiting for... does it really matter?



Characters from Waiting for Godot

Vladimir



One of the two main characters of the play. Estragon calls him Didi, and the boy addresses him as Mr. Albert. Vladimir appears to be the more responsible and mature of the two main characters. He is the one that carries the food but never eats any himself – giving what he has to Estragon. He asks Estragon how he is feeling in the play at times – including his concern about his foot after he is kicked by Lucky. He questions events and encourages philosophical discussions but to little avail.

Estragon



The second of the two main characters, Vladimir calls him Gogo. Estragon appears to be more vulnerable than Vladimir and looks for his protection in the play. He also looks to Vladimir for food when he is hungry. He is forgetful and Vladimir often has to remind him of previous events. He has abandoned all hope in his and Vladimir's existence and views Godot with suspicion – not really believing in him. Estragon's nickname, Gogo, is the French word for a person who is easy to deceive.

Pozzo



His name is Italian for 'well' and he passes by the spot where Vladimir and Estragon are 'waiting' with his slave Lucky. On first sight Pozzo is a pompous, cruel, obnoxious man with little time for feelings and humanity towards fellow man. He immediately provides a distraction for Vladimir and Estragon and brings chaos to their otherwise mundane but sheltered world they have created. On their first meeting Vladimir and Estragon get confused over Pozzo's actual name and refer to him as 'Bozzo' (could be translated as a man who is a fool and who has poor judgment). Although he displays a cruelty towards Lucky, and an authoritative presence, he also loses control very quickly and panics when things don't go his way. He displays a vulnerability and insecurity in his need for feedback from Vladimir and Estragon when he asks: 'How did you find me?...'. The name Pozzo is similar in spelling and pronunciation to the Italian word, pazzo and as an adjective, it means insane, crazy, mad, or irrational. As a noun, it means wild man or mad dog.

Characters from Waiting for Godot

Lucky



Pozzo's slave, who carries his belongings. He suffers, both physically and mentally at the hands of Pozzo who calls him 'pig' frequently throughout the play. Pozzo controls him by tying a rope around his neck (which we discover has made his flesh raw) and by whipping him. In a play where the other characters talk almost incessantly, Lucky only speaks twice – but the second time he speaks he surprises us when he delivers a monologue. When Pozzo is not berating him, he falls sleep standing up, and appears absent when he is awake. His name is highly unusual and elusive given the fact he could be viewed as the unluckiest character in the play but also it raises the question... is he in fact 'Lucky' because he is not as affected by the questions and situations that consume the other characters?

Boy



The boy appears in Act 1 and Act 2 as a messenger from Godot to inform Vladimir (who he refers to as Mr Albert) and Estragon that Godot will not be coming. The cast list specifies only one boy even though the boy who appears in the second Act tells Vladimir that he was not the boy who came the day before. He works for Mr Godot as a goatherd and Estragon takes an instant dislike to him whereas Vladimir is more kindly and thinks he has seen him before which the boy disputes.

Waiting for Godot

What happens?

A country road. A tree. Evening.

This is our setting for 'Waiting for Godot' and remains our setting for the remainder of the play. The Irish critic Vivien Mercier famously described the play as one in which 'nothing happens twice'.

The play 'En attendant Godot' was first performed at the Theatre de Babylone in Paris in 1953 in French and it was translated into English by Beckett in 1955 opening as 'Waiting For Godot' at the Arts Theatre in London. Waiting for Godot revolutionised theatre and had a lasting and profound effect and influence on many playwrights at the time and even now. 'Waiting for Godot' opened up possibilities for theatre and performance that had never been seen or even thought of before. It was and still is a ground breaking piece of work that is, all at once, disorientating, fragile, affecting, moving, gentle, surprising, pitiful, fraught, tense and stirring.

The play centres around two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon who wait by a tree on a country road waiting for someone called 'Godot' whom they have never met before, who may not even exist and who they may never even meet. The two men wait for the elusive Godot hopelessly and helplessly. Beckett himself had this comment to make about Godot:

"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."

Samuel Beckett

Vladimir and Estragon argue, sulk and reminisce during their wait, never living in the present but thinking about what has happened before and about a non-existent future. Despite being irritated at times in each other's presence, they also are very close and depend very heavily on each other – in particular Estragon towards Vladimir.

The play begins with a struggle of sorts as Estragon tries to take off his boot... a very simple action which appears to be a somewhat exhausting physical task for him. The gravitas of this one action and Estragon's need to rest means that the play begins with a real sense of weariness, fatigue and disillusionment as Estragon says there is 'Nothing to be done'.



Waiting for Godot

What happens?

They discuss what they might do to pass the time and Estragon suggests that they hang themselves but come to the conclusion that it would not serve any fit purpose for them both to die and they abandon the idea. It is clear that there is an underlying distrust between them as they are not wholly convinced that if one dies the other will necessarily follow and yet there is a fear that one may have to live without the other.

The two characters make an interesting duo due to their opposing qualities: Estragon is suspicious, Vladimir has more belief; Estragon is pessimistic and distrustful, Vladimir is more hopeful; Estragon approaches things simply, Vladimir likes to question and philosophise; Estragon is forgetful and scatty, Vladimir is more mindful.



Despite these differences, the two characters also share a very close bond with each other and it is impossible to imagine one existing without the other, particularly having seen in the play that any attempt to part ways is always short lived and never comes to fruition.

On meeting Lucky and Pozzo we see a very different kind of pairing between two characters.

Although the idea of a love – hate relationship is evident in both pairings, a cruelty clearly exists between Lucky and Pozzo as the roles of slave and master are seen where Lucky is disempowered and called 'pig' by his master. Through the behaviour of these characters, we are left, as an audience, feeling disillusioned as to who they really are or what they really think... we see two sides to the characters – Vladimir – once concerned for the welfare of Lucky as a slave soon changes his opinion very quickly as he begins to feel sympathy for Pozzo's situation. Estragon changes from someone displaying empathy towards Lucky to utter repulsion for him after Lucky kicks him – maybe Lucky senses something about Estragon that he distrusts and we should be mindful of. Pozzo is, one moment, terribly cruel, brutal and vicious but then philosophical about life, particularly in reference to his description of the changing sky. Lucky – who we are led to believe is incapable of language or even thought, surprises us with his long monologue in which he is incredibly articulate – this makes us wonder what Lucky's life was like before and how he ended up as a slave to Pozzo.

Main Themes

Time

Waiting 'to stay in one place or do nothing until something happens or in the expectation that something might happen'. Time in the play is cyclical; enduring; painful; frustrating; anxious; disillusioning and a test to see how long one can endure. Beckett uses repetition in *Godot* to help illustrate this passing of time through the language and actions of the characters. Pozzo's statement in particular about his pipe, (that the second pipe is never as "sweet" as the first), suggests that everything dulls with repetition. The characters' inability to remember facts from recent events or conversations can also add to the frustration of the passing of time and all meaning is lost when no progress is made from one day to the next.

Activity: Try to remember a moment when you were waiting for something very important. Through a choice of words (not sentences) describe how you felt. Now try the same exercise again but this time, you have been told that what you are expecting may or may not come but you have to wait for it – having nothing in the meantime to distract you.

Does your previous choice of words change? Replace your words with one sound to describe the feeling behind them and perform. Voice your sounds out loud one after the next four times.

Activity 2: Now replace each sound with an action or movement and repeat.

Discuss how your experience changed when you understood that what you were waiting for may not come and you had no distraction.

Dependence

Focusing on the relationships between Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky, what are the main elements that keep them together? Is Lucky forced to stay with Pozzo – why doesn't he try to escape? What holds Vladimir and Estragon together? **Question:** do the characters settle with what they have because they are not brave or interested enough to discover something new? Have they become so disillusioned with their existence that they would rather have pain than find pleasure? There is a real inability to connect between the characters on a deep level and problems keep them apart yet hold them together.



Main Themes

Activity: Think about the lives each character may have had before they found themselves in their current predicament in *Godot*. Have events in *Godot* happened as a result of their own making or were there other factors that perhaps caused them to be where they are? In regards to Vladimir, Estragon and Lucky, find moments in the script that may give us clues about their past and discuss how they have come to be in their situation now.

Activity 2: With your information, write a monologue from the point of view of one of the characters about their story.



Mortality

Death is normally associated with bereavement and loss but in *Godot* the characters approach death in a most unsentimental, matter of fact manner. Could this be a disregard for human life? There is certainly a lack of joy in being alive and to live is actually a chore for the characters. Yet, there also appears to be a fear of death – Vladimir and Estragon discuss suicide by hanging but they talk themselves out of it. The appeal of hanging appears to be something to do to pass the time during the eternal wait they are caught in, rather than death itself. They understand

that death is inevitable eventually and maybe another reason they choose to live is because death is something they are certain of, that if they wait for it, it will definitely come, without question.

Activity: Consider the setting of *Waiting for Godot* - a sparse setting with very little human life or activity... why do you think the world is like this in the play? Has something happened to extinguish life? What has happened to make the characters so disillusioned and despondent with life and embrace death? Also consider when Beckett wrote the play and what events he may have just lived through that could have influenced his writing.

Discuss: What makes you feel safe? How would you feel if everything was taken from you? Does creating routines, timetables, schedules, and rituals make us feel safe and in control of the world? Without what we need and love how would that change your place in the world and your feelings toward it?

Extra Activities

Stage Directions and Godot

Beckett was notoriously particular about his stage directions having once written: 'Any production which ignores my stage directions is completely unacceptable to me'. Imagine if you had free reign over the stage directions in the play - choose a section from *Waiting for Godot* and write completely new stage directions for it – end by staging your performance. Did you discover anything new about the characters? How did their relationships and attitude change between one another?

Play the same section again but without any stage directions at all this time. How does this change the meaning of the section? How does this approach affect the atmosphere?

Choose a moment from the play and rehearse in the following ways:

- without the dialogue
- with the dialogue and no action
- in gibberish
- without using hands for gestures
- sitting
- moving constantly.



Why Godot? Why Now? Why Us?

Theatre companies, venues and other arts organisations often come together to produce new work. But how do these collaborations come about?

Below, Talawa's Artistic Director explains why a co-production of an all-Black *Waiting for Godot* was right for these two organisations at this time.

Living in the Caribbean in my twenties, one of the books I found at the bottom of the remaindered bin of Kingston's largest book shop was 'Theatre of the Absurd' by Martin Esslin. I read it without any real sense of its context but there was something about its central idea that struck a chord with me. Perhaps it was living in a society where death and violence were part of everyday life, perhaps it was my own rather bumbling efforts at understanding existentialism that made it remarkable. Martin Esslin talked a great deal about Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

Nearly twenty years later I sat in a small two up, two down in Knebworth, having recently moved back to the UK to live, and watched *Waiting for Godot* on my tiny television. I was riveted. As a writer, I deeply admired how polished and spare the dialogue was. I enjoyed its references to life and death, to farting, friendship and fragility. I loved that the world the play created was so consistent, clever and funny that I could enter into it without any of the unease I felt entering into the more hierarchical worlds of other playwrights.

As I read and reread the play, I began to feel that this was a play that talked about a great many experiences that would resonate with Black Britons. It talks about a world where you wait for someone else to tell you whether or not your life can improve, of constantly having to negotiate with someone who holds themselves just out of reach. It speaks about having to sleep in a ditch and endure regular beatings, of living in uncertainty and fear. It also explores the power of friendships forged against adversity yet it also looks at how power makes those who have it insensitive to those they hold power over.

Much of the English spoken in the Caribbean is shot through with references to the Bible and *Waiting for Godot* is rife with biblical references. There are many familiar Victorian turns of phrase in the play that reminded me of the Caribbean, language learnt from the Welsh, Irish and Scottish immigrants who settled on the island's plantations as hoopers, wheelwrights, book keepers and overseers.

Fifteen years on and it is my job to put together a programme of work for Talawa Theatre Company, a company that describes itself as Black British and whose mission is to explore the Black British experience, that will fittingly celebrate the company's twenty fifth year.

Under the founder and first artistic director, Yvonne Brewster, Talawa regularly produced classic plays with Black casts: *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *King Lear*. I wanted to pay tribute to her work and include a classic text alongside productions of new writing *KRUNCH* and George C. Wolfe's *The Colored Museum* in the anniversary year. *Waiting for Godot* immediately sprang to mind. I had been discussing possibly producing the play with Ian Brown of West Yorkshire Playhouse for a good couple of years. He had immediately seen how the casting could create a fresh way of approaching

Why Godot? Why Now? Why Us?

the play. We had already had brief discussions with the estate and they seemed minded to give us permission to produce the play. There had recently been a West End production of the play with a stellar cast so it became a matter of timing more than anything else. Once dates were agreed, the die was cast. West Yorkshire Playhouse and Talawa Theatre Company would be producing Beckett's classic together.

In theatre, a decision to produce is never made for any single reason. There are always practical considerations. I pushed hard for *Waiting For Godot* because the quality of Black British acting talent is beyond question and so the combination of a classic play with a strong cast made it a good bet we would get decent and varied audiences. It consisted of a cost effective five actors and one set and so allowed attention to be focused on the text and those playing it, an approach I particularly wanted. These five parts had never been on offer to Black British actors before and so I felt we would attract a quality cast who would relish the challenges the play presented. I also felt that the voices the actors would bring to the play would create a different sound, enrich the already poetic rhythms of Beckett's language and their life experiences would bring depth and richness to their interpretations of Didi and Gogo, Pozzo, Lucky and the Boy.

As in *Waiting For Godot* itself, every reason for doing something could also be seen as a reason for doing nothing. Every instance I've found in the play that might resonate with the Black British experience could equally well be interpreted as totally universal or specific to some other cultural context. That is the genius of the play. It creates an abstract world in which images and incident are fleeting and shadowy, as much in the audiences imagination as in the playing of the play. It is what it is and you have to surrender to it. It is also what you make of it. So to the question, why choose an all-Black cast for this production of *Godot*, I quote Ian Brown. 'Why not?'

Patricia Cumper

Interview

Ian Brown – Director

Firstly, why ‘Waiting for Godot’ and why now?

I had done Endgame before and had really enjoyed it. I'd always wondered about giving Waiting For Godot a go but it felt to me as if there'd been so many productions of it, so why would you want to do another one? Then we were talking to the artistic director of Talawa Theatre Company and she said that she'd always wanted to do an all black version of it as it had never been done in this country before. I remember thinking that I would be interested in doing that. We spent over a year getting permission from the Beckett estate. I felt that doing the play with an all black cast would produce something quite interesting - I wanted to see what that would do to the play. It's a play about what it is like to be a human being, so I suppose you can do that kind of play any time. We've never done it here at the playhouse and I don't think there's been a production in Leeds or near to Leeds for a long time. It's also my last production as Artistic Director. It's hard to know what your last show might be at the theatre you've run for ten years, but actually Godot feels like a neat play to end on. It's quite a personal play. It's a play that's reflecting on somebody's life and I suppose I'm slightly reflecting on my career at the playhouse - so perhaps there is a strange connection there.

Is it true that nothing, more or less, happens in Waiting for Godot? If this is true then how is it we manage to be entertained?

I think it's a little bit of a myth that nothing happens actually. It is true to say that the play doesn't have a clear plot, because they're waiting and they're waiting for something that doesn't happen. But they do lots of things while they are waiting - they play games, they play act, they argue, they philosophise, they insult each other - so quite a lot happens. We spend our time watching it, with them, waiting for Godot to appear. So as an audience member you feel involved, you share their frustration, you get to know them and I think you grow quite fond of them. So you have a lot of things to occupy your mind while you're watching it. There are also three other characters that come in during the course of the play and entertain us. They give us lots to think about. More things happen in this play than in lots of other plays I know - in fact I'd say it's action packed!

Is it true that the Beckett estate is adamant that no changes should be made to any of Beckett's work (regarding text and stage directions)? If so, how do you bring your own interpretation to his work if there are such restrictions?

You are given some pretty firm guidelines. You certainly can't make any changes to the text. I think it's a good discipline actually - you just have to try and make it work. Strangely though I think every production of Waiting for Godot has been and will be different because the actors playing those roles will fill them out in very different ways. It's true that there are a lot of detailed stage directions but there isn't much to go on as to why they talk about the things they talk about. This means there is room to interpret it. There are a number of different ways of doing certain bits - you could take it very seriously, you could play it all for laughs or you could make it all quite tragic and sad. The actors and the director have to find their own way through it. What is happening in the world at that moment in time is also going to affect it. It's been done in some pretty extreme situations, for example there was a production in New Orleans just after hurricane Katrina. It has also been done in high security prisons, and by all accounts it had a big impact on those prisoners. So it can bear quite a lot of different slants on it, but I imagine that the play itself always remains pretty much intact.

Interview

Ian Brown – Director

Do you think hope can be found in the play? If so, how would you communicate this as a Director?

I think the play is very realistic in terms of what is like to be a human being - it acknowledges that we don't have very long to live here. By showing us how brief a life can be perhaps Beckett is saying that it is up to us to make the most of it. I don't think the play necessarily tells you that very clearly - you have to work it out for yourself a little bit. I do think *Waiting For Godot* contains a little bit of hope. It encourages you to think and feel and have ideas and to look for your own salvation within yourself. You can't just hang on, waiting for something to turn up or waiting for the time when you will go to heaven or to hell - you have to make the most of the time you have. It also shows us that you need other people in order to find happiness and to really flourish.

The relationship between Vladimir and Estragon could be viewed as one of co-dependency. Why do you think they stay together, despite their frequent suggestions of parting?

Vladimir and Estragon's reliance on each other is very moving. It's like a marriage - with all the good and the bad things that come with that! Sometimes they can't live without each other and sometimes they can't live with each other. They are a sort of Ying and Yang and that's why they rub along together. They've got different problems, different interests and different attitudes to life. Vladimir tends to be obsessed with the mind and with thinking and his hat. Estragon is more rooted to the earth, his boots and the pain of moving around. He is less imaginative than Vladimir in some respects but he feels a lot none the less. In lots of ways they are modeled on Laurel and Hardy. They take us back to a world of comics and the music hall and remind us of other "odd couples" such as Morcombe and Wise and the Two Ronnie's. They are two comedians, bound together, unable to go solo.

Do you think the play warrants a religious reading?

The play is called *Waiting for Godot*. God is in the title. I think it is impossible to watch the play without thinking that Godot could be God, although Beckett didn't want us to limit the play to that. I think religion is just one aspect of it. We're all brought up with some kind of religious knowledge and awareness, even if we're not believers. If you're brought up in the Judeo-Christian bit of the world then the Bible is part of your consciousness and you can't help but see the world through those stories. The tale of the two thieves at Christ's crucifixion, that one was saved while the other was damned, is a thread that runs throughout the play. Vladimir and Estragon are made to adopt semi-religious poses, holding up Pozzo and Lucky. There is definitely a crucifixion image suggested and the tree can appear to be the cross. They're kind of up there with Jesus somehow. Will one be saved and the other not? Or are they both damned? But the religious imagery in the play is not the only thing. It's just one aspect. In a way it's actually about human beings without God. It was written at a point in the Twentieth Century when people were starting to seriously think about the fact that God doesn't seem to be able to intervene in the affairs of human beings. People were questioning what God was and whether God was dead or alive. I don't think Beckett felt that the answers to life were in God. I think he thought that the answers were in ourselves.

Interview

Ian Brown – Director

Are there any lessons do you think to be found in the play? Particularly in reference to how we lead our lives.

The play does make people think about what it is like to be alive, to consider the deeper things of life. And I think people are grateful to have that opportunity actually. It might make them appreciate life a bit more. The play doesn't necessarily say that life is terrible but it does say that there are aspects of life that are terrible, and lots of people do have very miserable lives. But there are those of us who are privileged enough to actually have quite enjoyable lives most of the time, although tinged with all sorts of sadness and tragedies. But out of those things sometimes good things can come. So I think the play is a kind of morality tale in a way - it teaches us to make the most of what we have.

When casting *Waiting for Godot* were there any particular skills you were looking for in the actors?

I was looking to see whether the actors could make a connection with the text, whether it meant something to them. Interestingly, people really wanted to do this play. There were lots of people who would have very much liked to do it, who we couldn't unfortunately cast in the end. In terms of other considerations, Vladimir and Estragon obviously have to work as a couple. Pozzo and Lucky also have to be somehow complimentary. I was also looking for a love of language and an ability and willingness to just go with the world and imagination of Samuel Beckett.

They say that it is possible to find humour even in the bleakest moments... would you consider *Waiting for Godot* to be a humorous play and if so how would you communicate this?

Beckett was influenced by the Marx brothers, silent film and the music hall. He wasn't adverse to putting fart jokes in his work and being quite crude sometimes. Right at the end of the play Estragon drops his trousers - that's kind of classic clowning. All of that comedy is within the play, we are just bringing it out. I'm sure it's possible to do it all entirely seriously but I think the humour is there to make the more psychologically deep moments really count.

For someone who has heard about the play, but doesn't know much about it, is there anything you think they should know before they come?

I think you should just come and let the play happen. Just go with the flow - that's what we're trying to do in rehearsals. I actually think *Waiting For Godot* is really accessible. I'm looking forward to young people coming to see it who maybe don't know very much about it, or who are maybe expecting it to be difficult to understand. I do think it's quite difficult to read it off the page. I sympathise with people who say "Oh I read it and I didn't really follow it". But when you see it acted and hear it spoken it's a totally different thing.

In the Rehearsal Room

With Emily Kempson

Emily takes time out from her busy schedule as Assistant Director of *Waiting For Godot* to give us an insight into life as an actor in the rehearsal room RR3.

To some people, beginning to work on Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* may seem an intimidating task - a bit of a mountain to climb! One of the things that we did during the first couple of days of rehearsal was to unit the text. Quite simply this just means splitting the play into smaller sections - the divide comes when a shift or change occurs. Some of our units are a couple of sides long - others are about 5 pages. There is no hard and fast rule about doing this, each person would make different decisions and unit this play in a different way. Dividing the play up in this way gives the company manageable sections to work on and helps the actors map a path through this sometimes bewildering play! We gave each of our units a title, for example one is called "No Laces" and another is called "Supplication".

Although *Waiting for Godot* has a reputation for being a "wordy" play (it's true there are a LOT of words - just ask our actors!) it is also highly physical. We've been working with a fantastic movement director in rehearsals, Aline David, who has been helping bring the physical elements of the play to life. In lots of ways Vladimir and Estragon are two clowns - (you might imagine the sad clown sitting backstage) and one fun afternoon early in rehearsals we worked ways to find the character's walk. Aline asked our actors what part of their body they thought their character might lead with - their head, their chest, one of the ears, their pelvis - it could be anything! The actors moved around the room experimenting with how this might affect their walk. Aline asked them to really exaggerate this aspect of their walk - to bring it up to a '10' - then they gradually brought it down to a much more subtle level - to a '1'.

Lucky's speech has been a really exciting thing to work on in rehearsals. It might seem like a mad rant full of nonsense but in rehearsal Ian and Guy (who is playing Lucky) have worked hard to find meaning in it, and to make sure it connects in some way with the audience. It's an incredible piece of writing, full of apocalyptic images such as "earth abode of stones". It would be a great exercise to pick out three images from this speech and to really imagine them as clearly as possible. You might draw three images that most jump out at you, or perhaps do a piece of creative writing that describes the kind of landscape this speech depicts.



A Peek into the Rehearsal Room

Pat Cumper (Talawa's Artistic Director) and Fisayo Akinade (who plays The Boy in this production) have been blogging throughout the process to give us a sneaky peek into the world of the rehearsal room.

Week 1, Day 1

Pat Cumper

With wind howling outside and the occasional sleet shower making the roof rattle, rehearsals for *Godot* got underway. Beginning with a wide ranging and often challenging discussion about the world Beckett created and the characters he peoples it with - he refused to explain either - the company went on to a movement session that was wonderful to watch, hard work to do and capable of provoking laughter, sympathy, empathy. I swear Aline David (Company Movement) can move not only each limb but each joint independently.

Afternoon and it's down to text, Ian (Director) leading a first exploration of the first half dozen sections. We're naming them as we go along. Guess which one is called Garlic? Pretty detailed discussion about costumes: phrases like over-checked tweeds, zoot suit with the drape shape and butler's uniform were bandied about. You'll have to wait and see!

At six, or slightly after, we bundled up and strode out into the wind and rain. A good day. And we had strolling players from the afternoon children's play serenading us at lunch. What more can one ask for?

Week 1, Day 3

Pat Cumper

Having fought our way in through freezing rain, cast and director gathered in the rehearsal room at the St Peter Building to resume the existential wrestling match that is working on *Waiting For Godot*. If at first it looked as though the text was winning, well before lunch the room was once again ringing with laughter and full of suggestions. From the absurd to the profound, on what it is Beckett meant by each line. Jeffery is wearing his *Godot* hat, Guy bundles up when the room cools, gathering his energy for his assault on Lucky's epic speech. Character work continues with Ian (Director) regularly quoting insights into Beckett and the times in which he wrote. The differences between pals Didi and Gogo get clearer and clearer and we ponder how much-or little Pozzo's bling matters to him. Sun came out at midday and we left to go home under a cold, clear sky. As I cross the canal bridge, the water is turbulent. Like *Godot*, so much going on beneath the surface.

Week 1, Day 5

Pat Cumper

I know everyone in the rehearsal room falls in love with, and waxes lyrical about, a production as they work on it, but this week has been quite remarkable.

Death and the meaning of life, religion and those who use it to their own ends, slavery, Stephen Lawrence, Diane Abbott and the fleeting nature of happiness were just a few of the topics chewed over.

A Peek into the Rehearsal Room

There were pratfalls and word games and I-pad envy too. But most of all there was focus and complete engagement, a little wrench at six each evening as the day drew to a close. For those who know the play, guess which section we called Leaves and Boots?

Monday morning bright and early we start to put it on its feet. Can't wait. But then I have to, don't I. That's what it's all about. Waiting For Godot.

Week 2, Day 1

Pat Cumper

It felt like Spring in Leeds today. Clear, sunny, and almost warm for the time of year. And in rehearsals, things are looking livelier too. The set box is on display, the stage marked out and the tree is being represented by a broom handle in the very middle of the room. As the actors come off book, we explore more of the movement and physical comedy that sometimes accompanies and sometimes counterpoints Beckett's inimitable, intricate, interlocking text. Jeffery is working with his hat on most of the time: completely right for Vladimir. Estragon looks to his feet for his focus of activity: he's developed a very convincing hobble. As always, the challenge is to find and hold onto the arc of the scene, to feel when the pace quickens and when it slows. And most of all there are those lovely silences that Beckett wrote into the text. A silence in which to contemplate, a silence in which to regroup, a silence in which to listen, a silence in which to savour events and the memories of events. Sometimes just plain silence. Tomorrow, more of Didi and Gogo, The Boy gets on his feet and Lucky starts to speak.

Week 2, Day 2

Pat Cumper

Blissful weather and more hard work in the rehearsal room. It's odd watching the words I've read so often coming off the page in Caribbean accents that have been softened by years of living in Britain. It's not an easy text to memorise, so there are lots of stops and starts and going back over extended passages of quickfire dialogue and of course earning, and then playing, the silences described in the stage directions. Much business with hats and boots, sore feet and dicky prostates.

Guy had a good bash at Lucky's monologue today and in true Beckett fashion, he and the director teased more and more meaning, comedy and pathos out of a sentence that lasts three pages than the first pass lead me to expect was there. He's nearly off book with it too. Now that's dedication. The monologue is more than verbal pyrotechnics, it is a message bursting out of a man who hasn't been allowed to say what he thinks for a long time. Today the Boy finally stepped onto the playing area too, his character nervous after hearing the roaring and shouting that announced Pozzo's presence. Tomorrow it's costume fittings for some, lines for everyone, an interview with the Big Issue for Jeffery and, joy of joys, Aline is back to work with the actors on their movement. And I've got to write 800 words on 'Why Godot?'. Easy peasy.

Week 2, Day 3

Pat Cumper

It's the middle of the second week of rehearsals and finally Pozzo and Lucky together enter the rehearsal room. While the rest of the cast are in wardrobe, we block their entrance, whip, rope, basket, coat, stool and all. The whole thing is a welter of props, with pipes and chicken legs, picnic baskets and wine bottles all making their appearances. Interesting to see how a page of stage directions becomes a series of sharp orders and swift responses. I say swift: as swift as Lucky can muster. A lunch hour catch up meeting

A Peek into the Rehearsal Room

with everybody who is working on the production, a quick photo in the lovely parquet floored studio downstairs and then its back into Rehearsal Room 3 for a strenuous hour and more of movement with the lovely Aline. By beating out complex rhythms with hands and feet, the actors are so thoroughly warmed up that they roar straight into the first twenty minutes or so. Best bit: the end of the day with four actors in bowler hats driving together to the end of the first act: the director is in conversation with an actor at one end of the playing area, Aline is creating movement with another actor at the other, two other running lines and revising blocking sitting at what will be the roots of the famous tree at the centre of the room. Every now and then, one or other of the actors looks at the play text and gives a disbelieving little shake of the head and then goes straight back to the task at hand. Everyone is sensing the potential power of this *Waiting For Godot* and everyone wants to get it right.

Week 2, Day 5

Fisayo Akinade

I was reminded today how important it is for us as a company to be connected. It occurred to me, and all of us, during warm up this morning. We were doing a follow the leader exercise led by the movement director, which then became a silent exploration of character relationships. By the end of the exercise we were all exhausted but there was a real sense of calm in the room. I don't think the exercise could have worked if there wasn't trust between us, and it's from a place of connection and trust that real work can begin. Ian reminded us how special *Waiting for Godot* is, and told us that every day we work on it, it becomes more special. It was a really nice way to start the day.

Week 3, Day 1

Fisayo Akinade

As we begin our charge into week three, things are really starting to take shape. Throughout week two, props and costume were introduced: bowler hats and tattered jackets for Vladimir and Estragon; basket, bag, stool and rope for Lucky; pipe, monocle, and pocket watch for Pozzo; and a mock tree to complete the stage picture. We have finished going through the first act and week three for the most part will be dedicated to the second act. This is a difficult time for all involved. We are getting nearer and nearer to running the piece and with that comes a new set of pressures: remembering all the blocking that was done over a week ago; making sure the same impulses are there; remembering lines and intentions. And of course, what normally happens when you revisit something: the inevitable change. Scenes will get reworked because something new has been realised, and actors will have to do away with the old blocking and remember the new.

It's an exciting and often frustrating time, but as momentum builds so does the knowledge that what we are doing something special with this fantastic play.

Week 3, Day 5

Fisayo Akinade

It's an odd sensation being away from the rehearsal room for most of the day, and only making a quick appearance for an hour each day to go through *The Boys* sections before rehearsals end. Especially when for the first two weeks I was in rehearsals every day, mostly to watch the other actors and see what I could learn from them.

In those first two weeks I was able to watch the actors take the first steps to putting the play on its feet,

A Peek into the Rehearsal Room

and see the progression first hand. Whereas now when I get to rehearsal, everything seems to have come on in leaps and bounds as if by magic: lines are more secure, the blocking is becoming more organic and even more things are being added to the rehearsal room. When I arrived on Monday there was a new floor, which added levels, and gave the actors something new to explore and play with. Later in the week we had Mark Taylor Batty come in and share his thought on Beckett and *Waiting for Godot*. He lectures at Leeds University and is considered an expert on all things Beckett. It was a really enlightening hour, and we gained more clarity on some of the subtle references to Beckett's life and the Second World War that appear in the play.

We are now coming ever closer to our first preview. We have a week and a half left and from Monday we will be attempting to run through act one, I say run through, it'll be more like a stagger through, making sure all the things we have been working on for the past three weeks are in place, and hopefully by the middle of the week we'll be hoping to run/stagger through the whole thing. Wish us luck!

Week 4, Day 2

Pat Crumper

It's been a little over a week since I was in Rehearsal Room 3 watching Didi and Gogo cope with Pozzo, Lucky and The Boy as they enter and depart their world. The first thing I notice is how much sharper the movement has become, each actor expressing his character's inner world with gestures and posture as much as with the words. Gogo and Didi look more vulnerable, Pozzo more grand. Lucky's spine curves with weariness, then straightens as he pours out the words of his impossibly long monologue. (Odd how you always feel like applauding every time he does it.) Now there are rough ramps and blocks to indicate different levels on the set and a bag of real carrots, green bits and all, sits on the table with the kettle, tea and coffee. Then there are the props: a small army of watches and pipes, baskets and stools, whips and ropes. They're just a part of the picture now, not awkward additions. The actors are working easily with elements of their costume described so precisely by Beckett: the manifold pockets, the battered boots and bowler hats, the fitted waistcoats and skew-whiff ties. It's all coming together. Everyone knows that the production is attracting a great deal of attention so there is an air of seriousness in the rehearsal room. Every now and then, as a line slips or there's a particular pratfall works well, there's laughter, then it's back to work.

More Ideas for the Classroom

1. Interpreting Casts: Exploring the impacts of casting on an audience

Below are two introductory exercises designed to encourage debate and discussion BEFORE your visit to *Waiting for Godot*. They are followed by an activity teachers can use to extend students' thinking following the introduction.

Exercise A

Waiting for Godot is said to be a play that deals with universal themes – that appeals to all. But what makes a play universal? Ask students for their thoughts on this.

Tell students that you are going to read some statements and they are going to have 30 seconds to decide if they agree/disagree. If they agree with the statement, they should stand on one side of the room, if they disagree they should stand at the other end and if they are unsure they should stand in the middle. Students can place themselves anywhere along 'the scale', allowing them to agree/disagree in degrees. Before you begin explain to your students that there are no right answers and they should respect each other's opinions and feel free to express their own.

- I like watching plays/films/TV about people who are like me
- I like watching plays/films/TV about people who are really different from me
- Plays with a young cast appeal to young people
- People like theatre when it's good. It doesn't matter what race the cast is
- There should be more plays with all-female casts
- To appeal to a multicultural audience you need a multicultural cast

As students move up/down the scale, invite some to comment on why they have positioned themselves where they have.

Exercise B

Resources: Character Images

Split your class into small groups and give them the 4 images of Vladimir and Estragon and a brief character description.

Ask students to discuss the following questions in their groups. Encourage them to consider the similarities and differences in the actors' physical appearance (age, race, costume etc.) as well as what they are doing (facial expression, body language etc.)

What are their initial reactions to the images? Do any of the images make them want to laugh at the characters / feel sorry for them / wonder what's happening? Why do they think this might be?

Just by looking at the picture, what might they imagine these characters to be like? Are they quite similar or different to each other? In what ways?

Is there an image that looks most (or least) like the description?

Put the following quote from *Waiting for Godot* on the board. "Why are we here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing

More Ideas for the Classroom

alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come.” Ask students to imagine who or what Godot might be for the characters in each of the images?

Get students to feedback to the whole class and discuss. Do we think the characters are waiting for similar things? Why/Why not? Would we, as an audience, feel differently about these characters if they were played by women or young people?

Extension

Following one or both of the exercises above, ask students to write a short article responding to the news that the UK'S first ever all-Black *Waiting for Godot* is going to be produced. Encourage students to draw on the issues and thoughts explored in the previous exercises and let them know they can decide to write from the perspective of a journalist who is in favour of the production or one who is against it

2. Interpreting Contexts: Exploring the impacts of cultural contexts on theatre

Below are two introductory exercises designed to encourage debate and discussion FOLLOWING your visit to *Waiting for Godot*. They are followed by an activity teachers can use to extend students' thinking following the introduction.

Exercise A

Resources: Past Productions and Past Production Quotes

Split the class into groups and give them the Past Productions resource. [The resource has a brief description of 4 previous interpretations of *Waiting for Godot* with an image of the time and place it was performed in.] Ask students to discuss each production in their groups.

- What do they think a production of *Godot* in this time and place might have been like?
- What could the director have wanted to say with *Godot* at this time? How might s/he have tried to achieve this?
- Who was the audience?
- What was the casting like?
- What impact could the venue have had on the production?

Next give groups the Past Production Quotes and ask them to work with their group to try and match the quotation to the right performance.

Feedback as a whole class and reveal answers. Discuss students guesses and ask them:

- How does it seem the different audiences related to the themes of the play?
- How did the social and cultural contexts of these productions affect the audience's reactions?
- What choices might the directors have made to help the play 'speak to' the different audiences?

More Ideas for the Classroom

Exercise B

Ask your class why they think Beckett wrote a play about someone who never comes? What could he have wanted to express?

Allow them to discuss the following in pairs or small groups:

- Do we also wait for people and things that never come?
- Do you think there are people waiting for something today? What could that be?
- If you were to do a new version of *Waiting for Godot* what would you want it to say?

Tell students they are going to plan a new production of *Godot* in groups. If you have done any previous exercises, encourage them to draw on thoughts explored then. If not, discuss briefly what they know about reinterpretations: have they ever seen a modern day or urban Shakespeare piece? Why do directors like Tim Burton re-make old stories/films (*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Alice in Wonderland* etc.) When planning their interpretations ask students to decide:

- What they want their piece to say?
- Who their audience will be?
- What director/producer decisions they will make (casting, setting, venue etc.)?

Extension

Following one or both of the activities above, explain that Samuel Beckett's plays are protected by his estate. Anyone planning to do a professional production of one of his pieces has to write to the Beckett Estate for permission.

Get students to write a proposal letter to the estate for the production they have planned. Make sure they explain their previous choices:

- What changes do you propose and why?
- Who is your piece for?
- Where and when will the production take place?
- Why should The Estate grant permission?

Allow students to explore their choices practically by directing some scenes in the style of the reinterpretation they have planned.

Take note... more resource materials available...

Interview Section

Students from Goldsmiths College, University of London catch up with Patricia Cumper in Talawa's office to find out more about this production. Listen to or download the link from the companies' websites: www.talawa.com/resources.php

Here are the questions students asked Patricia. They will help to signpost you through the interview:

1. What was your inspiration for producing *Godot*? (0:00mins)
2. Why now? How relevant do you think it is to today's world? (01:38mins)
3. In relation to the recent London riots, how do you think young people in and outside of London will relate to the show? (02:52)
4. What do you think makes *Godot* special? (04:17)
5. Do you think it's accessible to all audiences? (05:19)
6. How important are the after-show talks and participatory activities to Talawa and your audiences? (06:26)
7. Are you bored of being asked, "Why a Black cast"? (07:46)
8. Do you think you'll continue working with Talawa when you leave in a few weeks? (09:21)
9. Do you have any advice for new theatre artists? (10:13)

Trailer

Visit the main show page on www.wyp.org.uk or www.talawa.com and follow a link that will show you a unique behind the scenes film. You can also listen to interviews with Ian Brown, Patricia Cumper and cast members during the rehearsal process and find links to press coverage of the production.